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Policy and Practice

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Good afternoon

It is a great honour to have been invited to address you, and to have the opportunity to engage with distinguished young leaders from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia. I must admit however, that I got a little envious when I saw the programme because it looks like you are about to have an enriching experience over the next two weeks. Enjoy every moment of it - it will pass very quickly.

I am going to talk about the challenges of leadership within the context of leading in public life, and from the perspective of lessons I have learnt, and what I have experienced working with leaders across different sectors.

*(First share a little bit about my life journey and the experiences that formed my way of thinking about and seeing the world. Single mom who was open minded – living in different houses – different races and classes – appreciation of difference, complexity and Ubuntu for being taken in by different people. Not being attached to material things as part of my identity or purpose. Wanting to be part of something bigger than myself).*

It is important I state from the beginning that I believe how we conceptualise and act out leadership is comprised of our values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, worldview, and the varying experiences and interactions we have had throughout our lives. Because our values, worldviews and life experiences differ, our understanding of leadership will inevitably not be the same. The study of leadership can be traced back to the times of Plato. However, it has only become the focus of academic studies in the past 70 years or so. If you Google the phrase leadership today, you get

about 492 million results. This means there has really been a plethora written about the topic, and I think this is appropriate. After all for me, leadership is a way of being; and of course there are multiple ways to be. With that said however, and to avoid getting too philosophical or perhaps hippie - I do think that there can still be some common principles of leading in public life that we can all aspire towards – those principles that challenge us to tap into our humanity, and contribute our efforts towards a better life for all.

Having common principles of leading in public life is one thing. What it means to live out those principles practically however, especially within an African context, is where the challenge of leadership lies. I will explore three main challenges to be aware of, in your pursuit towards being effective and authentic leaders of change.

The three challenges are:

1. Purpose and vision
2. Systems and complexity
3. Inner and outer work

### **Challenge 1: Purpose and vision**

The question of purpose and vision is probably one of the most fundamental challenges related to leading in public life. Some leaders are to be able to state what their vision is, yet cannot articulate why they think they should be the one leading it. I have encountered so many people who say they want to lead for the greater good. When I ask why they want to lead in this space, what has often followed is a deafening silence of bewilderment with only the sounds of crickets in the background as echoes. What this silence seemed to represent in most cases was that these leaders had never really taken the time to deeply interrogate for themselves, why they wanted to lead. When I think about my own leadership journey, and why I wanted to lead, the universe made sure I asked myself that question quite early on in my life.

Throughout my schooling days, I was an overachiever who did well academically, as well as in sports and cultural activities. I held various leadership positions, including being a school prefect. All the leadership positions and achievements were great, but they felt insufficient when I did not get the position of hostel head at high school, which I felt I was predestined for. In my own assessment, people liked me, I had the best CV out of all the candidates, and I had poured my heart and soul into creating activities that benefited my fellow students. I wanted to be recognized for all of the above, and getting the leadership position of hostel head would have been a testament of and recognition of my leadership, so I felt.

Well, the powers that be dealt me a sour dose of humble pie that was hard to swallow as a seventeen year old. Not only did I not become hostel head, I wasn't even voted in as a hostel prefect, which was a first ever at our school because all school prefects who lived in hostel were inevitably hostel prefects.

I realise now that not getting that leadership position was one of the greatest tests of whether or not I would actually display leadership. Would I sulk and retreat, licking my wounds for being dealt an "unfair" hand? Would I undermine the incumbent whom I felt had less leadership experience than me, and sabotage their efforts at every opportunity? Was being made a leader about my own ego needs of recognition and power, or was it about having a position that would allow me to have greater influence for the benefit of the people?

Luckily, my seventeen-year-old self stood up with her wounds, and carried on walking. Not getting the hostel head position allowed me to dig deep to evaluate whether I was really committed to the cause of effecting positive change in my environment or interested in the title. I continued with the activities I had spearheaded at hostel, because ultimately they were for the benefit of my fellow students who kept getting involved and finding value from them. I also never undermined the hostel head or said bad things about him. He actually did a great job, and had respect and adoration from all the students living in hostel. He and I incidentally have reconnected since high school and we are good friends now.

Leading in public life can have the seduction of doing things “for the people”, but when the rubber hits the road, our true motives often show. The questions I invite you to ask yourself under this challenge of leadership is: why do you really want to lead in public life? Are you able to lead without a position? Most importantly, would you be willing to let go of a leadership position if it meant you stepping aside would have a greater impact for the public good? These are vital questions that we have to ask ourselves as the next generation of leaders who have especially grown up in post-colonial Africa where some leaders in high positions have held onto power for their own self-advancement, to the detriment of the people.

Of course we are humans and cannot be expected to be purely altruistic in our efforts. Our ambitions and aspirations to be in leadership positions of influence can also be acknowledged. Bill Gates even once noted that a hybrid engine of self-interest and concern for others serves a much wider circle of people than can be reached by self-interest or caring alone. Key to this however is the awareness of keeping this balanced. Too much self-interest can result in potential abuse of power, and the arrogance that only you can lead. Too much caring about the people can also have its shadows. It can lead to self-righteousness about your cause, where you are the voice of a voiceless people and it inevitably becomes all about you. So as you progress to become more influential leaders in public life, it is key that you continuously interrogate your reasons and purpose for leading and ensure the greater good does not suffer at your benefit.

Once you have established the authenticity of your purpose in leading in public life, setting a vision that seeks human rights and social advancement for all becomes the next challenge. The remnants of post-colonial Africa has meant that those leading in public life now have had to put economic rights at the forefront in a continent where inequality and poverty are rife. South Africa for example, is the most unequal country on the continent, and the fact that there are racial and gender relationships to this inequality further complicates the task of leadership. What I have observed and experienced over the past couple of years however, is that the pressure to provide for the economic needs of the people has meant that other human rights

and social issues have been relegated to the second or third division league. I disagree with this notion and believe that the attainment of one right should not come at the expense of another. One of the sentences in the principles of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation where I work, captures this notion well for me. It states: “The advancement of human rights means seeking to make a contribution to freedom, peace and prosperity for all human beings, never to the exclusion of any category of humanity.”

The tragedy across the African continent is that visions that are set by some African leaders proposing positive initiatives in one area, unfortunately also include the violation of other human rights. We have seen throughout the continent deaths and violence against women, children, LGBTQI communities, plus racial, tribal, and religious wars that have resulted from the visions and policies of people leading in public life.

The reality of this challenge hit home for me when a friend of mine was part of a prestigious human rights programme with young leaders from across the continent. She assumed that these future human rights practitioners and activists, particularly a group in their late 20s and early 30s, would be more progressive in their thinking around ensuring human rights for all. However, my friend was shocked to experience that the majority of her classmates thought the death penalty for gay people was something that should be considered across the continent. These were the same people who were fighting passionately for other human rights, but could not see their blind spot, prejudice, and oppression of another human right.

Another example that I have experienced is with a Black male friend of mine. To him, the fight for Black rights is at the forefront, and all other rights are secondary. I challenged him on this because putting one struggle above another leads to what a friend of mine calls the ‘Oppression Olympics’, and there will never be a winner in that game. A true test of whether you are for human rights as a whole is if you can also fight for rights that don’t directly affect and benefit you, but stretch you towards compassion for others that are being oppressed for just being themselves.

As the next generation of those leading in public life, we have to make it our mission to ensure human rights for all beyond our own moral beliefs. When we set visions and policies that oppress others, we are not only jeopardizing their humanity, but we are misusing the power of influence bestowed upon us. That is why it is key that leaders do the self-reconciliation necessary to shred their prejudicial beliefs that lead to being oppressive towards others. If you recall, I said at the beginning that I believe how we conceptualise and act out leadership is comprised of our values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, worldview, and the varying experiences and interactions we have had throughout our lives. Hence if the prejudicial beliefs are left unattended and remain unchallenged, they will creep up in detrimental ways when leaders eventually set visions and make decisions related to human rights and social advancement.

## **Challenge 2: Systems and complexity**

We live in a highly complex socio-economic-political system where problems and solutions are not a linear cause and effect process. This is why understanding systems thinking should be a core competency for those leading in public life. “Typically, we look at problems through a magnifying glass – trying to break them down into minute detail. Systems thinking however helps us take a step back, and look at the problem through a set of binoculars, which give us the skills to see “the wood for the trees” – to know what are opportunities and risks to pay attention to” (Reos). Systems thinking helps us realise that problems and issues are interconnected and that a shift in one part of the system, will affect another. Hence when looking at the challenges we face on the continent, we need to recognize that there are multiple causes requiring multiple solutions.

Critical to appreciating the complexity of our societal challenges is the importance of acknowledging that we can only truly address our complex problems through working with other leaders in different sectors. In their Harvard Business Review article titled *Triple-Strength Leadership*, Nick Lovegrove and Matthew Thomas state that to solve our most vexing problems, we need leaders who can move easily among the business, government, and social spheres. Hence, we need much more

collaborative efforts between business, government, civil society and academia, because each sector brings a critical perspective to the issue that can help shift things. The fantasy that only government or only civil society can “save us” is part of the barriers we have in solving our societal issues.

There are promising platforms that bring together multiple stakeholders to try and address our complex social challenges. I have worked on several projects with the likes of Reos Partners, who undertake the endeavour of working with multiple stakeholders. It is not an easy process to bring together people with different views about the problem and what solutions they all think are best. But the effort of bringing them together, and exploring new alternatives, yields promising outcomes that can truly transform society for the better. The key ingredient is that we have to be willing to compromise, and trust that we want to work towards mutually beneficially outcomes. This is a big challenge for those who come to the table with a zero sum, win or lose mentality, and are intent on pushing their own agendas. As the new generation of leaders, we have to be able to show that there is a different way in which we can effect change – by working together – even with our differences.

If you do not just want to change the system for the better, but want to create a new society that thinks and acts differently, then you have your work cut out even further. Donella Meadows, who was an environmental scientist and systems thinking practitioner, reminds us in her article *Leverage Points, Places to Intervene in a System* just what a difficult task it is to create systemic change at a societal level. She notes that whole societies resist challenges to their paradigm harder than they resist anything else. So if trying to shift paradigms is so difficult, it further reiterates the need to be clear about why you want to lead because challenging the status quo will be met with resistance. Adam Kahane, in his book *Power and Love, A Theory and Practice of Social Change* concurs with this sentiment and notes that: “To lead means to step forward, to exceed one’s authority, to try change the status quo, and such action is by definition disruptive. There is no way to change the status quo without discomforting those who are comfortable with the status quo” (p.116).

Despite the difficulties it presents to challenge the status quo and shift paradigms, Donella Meadows suggests that you can change paradigms by continuing to point at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm, keep speaking louder and with assurance from the new one that you want to create, and inserting people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. She warns that you don't waste time with reactionaries, but rather work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open-minded. If we can heed to this advice, then the challenge to effecting systemic change may still be tough, but possible.

Being motivated leaders who wants to effect change immediately, it sometimes means we lack the patience to stay in a system and invest in the necessary time needed to shift things. We live in what I call a microwave world of quicker, better, faster – and now! Just put the woolies chicken in the microwave and it will be ready in 3 and a half minutes to serve. Unfortunately the advantage that we have gained from advanced technology has falsely permeated into how we approach most things in life – in particular trying to effect systemic change.

Changing a complex system takes time, and so one of the important skills needed in leading in public life is the patience to work at the problem from various angles, trying out new programmes, learning from your implementation, and improving your efforts when you implement again. The disadvantage of being impatient and only staying briefly in a system is that you also miss the learning opportunity to deepen your practice and learn vital skills that will be priceless when the opportunity to move into a more influential position arises.

Personally, I have spent the past five years getting varied experiences where I have been learning as much as I can from interacting with leaders and practitioners in different sectors. I am now in a grounded place where I am ready to take all those lessons and experiences and deepen my practice through my work at The Mandela Rhodes Foundation, towards meaningful contribution.



My wish for you is that you can invest the necessary time to effect change in your chosen system of influence, and not be enticed by other opportunities that seem “flashier”. Obviously, if you have invested a couple of years in a system, and feel there is no more room for you to contribute, then move on. I’ve also seen too many people stay in organisations when they are not happy, and what ends up happening is that they become destructive and compromise all the good work they have achieved over the years.

### **Challenge 3: Inner and outer work**

It is important to recognize that the role of leading in public life comprises of the outer public work you do, how you work within your organisation, and your own self leadership work. I have encountered too many instances where those leading in public life are held in high esteem in the public platforms they attend on behalf of their organisations, only to find that they treat their staff in the most horrific ways. Preaching one thing out there, while creating a toxic work environment is a shortcoming that I hope you can avoid.

The type of environment that a leader creates for its employees cannot be underscored enough. Sumantra Ghoshal, who was an academic in management that passed away in 2004, coined the term the “smell of the place” to describe the feel of work environments. At an address at the World Economic Forum, he tells a story of how he felt when he was in Fontainebleau Forrest in France during spring, versus downtown Calcutta in summer. In Fontainebleau he wanted to run, jog and do something because there was something in the air, the trees and the environment that propelled him to do so. When he went to Calcutta in summer to visit his family, he was still the same person, but felt very differently. Summer temperatures there were 39 degrees Celsius and above. In Calcutta summer, he would feel tired, grumpy and not want to do much.

Ghoshal noted that organisations and leaders often create ‘downtown Calcutta’ inside of them. Then they wonder why individuals do not feel revitalised during the good times, let alone during turbulent times. His research found that you could

create a 'Fontainebleau' type of environment in the organisation by creating a space where people feel stretched, where people want to exercise self discipline towards achieving the organisation's goals, where there is mutual trust, and support. So leading in public life is not just about what you do out there, but it is also about how you show up for your team. It is about creating an environment that makes them feel motivated to contribute to effect positive change with you. A true marker of your leadership of course is if you are able to grow other leaders in your organisation and have a shared system of leadership that recognizes the collective efforts.

The inner work component of leading in public life is continuous self-leadership and reflection. Because leading in public life is so much about others, leaders in this sphere seldom give themselves the time to stop, take a breather and reflect on how they are doing. Taking the time to reflect allows you to see what you are doing well in your leadership, as well as areas where you can grow. It also allows you to replenish your energies so you are able to be more fully present in your efforts. Taking time out to reflect creates a likelihood of you being more effective in your change efforts than continuing to run on the treadmill without ever pushing pause. Creating self-leadership reflection time is also about being humble enough to recognize that the world can function without you, even if for a few days. So taking a break doesn't mean everything will go wrong or stop working.

Self-leadership is also about being willing to be vulnerable, to be wrong, and to receive feedback. In my previous life as an organisation development practitioner, I was sometimes called in by clients to fight some fires where a leader was not too impressed about getting feedback on how they were showing up. I would then coach the leader through processing the feedback, and in most cases they were able to see for themselves some truth in the feedback. In the absence of a coach, it is vital that you create opportunities to grow through hearing feedback from others, reflecting on it and integrating it into how you show up as a leader in future interactions.

Doing the necessary self-leadership work means that you are as aware of your strengths and passions, as you are of your fears and weaknesses. My biggest fear

over the past few years has been about not being enough. This has manifested in the workspace through my fearing that no one will take me seriously because I am young and don't have "enough" work experience to warrant the positions I have held. In all the jobs I have held, whether at Absa, Investec, consulting, and now at the Mandela Rhodes Foundation; I have always been the youngest in the team and youngest incumbent ever to hold the various positions. In hindsight, my endless anxiety and fear about my age was pointless because my clients and co-workers would keep giving me excellent feedback on how well I was doing without ever raising the age matter. In the cases where my age has been raised, it has always been in a teasing and encouraging manner where people say things like: "I can't believe you are so young and are so good at what you do." In the first two to three years of my career, I couldn't fully receive such feedback because deep inside I didn't believe in myself, even though I was doing well to the outside world. But once I started to recognize the fear, and how it was preventing me from being my best self, I was able to face it. I've progressed well in not letting the voices of fear about my age get me down. But as humans, we will predictably have other fears that will creep up once we work on others, so I know that facing my fears will be a life long journey.

Leadership author Margaret Wheatley, in *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, notes the following about fear: "Fear is fundamental to being human, and so we can expect that we'll feel afraid at times, perhaps even frequently. What is important is to notice what we do with our fear. We can withdraw or distract or numb ourselves. Or we can recognize the fear, and then step forward anyway. Fearlessness simply means that we do not give fear the power to silence or stop us."

My wish for you as leaders and as fellow human beings is that you too can face your fears – and get rid of those terrible thoughts that we hold about ourselves that steal energy from us being able to go out into the world and make a positive contribution.

In conclusion, as young leaders who are stepping up to the challenge and embracing the opportunity to be leaders in public life, my hope is that the three insights I have

shared with you today can be something that you carry with you along your journey. Firstly, that you may remember to establish your purpose for leading, and setting a vision that ensures human rights for all. Secondly, the importance of being able to operate in a complex system, and the value of collaborating across sectors. Thirdly, the critical importance of doing your inner work, and connecting that to your outer work. If we cannot create spaces of vulnerability and love within ourselves, we cannot create them in the world. Contrary to popular belief, love and vulnerability are actually some of the most powerful forces for change if we are open to their gift.

Thank you.