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Why we need leadership

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RECENTLY, Reuel Khoza of Nedbank remarked on the “emergence of a strange breed of leaders” whose “moral quotient is degenerating”. He raised concern about whether we have an accountable democracy and said that we have a duty to call to book leaders who cannot lead.

If this is so, the new Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics at Rhodes University, whose slogan is “Where leaders learn”, is timely.

Too many in positions of power and those entrusted with leadership of key institutions are sorely wanting in values and conduct in tune with ethical, responsible and accountable leadership.

Witness the flagrant abuse of power for self-enrichment, as shown in corruption, fraud and dubious tenderpreneurial activities, in anti-democratic practices, and women’s oppression in the name of culture.

Witness, too, the failures on the part of those entrusted with leading to grasp fully their profound constitutional, moral and social responsibilities in a society that proclaims a commitment to human dignity, social equity and justice.

Recall how a futile debate on the cause of Aids prevented leadership from dealing with the pandemic, and how the tardy response resulted in unnecessary delays in treatment and the tragic loss of lives.

Recall, too, that we were promised an innovative public service that would provide an excellent quality of service, be the servant of the people (and be) accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption. Batho Pele was to be the watchword of our public service.

Instead, in many areas, there is a culture of disdainful conduct and service, sheer indifference to the needs of people, and a sore lack of ethical and accountable leadership.

The elites have recourse to private and Model C schools, private hospitals and private cars. The poor, on the other hand, depend hugely on public services for their basic needs and for the improvement of their lives.

Our schools cry out for courageous and effective educational leadership from state departments and school heads. A key distinguishing feature between well-performing and poorly performing schools is effective leadership.

Caroline Southey writes that “a depressing realisation is setting in that we are in danger not only from those in civilian clothes – there is an increasing trend for our criminals to sport police uniforms”.

She contends that the tremendous increase in assault investigations and murder cases involving the police is symptomatic of a police force that is sans leadership, devoid of a moral compass and feels accountable to no one.

Our fragile environment, too, continues to suffer because of timid leadership. We pursue relentlessly, without effective regulation “progress” and “development”, irrespective of the massive degradation of the environment and the hazards of global climate change.

The shenanigans of various businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats make for riveting, if depressing, reading. Regularly, we are shocked and awed by the brazen sense of entitlement, the glib emphasis on the legal instead of the ethical, and by the impunity with which so-called leaders redeploy resources for private gain.

Perhaps we have been numbed into silence. Perhaps we think that our citizen duty is limited to voting every five years.

Or perhaps, shocked and awed, or thoroughly discouraged, we cannot conceive how we can become agents of change.

Silence is not an option. It leaves the door wide open for irresponsible and unaccountable leadership, and a culture of impunity, greed and crass materialism in which self-interest, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses become the new gods.

We have to also avoid cynicism and despair. Former president Nelson Mandela writes, “there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.” Instead, we must remain optimistic, keep our “head pointed towards the sun, [our] feet moving forward”.

The task of the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics is to understand what constitutes ethical and responsible leadership, to promote such leadership in diverse contexts, and to educate towards such leadership.

There is no off-the-shelf or customised, shrink-wrapped, perfect leadership model.

Leadership also cannot be simply taught, and theory alone or building skills is not enough.

Leadership is pioneering in thought and action, being willing to take action to address the challenges we see around us, and using wisdom to change society for the better wherever we find ourselves.

To build leadership we must take history, culture and context seriously.

We need a situated leadership appropriate to our conditions; and we need to forge leadership that is distributed institutionally, rather than centred on the “big man” – and, usually, it is the big man!

Given our various challenges, our task is to cultivate, grow and institutionalise ethical, responsible and accountable leadership across our society.

We can draw inspiration from wonderful people who provided selfless leadership and paved the path to our democracy – Luthuli, Mandela, Tutu, Hani, Lillian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia, Helen Joseph, Oom Beyers Naude and many others.

We can also take inspiration from the youth of our country – not the pompous, verbose, self-aggrandising lot who regularly bemuse us – but those who use their imagination and time to advance social justice for all, deepen our democracy, and protect our planet.

Ethical leaders also possess certain key qualities. They take learning, education and knowledge seriously. They know that these are vital for understanding our world, for insight into our problems and challenges, and for finding solutions.

They have an unwavering commitment to non-racialism, non-sexism and great respect for difference and diversity: whether related to race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, language or culture.

They refuse to be paralysed by our history, legacy and contemporary problems. Instead, they remind us of our ingenuity and courage in fashioning a fabulous constitution and winning our democracy; they call on us to draw on these to confront our challenges.

At the heart of leadership is integrity and honesty. Ethical leaders tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.

But leaders look beyond themselves. They see potential all around them, seek to build new generations of leaders who will be better than them, create opportunities for developing people, provide experiences and space to learn lessons, and teach by living the core values associated with leadership.

Of course, leaders need committed but critical supporters, who also act as agents of change, strong institutions and a strong civil society. Leadership, then, becomes everyone's task and responsibility.