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## **The leadership conversation we need**

### **Tony Manning**

As South Africa powers ahead, it is natural that the issue of leadership should get plenty of airtime. It deserves more. But the conversation would benefit from fewer platitudes and more specific proposals.

Much debate in this country centres on the quest for a new “African leadership model”. Commentators harp on the need to know what takes to lead “in an African context.” But while there are no doubt lessons worth learning in our back yard, and leaders must be able to adapt to the cultural conditions they find themselves in, nothing has so far been said here about leadership that has not been said elsewhere.

Two questions underpin just about every local speech or article on the subject: How should leaders behave? How can we develop the leaders of the future? But these are universal challenges, for which many answers have already been provided by the world’s leading experts.

Almost everywhere today, leadership behaviour is under the spotlight. Ethics and corporate governance have become serious matters. Leaders are expected to conduct themselves properly, not only complying with the law, but also displaying sound personal values and ensuring that their people do the same. And there has been a marked shift from focusing only on profits to managing the “triple bottom line”.

At the same time, there has been a shift in thinking about how leaders lead. Today, it is important to be a team player and a team builder. In an increasingly networked world, where good ideas arise in many places and goods and services are often produced and provided far from head office, the ability to empower, inspire and align people is greatly valued. Character traits like charisma and rugged individualism are seen to count for less than skills in communication, collaboration and conflict management.

There is a wealth of knowledge on every aspect of these issues. The best leadership development programmes are designed around them. Building on what is already evident is surely the first step in making SA a winning nation. There is more to gain by borrowing and copying the best practices rather than rejecting anything “not invented here.”

What, then, should we talk about in our quest for leadership excellence?

A good starting point is the fact that SA’s future leaders will face four critical challenges. First, to make existing organizations competitive. Second, to make diversity work. Third, to build new organizations of size and consequence. And finally – but essential to dealing with the other issues – to instill the ethical behaviour that Africa is now seen to lack.

All these tasks need to be tackled with great urgency. But they need to be tackled from the ground up, company by company, in a systematic and deliberate way.

Making companies competitive is less easy than it seems. To merely talk of being “world class” is not enough. Producing great results year after year is a very rare thing, and many local firms have hard work ahead of them. The competitive arena is changing, and doing well is getting more difficult.

SA companies must grow in order to create jobs and wealth. But doing so will take more than lofty speeches or flowery mission statements. Although many firms are in great shape, many of their leaders need new skills and the pool of leadership talent needs to be deepened for the results to keep coming.

Diversity is a fact of SA life. But while transformation is necessary, it is neither free nor automatically “a good thing.” If the process is not skillfully managed, dysfunctional behaviour is likely and results will suffer.

BEE deals are slowly shifting the ownership of companies from white hands to black ones. A few people have become fabulously wealthy in no time at all. But while they make headlines, there is little discussion about the kind of leadership it will take to create wealth through real entrepreneurship – starting new businesses from scratch and growing them into big businesses.

Conversation is carefully avoided about why Africa has spawned few indigenous big companies or what it will take for black South Africans to build tomorrow’s Sasol, Discovery Health or Liberty Life. Yet we clearly need people who can turn the germ of an idea into a significant enterprise through their own efforts and not through handouts.

The fourth issue, ethical behaviour, may be the toughest nut of all. Transparency International’s latest survey on perceptions of corruption ranked SA number 44 of 145 countries. It will not be easy to improve our position, because corruption feeds on itself. But doing so is imperative.

In the King Report, SA has one of the world’s finest codes of corporate governance. But “ticking boxes” does not ensure good behaviour in organisations. Creating a culture of compliance demands the unwavering commitment of those in leadership positions. If they don’t “walk the talk,” others won’t see the need to do so. If they do not demonstrate consistent ethical behaviour, those around them will feel free to break the rules too.

SA needs new leaders – black and white, male and female – for the times we’re in and for the world ahead of us. But while we pontificate, the wheels spin. We would achieve much more, much faster through a robust conversation about the few issues that really do matter – and that we can do something about.

***Manning is a strategist and author***