

Leading in Public Life – An Overview

The Leading in Public Life programme is a focused public leadership programme for young African professionals. It emphasizes the importance of leadership in an African context – acknowledging both the specific character of African development challenges as well as the rich and diverse African experience of leadership thinking and practice.

Public leadership addresses public concerns and issues and takes place in the public sphere rather than within a narrower organizational context dealing with private interests. It is leadership geared to effecting political, social, economic and ecological change whether one is working for government or outside of government in the private sector, a civil society organization, or engaged as an active citizen, or playing a public role in the media or in academia.

We know that effective leadership is the critical ingredient in ensuring effective and sustainable processes of development and democracy. The research evidence to support this is overwhelming. And yet, discussions about development almost always focus on a range of policy and practical issues rather than the underlying “soft” issues of leadership and management. This programme tries to address that.

While some people may more naturally have the self-confidence that pushes them into leadership roles than others, this programme assumes that everyone can develop their leadership ability and that everyone is called to take on leadership responsibility.

Our public leadership model

To support the Leading in Public Life programme, we have developed a simple public leadership model based on four core propositions. This draws on the best current thinking on leadership internationally and seeks to marry this with some of the important leadership lessons that have emerged from our African experience.

Hopefully, it provides a frame of reference for a holistic approach to leadership rooted in both indigenous knowledge and the global discourse on leadership. It is not meant to be comprehensive but rather seeks to focus us on some of the key ingredients of leadership that we need to develop as Africans committed to public service.

Proposition 1 - Agency

Good leaders lead from the inside out based on their own sense of agency. They are conscious of their unique strengths and weaknesses and their individual leadership style. They are in touch with their values. They know how to manage themselves. They are able to function with integrity and adopt an ethical approach to the difficult moral dilemmas of public life.

This proposition is about self-awareness, self-mastery and self-management. It assumes that effective leadership starts with the individual leader. It is about self appraisal, value assessment and understanding how personality influences how the individual works. It has a focus on how the individual is performing within their immediate environment.

Proposition 2 – Collaboration

Good leaders harness the energy and talent of others to achieve their goals. They know how to create effective teams. They know how to get the best out of all the people who work with them. They embody the spirit of ubuntu. They seek out partners beyond the boundaries of their own organization. They are good at building coalitions to tackle the institutional and social challenges they face.

This proposition deals with leading and managing others. It covers how to develop effectively focused and functioning teams; how to manage people to maximise their potential; how to build trust and manage the inter-personal; and how to facilitate collaboration and partnership.

Proposition 3 - Driving change and innovation

Good leaders are the enablers of change. They assist their organisations, communities and societies to adapt to the changing demands of the present and the future. This often means having the counter-intuitive wisdom to recognize that the obvious or popular answer is often not an answer at all but may worsen the problem. They recognize that sometimes the necessary change is often about changing the way we think about the issue. This is usually not popular. People do not like to change. But the good leader is able to stretch people without losing them. Good leaders do not hide the truth. They help people own the truth. And they help inspire them with new vision. They recognize at the same time that there are no easy answers to the everyday dilemmas of leadership but do not dodge making decisions because of the difficulty.

This proposition deals with leading and managing change and innovation in the complex and political environment that characterises the public arena. It addresses the role of the leader in a wider organisational or social context – managing key relationships; engaging with communities; and addressing complex challenges. This proposition deals with how to address the complex

often seemingly intractable problems that public leaders are sometimes called on to address. It is about the wisdom required to help people achieve major transitions and transformations. It deals with how to build vision.

Proposition 4 – Integration

Ours is a continent with massive challenges but also great opportunities. We are undergoing a series of massive transitions such as urbanization with all the uncertainty and social conflict that this brings. In general, public leadership within our societies has not been strong or principled enough to ensure that these transitions are used as opportunities to build more equitable, productive and inclusive societies. There is a common imperative in all our countries to work together to build quality leadership in the public sphere.

Furthermore, many of our challenges from poverty to strengthening the public service to economic development to climate change require a regional and continental response, not only a national one. The Leading in Public Life programme is also about building a network of young leaders from across the continent committed to collaborating across national boundaries in order to find solutions and facilitate change. In the process, the programme hopes to contribute to building a richer and more diverse African understanding and practice of public leadership.

This proposition deals with understanding Africa's development challenges and the range of approaches to addressing such challenges. It is about demonstrating thought leadership and building networks of influence both within countries but also regionally, continentally and globally.

Our Approach to Leadership Training

The Leading in Public Life programme combines the following: face to face training as part of a two week residential leadership course in Cape Town; a coaching programme (up to 8 sessions that continue post the course) with the objective to support the insights obtained during the course and to enhance the leadership trajectory of the participants in terms of realising their professional goals, and; an alumni network of graduates supported by an online platform to share information and discuss issues.

The programme recognizes that it is easy to talk about leadership, but that leadership is not so easy to practice. This is because leadership is about behaviour first and concepts and skills second. Good leaders have a positive impact primarily because people trust and respect them, rather than for the ideas that they hold or the skills they possess. In this, leadership is different to management. Management relies more on planning, organisational and communications skills. Leadership relies on management and intellectual skills too, but is more about qualities such as integrity, honesty, humility, courage, commitment, sincerity, passion, confidence, positivity, wisdom, determination, compassion and sensitivity.

In this programme, we try to balance conceptual and skills work with experiential learning and activities that enable participants to explore their behaviours and values in the pressured political and work environments in which they have to operate.

In conclusion, good leaders recognize that the journey of leadership involves the long road. They persist in difficult circumstances. They never give up. They place an emphasis on on-going learning for they know they can always improve. And they recognize that today's skills may not be what is needed for tomorrow. The leadership journey is therefore one of on-going learning and improvement.