



What Nelson Mandela Taught the World About Leadership

By Willie Pietersen

We all recall signal moments in our lives—those that shaped the way we view the world. February 11, 1990, was such a day for me. From my home in Connecticut, I watched the TV broadcast of Nelson Mandela’s release from prison and saw him walk through the crowds—a tall, upright, and dignified figure. He was driven to Cape Town’s city hall where, before a rally of thousands of supporters, he made a landmark speech declaring his commitment to peace and reconciliation.

As someone who was born and raised in South Africa, and witnessed the cruel injustices of apartheid firsthand, I was overcome by a mixture of disbelief, renewed hope, and profound gratitude. I shall never forget that powerful moment.

In the years that followed, Nelson Mandela's legacy outgrew the confines of South Africa. Today he is widely acknowledged to have been one of the most iconic leaders of the past century. His death on December 5, 2013, brought forth an outpouring of accolades from around the world for what he achieved and the legacy he left behind.

Through all the rhetoric, one message emerged clearly: The world will be a better place if we can carry forward Mandela's values and not let them die with the man. So we need to take stock. What did he achieve? How did he do it? What can we learn from his life and work?

Mandela's Challenge: The Scourge of Apartheid

As a former CEO and now a professor at Columbia Business School who has long studied (and striven to practice) the art of leadership, these questions are of professional interest to me. They also matter to me on a deeply personal level. As a young lawyer in Cape Town, I saw first-hand the dehumanizing impact of apartheid on all those whom it touched.

First, a bit of background: South Africa is a multiracial country with a population of about 52 million, with blacks making up 80 percent of the total. The apartheid regime, launched in 1948, enforced rigid segregation between blacks and whites (apartheid means “separateness”) and robbed the black majority of their dignity by treating them as inferior human beings without the rights and privileges enjoyed by whites. At its core, it was a system of subjugation. Its residue was material and spiritual impoverishment.

Under this cruel system, an odious piece of legislation gave a government board the power to classify a person’s race according to a set of visual and cultural criteria. The application of this law reached new depths when individual members of the same family were classified differently and forced to live apart or prohibited from having sexual relations, when courting couples were prevented from marrying, or when innocent children were forced out of the schools they were attending.

As a young lawyer, I represented several young couples whose lives had been torn apart by this inhumane law. The appeal process required the aggrieved individuals to submit to a degrading personal inspection, whereby board members would examine them as if they were laboratory specimens—for example, twisting a pencil in a young woman’s hair in order to measure its “kinkiness.” The indignities and human distress involved have haunted me ever since.

In reaction to the widespread oppression that characterized apartheid, there were spasms of resistance, some of them violent. These were always harshly crushed and severely punished. Desperation increased and hope receded. Out of this crucible, Mandela emerged as a leader of the resistance movement. Ultimately he was apprehended, tried, convicted of sabotage and sent, along with other freedom fighters, to Robben Island, a barren outcrop off the coast near Cape Town where he faced the bleak prospect of life in prison.

Mandela's Achievement: A Peaceful End to Apartheid

While Mandela was in jail, pressure mounted on the white minority government. The door opened for negotiations—a process that Mandela himself helped bring about, even while he was imprisoned. In 1990, after 27 years in prison, Mandela was released and assumed his role as head of the African National Congress and the leading representative of black South Africans.

In 1994, Mandela became South Africa's first black president. The challenges he faced were daunting. Black South Africans were understandably bitter and hostile about the decades of oppression they'd suffered; whites were apprehensive about their loss of privilege and frightened about the likelihood of violent reprisals by the newly-empowered blacks.

Yet during his five years as president, Mandela led a peaceful transition from a discordant, racially segregated country to a democracy based on a universal franchise, sustained by a progressive constitution and an impressive Bill of Rights. In the process he earned the affection and respect of all races in the country, and, against all odds, ushered in a period of peace and stability. This achievement probably has no precedent in history.

Chris Filmer, also a former South African, offers this compelling metaphor. The situation Mandela faced was analogous to two powerful steam engines careening towards each other on the same track. Mandela had to slow them both down, stop them, then reverse each one to a position where they could link up and travel in a completely new direction.

Underneath this monumental achievement lies a remarkable journey and a revealing portrait of a man's character. Together they provide priceless and enduring lessons in leadership.

The Three Domains of Integrated Leadership

I suggest that leadership is ultimately about integrity, hence the idea of integrated leadership. An integrated leader is one who is able to master the three domains of leadership:

- Personal Leadership (Leadership of Self). This is about demonstrating authenticity, deep self-knowledge, and sound personal values—the source of one’s ability to persuade.
- Interpersonal leadership (Leadership of Others). This is the capacity to understand and empathize with the needs of others and bring out the best in everyone.
- Strategic Leadership (Leadership of the Organization—or in politics, Leadership of the Nation). This is the ability to establish a winning strategy, the right priorities, and an effective process for achieving success.

These three domains are interdependent; when any one of them is ineffective, it undermines the effectiveness of the whole. My own view is that mastery of self is the threshold requirement. It is our permission to lead. If that is not in place, nothing else will work. In the words of Socrates, “Let him who would move the world first move himself.”

Let’s examine Mandela’s leadership effectiveness through the lens of these three domains.

“Be the Change You Seek”: Mandela’s Personal Leadership

Mastery of self was probably the most remarkable aspect of Mandela’s leadership. Instead of simply languishing in prison, he used the time to think deeply and muster his inner strength. He studied, contemplated his future course

and the future course of his nation, and clarified his vision for South Africa.

Mandela, like the other leaders of the African National Congress, had been convinced that guerrilla warfare against the apartheid regime was a necessary part of their independence struggle. After all, they reasoned, apartheid was itself a violent system; hence, a certain amount of retaliatory violence was justified and arguably unavoidable.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, the political situation evolved. Thanks in part to worldwide political and economic pressure, even conservative white leaders like Prime Minister P. W. Botha began to acknowledge that the country must “Adapt or die.” Little by little, a majority of white South Africans came to accept the reality that the status quo was unsustainable, and that a violent upheaval was becoming increasingly likely.

Mandela was following these developments from prison. He realized that anger and resentment could easily ignite a bloody civil war. These emotions were present within every element of South African society. The Afrikaners (white South Africans ultimately of Dutch descent, sometimes called the Boers) feared the loss of power and the extinction of their proud language and culture; the blacks were seeking retribution against their white oppressors and jockeying for tribal advantage among themselves; and the Indian and mixed race groups (known as “coloreds”) worried about black domination.

Mandela believed that a violent uprising against apartheid would have horrific results. Therefore, finding some way to create a nonviolent transition to majority rule was essential. But how do you persuade such diverse groups to let go of their deep-seated fears and resentments and pursue a common purpose?

Simple exhortation would not be not enough. Mandela understood that he first had to change himself before he could ask others to change themselves. This was a challenge of moral leadership. In the words often attributed to the Indian independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi—words Mandela himself often quoted—“Be the change that you seek.”

Of course, like any other political prisoner suffering at the hands of an unjust regime, Mandela sometimes felt anger and thirsted for revenge. But he recognized that giving free rein to these emotions would damage his capabilities as a leader. So he trained himself to master his feelings, even while knowing that reaching out in friendship to those who had been deadly enemies of his own kind would expose him to enormous personal danger.

While in prison, Mandela steeped himself in the writings of Shakespeare, from which he derived profound insights into human psychology. It's revealing that, when asked to name his favorite passage from Shakespeare, he turned to act 2, scene 2 of Julius Caesar and cited the lines

Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once.

The strategic shift from armed confrontation to negotiations and reconciliation was not, for Mandela, a sign of softness or weakness. On the contrary, he thought of it as a matter of strength, discipline, and courage.

In 1998, former President Bill Clinton visited Mandela, who took him to Robben Island and showed him where he had spent those years doing hard labor and suffering numerous indignities. Clinton was awestruck. “Surely,” he said, “you must have felt some anger and the need for retribution after all this?” Mandela’s answer: “No. If I had allowed myself those thoughts, I would have remained in prison, but it would have been a prison of my own making.” In the same circumstances, how many of us would have been able to attain that victory within ourselves?

Learning Your Enemy’s Language: Mandela’s Interpersonal Leadership

Along with this remarkable victory over himself, Mandela embarked on his campaign of persuasion, beginning this work even before his release from prison. Because he aspired to leadership of the whole nation, this required him to learn to empathize with all South Africans—including those who considered him their enemy.

Consider these extraordinary actions: In prison, Mandela learned the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner history. He conversed with his jailors and his negotiation counterparts in their own language. He talked respectfully to his jailors, took an interest in their daily concerns and family lives, and offered them advice when he could. He even studied rugby, the Afrikaner national sport and intense source of Afrikaner pride, and discussed the nuances of the game with his captors.

As Mandela has observed, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

After, after being freed, Mandela continued to lead in the same vein. During negotiations with white leaders over the shape of the new racially-integrated government, he drew upon his knowledge of South African history to refer to Afrikaner heroes such as the generals who fought the English during the Boer War, impressing and pleasing those on the other side of the table. When he was inaugurated as president in 1994, one of the guests seated on the stage with him was an Afrikaner who had been his chief jailor at Robben Island.

A year later, when the rugby world cup competition was staged in South Africa (largely thanks to Mandela’s influence), he defied fellow leaders of the African National Congress by publicly supporting the predominantly Afrikaner Springbok team. (Traditionally, black South Africans had actually cheered for foreign teams when they played against the Springboks.) When the Springboks won

the world cup by beating New Zealand, Mandela donned the team's jersey and joined wholeheartedly in the victory celebrations in front of a TV audience of millions —a huge unifying moment for the nation.

Perhaps most important, Mandela lent his support to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a systematic process for the nation to undertake the painful but uplifting journey of forgiveness and reconciliation. Chaired by the internationally respected Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission invited victims of gross human rights violations under apartheid to give statements about their experiences. Perpetrators of violence who gave honest testimony could receive amnesty from prosecution. Not all South Africans have been satisfied by the work of the commission; some blacks, in particular, resent the granting of amnesty to whites who abused their powers under apartheid. But most people of all races regard the commission as an essential step in the peaceful transition to democracy.

Mandela's brand of interpersonal leadership wasn't easy to practice. Many of his black allies worried that he was weak when dealing with white leaders. His rivals for political power sometimes used inflammatory rhetoric to attract support among black South Africans who were understandably angry over their long history of mistreatment and impatient for radical change. Mandela had to exercise great emotional restraint, political skill, and his enormous personal prestige to keep the warring factions within his own party more or less under control.

Mandela's interpersonal effectiveness stemmed from his mastery of self, coupled with his profound empathy—the ability to see the world through the eyes of others. As the writer Stephen King has said, “You have to start by knowing yourself so well that you begin to know other people. A piece of us is in every person we meet.”

The Clear Trumpet: Mandela's Strategic Leadership

Management guru Peter Drucker once said, “The first task of a leader is to be the trumpet that sounds the clear sound.” Did Mandela define a clear goal and priorities, and did he harness an effective method for reaching these?

Let's return to the speech Mandela gave when he was freed from prison. Mandela had to walk a tightrope, offering a hand of friendship to the white minority while assuring his black and colored compatriots that he would not forget their sufferings or ignore their grievances. With the world holding its breath, Mandela began his speech with these words:

Friends, comrades and fellow South Africans.

I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom for all.

I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people. Your tireless and heroic

sacrifices have made it possible for me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.

These words immediately made it clear that Mandela intended to represent all South Africans, white and black. They also reassured anxious listeners around the world that Mandela was deeply committed to democracy—a crucial point in an era when many observers associated Africa with governmental corruption and autocracy. Mandela returned to this point frequently throughout the remainder of his speech:

Negotiations on the dismantling of apartheid will have to address the over-whelming demand of our people for a democratic, non-racial and unitary South Africa. . . . Our march to freedom is irreversible. We must not allow fear to stand in our way. Universal suffrage on a common voters' role in a united democratic and non-racial South Africa is the only way to peace and racial harmony.

Like me, many white South Africans hearing Mandela's speech must have responded to his call for democracy, peace, and racial harmony with a mixture of relief and skepticism. Would it really be possible for a black leader, however inspiring, to channel decades of frustration and anger into positive, peaceful action? Yet true to his words, Mandela went on to lead a campaign of forgiveness and

reconciliation, promoting the inclusive vision of a “rainbow nation” living together in harmony.

Of course, in addition to being the political father of a reborn nation—the George Washington of South Africa, if you will—Mandela also faced the kinds of strategic challenges any national leader might face. His overriding vision of freedom and harmony implicitly embraced three sub-goals; a political goal (democracy) a social goal (better living conditions) and an economic goal (shared prosperity). All three, of course, were interrelated.

On the political front, the results have been stunning: a peaceful transition to democracy and black majority rule. Mandela was truly the trumpet that sounded the clear sound. He served as a majestic role model of inclusiveness.

On the social and economic fronts, the results have been much more mixed. Mandela’s nobly-intended social programs have been hobbled by a lack of funding, and significant gaps have remained in areas such as health care, education, housing and jobs. Economic growth has averaged just 2 to 4 percent annually, well short of the 6 percent that economists say is needed to close the growing gap between white and black. Some of Mandela’s staunchest admirers fault him for stepping down from the presidency in 1999, at the height of his power and popularity, while leaving these problems unsolved. (Of course, Mandela was almost 80 years old, and it would be hard to claim that he hadn’t earned the right to retire.)

It's clear, then, that Mandela did not achieve all his goals; the social and economic problems of the country remain daunting. Was Mandela, then, a failed leader? I don't think so. Compare his legacy with that of Abraham Lincoln, who saved the Union and freed the slaves—yet it took a hundred years for comprehensive civil rights legislation to be enacted. Like Lincoln, Mandela established the essential foundations for a cause that transcended his lifetime.

Mandela's Lessons in Leadership

How do we sum up what Mandela taught us about leadership?

The first lesson is a simple reminder: No leader is perfect. Mandela was not as successful in driving economic growth as he was in the human aspects of leadership. And even with his formidable human strengths, he was forced to make trade-offs on how he spent his time and energy. Some of his friends, supporters, and even family members found him emotionally distant; some believe he squandered the opportunities he enjoyed to transform South Africa's economic and social system in more fundamental ways. Even a great leader can't do everything.

The second lesson is related to the first: Leadership effectiveness is situational. A leader's unique skills and

attributes must match the moment. In the case of Mandela's visionary leadership, this match was excellent.

Notice, for example, that Mandela's decision to rely on nonviolence and to campaign for democracy, and equality in the new South Africa was based, in part, on the specific political and social circumstances he faced. Even in the apartheid era, the South African government maintained a strong tradition (derived from its European heritage) of respect for certain democratic norms, including elections, effective checks and balances, and a strong, independent system of justice. Mandela and his African supporters were able to appeal to these institutions and to the values they represented as a way of rallying open-minded white South Africans to their cause.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that in the person of F.W. de Klerk, South Africa's last leader under the apartheid regime, Mandela found a negotiation partner who shared his vision of a peaceful transition and showed the courage to help carry it through. The two men subsequently shared the Nobel Peace Prize.

The third lesson: An effective leader must create powerful processes designed to lead to desired outcomes. In his dedication to democracy, equality, and inclusiveness, Mandela helped create processes (such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) that would lead, in the long run, to a freer nation in which everyone had a stake.

But processes by themselves can't solve deep-seated political and social problems. To be trusted, processes must

be based on the integrity of the leaders who implement and guide them. As Mandela showed us, in order to bring about transformational change, certain leadership qualities are essential:

- Deep self-knowledge, humility, and a strong moral foundation
- Dedication to a cause larger than oneself
- A clear vision for success, supported by unwavering determination
- An ability to build trust by empathizing with the needs and concerns of others
- The personal strength to overcome bitterness and forgive one's enemies

Together, these represent a unique combination of focus, principles, courage, and compassion.

We live in a world beset by sectarian hostilities. Imagine the possibilities if political leaders everywhere could summon the moral strength to apply Nelson Mandela's teachings.

“Unconquerable Soul”: Mandela's Inspiration

Nelson Mandela drew inspiration from the following poem by the nineteenth-century writer William Ernest

Henley called “Invictus” (the Latin title means “unconquered”).

Invictus

**Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul**

**In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.**

**Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.**

**It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.**