

# On leadership

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

To paraphrase Shakespeare: Some men are born to leadership. Others achieve leadership. And others have leadership thrust upon them.

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 Strydom, was Prime Minister.

In other respects, I achieved leadership. I served long apprenticeships as a student leader; as a leader in various Afrikaans cultural organisations; as a back-bencher; 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 National Party caucus meeting on the morning of 2 February 1989. Without the slightest prior warning we received a message from my predecessor President P W Botha that he had decided 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 six votes and emerged as leader of the National Party and *de facto* President elect.

Exactly one year later, to the day, I rose to make the speech in Parliament that would change South Africa forever.

From the perspective that I have gained during the subsequent twelve years I should like to identify the following requirements for leadership.

## 2 REQUIREMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP

### 2.1 Ability to make a cool and impartial assessment of the situation with which one has to deal

By 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 impose on 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. As Christians we also struggled with the question of what was right and what was wrong.

## **2.2 To accept the need for change**

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 of the situation led us 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. Resistance to change is deeply ingrained in 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-based reasons to fear change. We were deeply concerned about:

- communist influence in the ANC;
- the failure of other African countries to build, stable, democratic and prosperous societies; and
- the future of ethnic and cultural minorities under a majority-rule government.

## **2.3 Acceptance that decisions must be guided by of 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. 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 injus-

tice. It was this, in the final instance, that persuaded my colleagues and me that we had to accept the risks of radical change.

## **2.4 Having accepted the need to change, 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. For example, when he launched his *perestroika* reforms, President 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.

## **2.5 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 the antagonism of the past;
- a South Africa free of domination or oppression in whatever form;
- a South Africa within which the democratic forces - all reasonable people - align themselves behind mutually acceptable goals and **against** radicalism, irrespective of where it comes from.

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

## **2.6 Special communication skills**

We live in a world of perceptions - and perceptions are created as much by how we communicate as by what we do. For us 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 essential sacrifices - but they cannot deal with uncertainty.

A key leadership factor is the ability to inspire your followers to accept your vision of the future. Some of the followers of the ruling National Party were not prepared to take the risks involved in a radical change of course - even though they could see the breakers smashing on the reefs ahead. It was the task of the party's leadership to assure them that there were other courses that could effectively protect their core interests, while at the same time affording full political rights to all South Africans. We explored the possibilities of power sharing; of constitutional guarantees; of the devolution of power.

Ultimately, most Afrikaners and white South Africans accepted the necessity of fundamental change. However, some doggedly shut their eyes to the dangers ahead. They refused to give up the Afrikaners quest for exclusive national self-determination in some non-existent homeland, and pointed continually to the chaos in Africa and to the threat of communist domination.

In 1982 some of the most die-hard elements left the National Party and established the Conservative Party. They did so because the Government had, by that time, already begun to change course. It had decided, as a first step, to include the coloured and Asian minorities in a three chamber Parliament and was determined to move away from rigid racial segregation with black South Africans.

The departure of the Conservatives greatly facilitated the task of those of us who remained behind. It was no longer necessary to make unwieldy compromises to keep them on board. Another leadership requirement is accordingly the ability to encourage those who are steadfastly opposed to change, to disembark. It is better to accept a smaller power base than to allow a faction in ones power base to block what must be done.

## **2.7 Ability to turn one's vision into reality**

Knowing what to do 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 of government to alter course. History contains a woeful tally of leaders in many countries who have resolutely steered their countries into war and 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.

A key to success for the reform minded leader is accordingly to be at the helm - or to have enough influence to ensure that the helmsman takes the right decisions. To do this you must become a leader and remain a leader. You must achieve authority and you must maintain the confidence and support of key role players and constituencies.

Some leaders try to determine the course of events through the sheer force of their personalities, others by the brilliance of their intellect. I tried to do so by putting the emphasis on teamwork; by drawing all members of my management team into the process of analysis, planning and strategising; by listening carefully to all of them; by constantly interacting with the team in pointing out the right direction as I saw it; and by forging an acceptable consensus. This may not have been the most spectacular way of managing change, but it was the most efficient way. It did help to ensure that during the entire process the whole of our management team remained solidly committed to our common objectives.

## **2.8 Timing is an essential attribute of leadership**

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. A leader intent on managing change must watch the tides and currents and must position himself accordingly. Timing is crucially important.

I was often criticised while I was a leading figure in the National Party and before I became President for not racing out ahead of the pack in the pursuit of reform. Had I done so I would probably have alienated important constituencies within my party. I might then not have become leader of the National Party in February 1989 and I would not have been able to initiate the transformation process in February 1990, and therefore to manage it.

History awards no prizes to those who have the right answers. It recognises only those who acquire power and use it to translate their vision of what is right into positive developments on the ground.

A leader must have a weather eye open for changes in political tides and currents. More than this, however, he must also be ready to ride the wave of history when it breaks.

After my inauguration in September 1989 my hand was further strengthened by the great historic events that were occurring in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. 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 serious 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 peace-meal fashion.

## **2.9 Leaders must persevere**

Having taken the decision to embark upon radical change, the main challenge is to maintain sufficient control of the process. 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 seized by enormous and often uncontrollable forces. All that the canoeist can 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 own transformation process. The boycotts of the process by the ANC and the IFP; the terrible 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 - all of these crises almost caused the process to capsize.

## **2.10 Leaders must be prepared to take risks**

There were many points during the transformation process when we had to take calculated risks. Among these were when we decided:

- to permit free political activity for all parties - including even the Communist Party; and
- to commit ourselves irrevocably to a negotiated solution and to a future where we would no longer be the sole arbiters of our destiny.

One of the most notable risks that I took was in 1991 when the National Party started to lose bye-elections - primarily to the Right. The Conservative Party insisted that we had lost our mandate to continue with our new course. It claimed the right to speak for the majority of whites and began to undermine the National Party Government's reform programme.

I decided - against the advice of my closest advisers - that the best way to deal with this threat would be 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.

### **2.11 Leaders must accept that the process of change never ends**

There is no point at which leaders can say that they have “solved” any problem in a rapidly changing environment. As soon as they have achieved their objectives, they must begin to address the next challenges that change will inevitably throw down. Ultimately, they must face the final test of leadership – of accepting the appropriate time for their own retirement. One of the greatest mistakes of leaders – including many great leaders – has been their inability to know when to leave the political stage. Too many fail this test and overstay their welcome.

## **3 CONCLUSION**

By 1997 we had achieved most of the primary objectives that we had set in 1990:

- we had negotiated one of the most democratic constitutions in the world;
- we had rejoined the global community;
- our new government had adopted economic policies and approaches that were, by and large, sensible and effective. We were well positioned for high economic growth.
- we had done all this with surprisingly little violence and with a great deal of goodwill.

Our new generation of leaders face many serious problems. Their main challenges will be to ensure that:

- our constitution takes root in the hearts of all our people;
- that we nurture relationships between our different communities that are now beginning to show some signs of strain; and that
- we work together to address the very real problems that confront us, including crime, unemployment, poverty and AIDS.

The baton of leadership has been passed to another generation. I wish them well in the race!