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THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DURING SOUTH AFRICA'S TRANSITION

Twenty-one years ago we South Africans began a process of historic and fundamental change. How did we manage the process and what was the role of leadership?

In the mid 1980s South Africa was caught in the grip of a seemingly irresolvable conflict. Indeed, it was difficult to imagine parties that were further apart than the ruling National Party and the African National Congress.

- The ANC was a radical socialist movement that was committed to violent revolution. It was inextricably allied to the Stalinist South African Communist Party. It was committed to nationalisation and the immediate introduction of a non-racial egalitarian society
- The National Party, on other hand, had been the party of apartheid. It had traditionally championed the cause of white Afrikaner nationalism and believed that the problems of the country could be resolved by a process of territorial partition. It was strongly in favour of free enterprise.

What enabled these parties and the other twenty-three that joined them in the multi-party negotiations to bridge the enormous chasms that divided them? What were the requirements of leadership in the management of the ensuing transformation process?

From the perspective that I have gained during the subsequent years I have been able to identify the following requirements for leadership of major change processes:

The first requirement of leadership - and to really being able to make a difference - is actually to become a leader. The world is full of brilliant people who have all the right solutions to the problems of the world. However, if they don't have the ability to turn their ideas into reality they remain spectators and armchair commentators in the great game of life. Becoming a leader isn't an easy process.

A very small number of people are born to leadership. Others achieve leadership. And others have leadership thrust upon them.

Some people enjoy special advantages in attaining leadership positions. For example, I am told that the Oxford Union has produced no fewer than twelve British Prime Ministers!

In my case, it could be said that, in part, I was born into a long tradition of political service and leadership. My father was a senior cabinet minister and President of the Senate. My uncle, J G Strijdom, was Prime Minister.

In other respects, I achieved leadership. I served long apprenticeships as a student leader; as a leader in various civil society organisations; as a back-bencher in parliament; as a cabinet minister and as a senior office-bearer in my party.

However, despite my family background and despite my long preparation for leadership, there was a sense in which leadership was thrust upon one. This occurred at a remarkable caucus meeting of my political party on the morning of 2 February 1989. Without the slightest prior warning we received a message from my predecessor, President P W Botha, announcing his decision after a serious stroke to step down as party leader. We decided there and then to elect a new leader. I won the subsequent caucus election by a narrow margin of only eight votes and emerged as leader of the National Party and *de facto* President elect.

The fact that I was elected leader of the National Party enabled me to make a difference.

Exactly one year later, to the day, I rose to make the speech in Parliament that launched the democratic transformation of South Africa. I announced the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of all political parties and organisations. I said that all of us would have to work together to negotiate a new non-racial democratic constitution.

The first requirement of leadership is an impartial and dispassionate assessment of reality

At the beginning of the 'eighties, it was becoming increasingly clear to many of us in leadership positions in the National Party that we were on the wrong course. We were becoming more and more isolated from the international community with each year that passed. The great majority of black South Africans were increasingly adamant in their rejection of our policies and the solutions that we were trying to sell to them. As a result, we had become involved in a downward spiral of resistance and repression that threatened at some stage in the not too distant future to erupt into full-scale conflict.

All of this was having an increasingly damaging effect on our economy and was threatening to shut down the engine of economic growth that was, and remains, our best hope of bringing all our people a better life.

My colleagues and I spent a great deal of time identifying our problems and wrestling with the need for fundamental change. In open and often brutally frank discussions we examined the hard and unpalatable facts that confronted us. Our greatest challenge in managing the transformation process was to acknowledge these realities, to admit our failure to bring justice to all South Africans and to confront our fear of radical change.

Our analysis led to the inescapable conclusion that white South Africans and the Afrikaner nation would have to accept a future as part of a non-racial South Africa. Demographic and economic realities simply made this inescapable. However, it

would mean the acceptance of the end of our right to national self-determination as a distinct nation in an own country.

Our struggle to attain and secure this right had been the central theme of our history for almost two hundred years.

An essential element in leadership is the acceptance that decisions must be guided by strong values and principles.

The main reason for our acceptance of change, was not the pressure that we were experiencing from the international community or rising discontent in South Africa. We could have remained in power for many years to come. We could have weathered sanctions and withdrawn into a grim fortress of national isolation. After all, this is the kind of option that many other embattled states have chosen.

However, we also struggled with the question of what was right and what was wrong. For me the key point was simply the realisation that the policies that we had adopted, and that I had supported as a young man, had led to a situation of manifest injustice. It was this, in the final instance, that persuaded me and my colleagues that we had to accept the risks of radical change.

The next requirement of leadership is to accept the need for *real* change even if there are serious risks involved.

Knowing and admitting that you are on the wrong course and being able to do anything about it are two quite distinct issues. The prospect of imminent disaster has not always persuaded those at the helm to alter course. History contains a woeful tally of leaders who have resolutely steered their countries into war and their companies into bankruptcy, despite the direst warnings of dangers ahead. Others, just as often, have, through indecision and inaction, allowed their countries to drift rudderless onto the rocks.

Resistance to change is deeply ingrained in all of us. We fear the unknown and dread the prospect of moving into uncharted waters. In our case, in South Africa, the whites and other minorities had well grounded reasons to fear change.

- We were deeply concerned about communist influence in the ANC, the most important revolutionary movement. Nearly all the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the South African Communist Party.
- We were also concerned about the failure of other African countries to build, stable, democratic and prosperous societies.
- We were worried about the future of ethnic and cultural minorities under a majority-rule government.

However, leaders must accept the need to take calculated risks.

We realised that the greatest risk would be to do nothing at all.

One of the most notable risks that I had to take occurred in 1991 when the National Party started to lose by-elections - primarily to the Right. The Conservative Party claimed that we had lost our mandate to continue with our new course.

I decided - against the advice of some of my closest advisers - to call a referendum among the white electorate to renew and strengthen my mandate for reform. In the event, the referendum, which was held in March 1992, resulted in a two-thirds victory for the continuation of our transformation policies. If I had lost the referendum I would have had to resign.

Leaders must avoid the temptation of *pretending* to change.

Very often countries, companies and individuals who know they must change, pretend to change. They think of brilliant new ways of doing the wrong thing better. Smokers, (and until six years ago I was one myself), will tell themselves that if they cut down the number of cigarettes they smoke they will be addressing their problem. Others who are overweight will fool themselves that by taking no sugar in their tea they are really coming to grips with their problem.

The same thing happens on an international and national scale. For example, when he launched his perestroika reforms, my friend Mikhail Gorbachev continued to insist that there was basically nothing wrong with communism. It just had to be reformed and implemented in a more open and democratic manner. In the same way, countries and companies will, for sentimental reasons, cling to industries that are no longer relevant instead of breaking through into entirely new cutting edge technologies.

For years we white South Africans also fooled ourselves that we could 'reform' apartheid and thereby avoid the traumatic decisions and risks that real change always involves. It was only when we accepted that we would have to take extremely uncomfortable decisions and risks that real change could begin.

Leaders must articulate a clear and achievable vision.

On 2 February 1990 I presented a new vision to the South African Parliament of a peaceful and democratic solution to our problems. I said that our goal was "a new South Africa:

- a totally changed South Africa;
- a South Africa which has rid itself of past antagonisms;
- a South Africa free of domination in whatever form;
- a South Africa within which the democratic forces - all reasonable people - align themselves behind mutually acceptable goals and against radicalism.

By 1994 - to the astonishment of the world - we had turned our vision into reality.

A vision gives direction and purpose to our actions and provides a way of measuring our progress. Without a vision, we have no idea of where we are going or of how far we have come.

Leaders must be able to communicate their vision

Leaders must be able to inspire their colleagues and their supporters to keep on working for the achievement of the common vision - despite setbacks and crises. This is what Winston Churchill did so effectively during the dark days following Dunkirk.

We live in a world of perceptions - and perceptions are created as much by how we communicate as by what we do. For us in the National Party it was very important to convince the media and the world of our vision. It was also essential to encourage our own supporters and reassure them that we were on the right path. Most people can deal with change and are even prepared to make painful sacrifices - but they cannot deal with uncertainty.

Leaders must get their timing right.

Even when you have become a leader, it is foolish to be vociferously right at the wrong time or to move so far ahead in the right direction that your followers can no longer hear or see you. History and events move at their own pace - sometimes agonisingly slowly, at other times with frightening speed.

Leaders intent on managing change must consequently watch the tides and currents and must position themselves accordingly. More than this, however, they must also be ready to ride the wave of history or opportunity when it breaks.

Timing was crucial. Had we started our negotiation initiative earlier - say, in the middle 'seventies - it is doubtful that the National Party government would have been able to take its followers with it. If we had launched our initiative too late, we might have entered the negotiation process when the balance of power had begun to shift against us - as Ian Smith did in Zimbabwe. History sometimes opens a window of opportunity, when all the forces involved are ripe for negotiation. It is the task of statesmen to recognise such windows and lead their followers through, before history once again slams them shut.

After my inauguration in September 1989 the great historic events that were occurring in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union created such a window of opportunity. The collapse of international communism helped to allay fears of Soviet expansionism and of the influence of the South African Communist Party within the ANC Alliance.

The stage was ready for the speech that I made on 2 February 1990 in which I announced our diametric change of course - including the release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of all political parties and movements and the launching of constitutional negotiations.

Another principle that I followed in taking these far-reaching steps - some of which I knew would cause great concern to many of our followers - was to announce all the decisions at once, rather than to do so in a piece-meal fashion. If one has to cut off

the tail of a dog, it is much better to do so with one clean and decisive stroke, rather than by cutting the tail off piece by painful piece.

Leaders must persevere.

Having taken the decision to embark upon radical change, the main challenge to leaders is to maintain control of the process and to persevere until they have achieved their objectives.

I realised that the decisions that I announced on 2 February would unleash a chain of events with far-reaching and unpredictable consequences. It was rather like paddling a canoe into a long stretch of dangerous rapids. You may start the process and determine the initial direction. However, after that the canoe is at times seized by enormous and often uncontrollable forces. All that the canoeist can then do is to maintain his balance, avoid the rocks and steer as best he can - and right the canoe if it capsizes. It is a time for cool heads and firm, decisive action.

We experienced many such crises after we began our transformation process. The boycotts of the process by the ANC and the IFP; the violence that continued to scourge the country during the negotiations; the ANC's campaign of rolling mass action involving strikes and massive demonstrations; the assassination of Chris Hani – the leader of the South African Communist Party - all of these crises almost caused the process to capsize.

Leaders need good luck

- I was fortunate to have won the leadership of the national Party on February 1989 by a handful of votes;
- I was fortunate in having cabinet colleagues who stood by me throughout all the many crises and tribulations we experienced during the transformation process;
- I was also fortunate in having a man of the stature of Nelson Mandela as my counterpart on the road to our new society.

When he and I first met in December 1989 we both concluded that we would be able to do business with one another. Our relationship was often stormy - because we were, after all, opponents in tough negotiations about the future of our country. Nevertheless, whenever the occasion demanded it, we were able to rise above the fray and find solutions.

He brought the ANC back to the negotiating table in September 1992 after talks had been derailed by nationwide protests and strikes; in April 1993 he helped to calm the country after the assassination of Christ Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party. In November 1993 he and I resolved the deadlocks that stood in the path of final agreement on our new interim Constitution. Only he had the bearing, the stature and the charm to ensure the support of his widely diverse alliance for the final consensus that we reached. After his election as President he used these qualities to promote national unity and reconciliation between all our people.

In retirement we became friends.

Finally, leaders must accept that there is no end to change - and must plan for their own departure.

As soon as one has achieved one's transformation objectives one must start the process all over again. In a world in which change is accelerating, fundamental and unpredictable there is no respite or time to rest on one's laurels. One of the most difficult decisions for any leader is to accept that he, too, will one day be swept away by unrelenting river of time. The wise leader will know when to leave and when to pass the baton to a new generation.

To sum up, our experience in managing the transformation of South Africa has identified the following leadership requirements:

- Relentless self-examination;
- Value-based decisions;
- acceptance of the need for real change;
- the communication of a clear and attainable vision;
- willingness to take calculated risks;
- a sense of timing;
- the need to persevere; and
- acceptance that change is a never-ending process.

Leadership is a tough business. Whatever you do, you will be subjected to bitter criticism by one faction or the other. Leaders are confronted with the ever-present prospect of failure, of taking the wrong decision, of seeing their careers end in tatters and ignominy. It is not for sissies.

But the rewards of success make it all worthwhile:

By December, 1993, we in South Africa had achieved all the goals that I had articulated when I started the transformation process:

- We had adopted a non-racial constitution;
- We had prepared the way for our first-ever universal democratic elections;
- After centuries of conflict and division we had laid the foundations for a new peaceful non-racial nation.

Ironically, my greatest achievement as a leader may well be viewed by future historians as my willingness to surrender leadership. I did so on 10 May 1994 when President Mandela was inaugurated. Few leaders have ever laid down the responsibilities of office with a greater sense of accomplishment than I did on that day.