

Leadership: Vision, then courage to act



In this second instalment of the leadership series that I initiated in my previous article, I'm discussing the leadership trait of courage/boldness (for the purpose of this letter, I'll stick with the word courage). In the first article, I used the March 2019 Presidential SONA as a base to discuss the importance of visionary leadership for the social and economic development of South Africa. However, vision alone is insufficient. A vision or 'a dream (goal) without a plan is just a wish', said Antoine de Saint Exupery. I ended the previous article with the next big question – 'Do we have the leaders with the courage to take on the required bold actions to make this dream a plan and reality for South Africans? Yes, we do!'

It was a bold assertion on my part to conclude that we do have such leaders. I followed up by posing the question by way of what I'll confess was a limited survey amongst some of my WhatsApp groups. The emergent reality is rather disappointing. Three key observations struck me from the feedback that I received: -

Firstly, the names that were proposed reflected recent actions in the public and political arena. The political environment of the past ten years has had a great influence on the perception of who is a courageous leader. This should not be surprising because it is real and current in terms of the most concerning issues that need to be addressed in the country. You would have guessed by now that Ms Thuli Madonsela and our Chief Justice, Mogoeng Mogoeng appeared frequently in my respondents' replies to the question at hand. No surprises there, given the unfolding corruption scandals and party political battles; on enquiry whether any political leaders in South Africa display courage, there was an almost unanimous NO! Just one lonely respondent bravely suggested Julius Malema as a courageous leader.

Secondly, there were no business leaders put forward. One respondent expressed a very disappointing perspective towards business in terms of lack of voice, proactive action, and response to challenges facing the country. This has been a long-held view about business in South Africa and was aptly captured by the Centre for Enterprise and Development, who stated that business has established a cosy relationship with government in terms of engagement which has not put the interest of the country first (The Growth Agenda. Priorities for mass employment and inclusion: business and government 'Going along to get along', page 2).

Despite the above views on business, I'll throw into this discussion a list of names that were put forward at the Joburg Indaba recently, through the SA Mining Hall of Fame. The purpose of the Hall of Fame is to honour individuals who have shown exceptional leadership in the South African mining industry since democracy. The list includes the following – Mark Bristow, Ian Cockerill, Barry Davison, Con Fauconnier, Brian Gilbertson, Bobby Godsell, May Hermanus, Marius J. Kloppers, Gwede Mantashe, Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, James Motlatsi, Patrice Motsepe, and Siphon Nkosi. These are well-known men and women who have built great companies and shaped the South African mining industry; I'll let you, the reader, be the judge of their courage.

Thirdly, there was no mention of youth leaders who could play a part in the socio-economic transformation of South Africa. It is unfortunate that there are no youth leaders who immediately come to mind; however, I do not believe that it is a reflection of our reality. For example, during the 'fees must fall' campaigns several student leaders emerged who displayed boldness about an issue that is of national concern. A quick Google search revealed, among others, Sithembiso Ndlovu (Tshwane University), Alex Hots (Rhodes University), Shaeera Kalla (Wits University), Naledi Chirwa (Pretoria University), and Nompandolo Mkatshwa (Wits University).

Tjoe! The above observations are concerning in my view, although based on a limited survey – a few questions were raised in my mind as I was contemplating this article.

- While there are many who can be regarded as leaders, not only from a position perspective, few are the kind of leaders who have a propensity for action, willingness to follow the courage of their convictions, and boldness in translating vision to tangibles. South Africa needs action-orientated leaders to drive the transformation, in all its dimensions, that the country needs. Is the persistent underperformance of the nation a function of this lack of 'leadership for action'?
- It's difficult to understand where the difficulty lies in translating leadership vision into action – is it fear or incompetence? Both require courage to overcome, including 'knowing what you don't know' and seeking assistance and collaboration. Are the visions, dreams, and aspirations that we hear from our leaders really a concern for the nation or rather a camouflage for the concern for self and how one will benefit?
- Will the country's leaders only emerge from our youth? The breadth and depth of issues require all demographics to play a role in learning, teaching, perspective, experience and the 'energy to do' that you find in diversity. What kinds of action would show a concern for the nation, rather than the self, from our leaders?

That will be the subject of my next article, selflessness as a leadership trait

M.I. Mthenjane
President, SAIMM