

Nelson Mandela a Model of Leadership

Risk Taker

According to Kouzes and Posner, one - a leader in particular - is confronted with “risk” when one tries untested approaches and accepts the risk that accompany all experiments. One is also confronted with risk when one is (a) confronted with a new challenge or a new idea, (b) pushed outside one’s comfort zone, (c) willing to be “first” and or to “trust”, (d) willing to experiment with new ways of doing things and or (e) willing to go beyond the boundaries (1). Nelson Mandela, born July 18, 1918 at Mvezo, a tiny village on the banks of the Mbashe River in the district of Umtata, the capital of the Transkei, was one of the world’s greatest leaders and risk takers, yet becoming so was a process. He learned to be a leader. Madiba, Nelson’s clan name, a term of respect, challenged the social process of apartheid in South Africa and became its first Black African president. Although he was imprisoned for 27 years, he accomplished this feat with style and grace. On May 10, 1994, Nelson Madiba Mandela accepted the presidency of South Africa with national pride and humility. In the process of becoming president, he became a worldwide “model of leadership”. In 1993, he won the Nobel Prize, partly due to his leadership ability (3). Today, he is one of the world’s most revered leaders.

Madiba began developing his leadership style during his early childhood years while watching his father and mother’s behavior, listening to them tell African tales, and listening to his father, Chiefs, and elders recite oral history.

Mandela grew up listening to his father’s stories of historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors, and his mother would enchant him with Xhosa legends and

fables. These tales stimulated his childish imagination, and usually contained some moral lesson, such as “virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know.” (2, p.10)

Mandela was a scholar of Xhosa history, but at Mqhekezweni (where Chief Jongintaba resided), and from Chiefs and headmen, he learned true African history. Through them he discovered the great patriots who fought against Western domination. His imagination was fired by the glory of these African warriors (2, p. 20) He once stated “I maintain that nurture, rather than nature, is the primary molder of personality...” In his autobiography, he states “On the day of the inauguration, I was overwhelmed with a sense of history....” (2, p. 541). Madiba’s leadership style, and his ability to take risk, are rooted in Xhosa history, familial piety, family, early childhood training, and a formal Christian education.

Foundations of Risk Taking

Apart from life, a strong constitution, and an abiding connection to the Thembu royal house, the only thing Mandela’s father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, bestowed upon him at birth was a name, Rolihlahla. In Xhosa, Rolihlahla literally means, “pulling the branch of a tree,” but its colloquial meaning is “troublemaker”. (2, p. 3) His father, was a chief by both blood and custom (2, p. 3). Mandela’s first insight into leadership was from watching his father, his role model. He knew his mother loved and supported him, but he held that “I defined myself through my father.” (2, p. 13) The Xhosa are a proud and patrilineal people with an expressive and euphonious language and an abiding belief in the importance of laws, education, and courtesy. Mandela adopted all these traits and beliefs. This is manifested in his effervescent mannerisms, eloquent speech, humility and moral code of ethics. Xhosa society was a balanced and harmonious social

order in which every individual knew his or her place. Each Xhosa belonged to a clan that traces its descent back to a specific forefather (2) It was from those Mandela further developed strong ties to his homeland and people. He once stated “We have no half brothers or half sisters. My mother’s sister is my mother; my uncle’s son is my brother, my brother’s child is my son, my daughter.” (2, p. 8)

Although Mandela was a member of the royal household, he was not trained to rule, but to counsel the rulers of his tribe. (2) Thus he developed a sense of social responsibility and loyalty for the welfare of his people. He could also be exceedingly stubborn, another trait passed down from his father to him. (2) He stated “My father possessed a proud rebelliousness, a stubborn sense of fairness, that I recognize in myself.” (2, p. 6)

Africans have a highly developed sense of dignity, or what the Chinese call “face” I learned early that to humiliate another person is to make him suffer an unnecessarily cruel fate. Even as a boy, I defeated my opponents without dishonoring them. (2, p. 9)

At five Mandela became a herd-boy. He developed a work ethic very early in life. As a youth, his most popular game to play was “thinti”, an approximation of war. Custom, ritual, and taboo shaped his life. To him, this was the alpha and omega of existence, and was unquestioned. He also learned that to neglect one’s ancestors would bring ill fortune and failure in life. He was aware of a collective consciousness. His father did not subscribe to local prejudice, nor did he. As stated earlier, he was baptized into the Methodist, or Wesleyan Church, and sent to school. where he received a British education. His first teacher gave him the Christian name Nelson. (2) At nine

years of and after the death of his father, Mandela's mother took him to live with Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo at Mqhekezweni (the Great Place, the capitol of Thembuland.) Here he was constantly in the presence of the Chiefs, the chief elders, local people, politician, the highest Justices of the Thembu court, men that were used to the exercise of authority. This is where he gained a personal sense of authority, privilege and power, self-determination and leadership. Jongintaba, the regent, became his guardian and benefactor for the next decade. Later Mandela stated

In the moment of beholding Jongintaba ...and his court I felt like a sapling pulled root and branch from the earth and flung into the center of a stream whose strong current I could not resist....I saw that life might hold more for me than being a champion stick-fighter.(2, p. 14)

It was here that a vision of leadership was planted in Mandela's heart. He said "Chief Joyi's war stories and his indictments of the British made me feel angry and cheated, as though I had been robbed of my own birthright." (2, p. 19)

My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court. I watched and learned from the tribal meetings that were regularly held at the Great Place. As a leader I have always followed the principals I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place.... (2, p 19)

The principles of leadership that he learned there are as follows: (a) The foundations of self-government are that all men are free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens. (b) When criticized, listen do not defend oneself, and show no emotion. (c) Unanimity might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy means that all men are to be heard, and a decision is taken together as a people. A minority is not to be crushed by a majority. No conclusion is forced on people who disagree. (d) A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the

flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind. (e) Endeavor to listen to what each and every person in a discussion have to say before venturing one's own opinion. (2, pp. 18 & 19). In the Great Place Mandela learned of heroism, generosity, principles of leadership and humility.

Mandela was a serious youth and never liked to admit defeat. At 16, during his "right of passage" into manhood (circumcision), he had to display daring courage and show no signs of weakness, which would have stigmatized his manhood. There were explicit rules for entering into manhood properly. To the Xhosa people, it represented the formal incorporation of males into society. It was at this time that he realized he had to put away childish thinking. Circumcision was a trial of bravery and stoicism. Mandela counts his years of manhood from the day of his circumcision. The name he was given at circumcision was Dalibunga, meaning "Founder of the Bungha," the traditional ruling body of the Transkei. As a reward for becoming a man, he was given material wealth, two heifers and four sheep. He was not a jealous person, therefore he was not jealous of those who received more than he, he was merely grateful for what he was given. During the ceremony after his circumcision, he and other young men were referred to as "...sons, young, healthy, and handsome, the flower of the Xhosa tribe, the pride of our nation." (2, p.26) He was also told that the Xhosa and all Black South Africans were conquered people, that they were slaves in their own land, and tenants of their own soil, that they had no strength, no power, no control over their own destiny in the land of their birth. They were told that the gifts they were given were naught because the leaders could not give them the greatest gift of all: freedom and independence. The flowers of the Xhosa nation are dying. These words soon began to work in him and he developed a burden for Black South Africans. Mandela stated "The speaker had planted a seed, and though the seed lie dormant for a long season, it eventually began to grow." (2, p 26). Also, this was the day that Mandela realized he had been ignorant of Black's plight in South Africa.

At 16, while attending Clarkbury Boarding Institute, Mandela learned that Blacks do not always have to obey Whites. He witnessed and learned unselfish devotion to a good cause. He added to his work ethic, diligence. Although at this time he was not very

courageous, he admired Blacks who would not be cowed by Whites. He learned to accept all Blacks, not just those of his clan. At 19, while attending Wesleyan College, he learned about the responsibility of being a leader, and for the first time he experienced the responsibility and burden of leadership. He became a leader, but his courage was yet untested. He began to understand his parochialism and loosen the hold of the tribalism that imprisoned him. He began to sense his identity as an Africa, not just a Thembu or even a Xhosa. He learned moral reasoning, and to take a stand for justice and truth, just as the assegai (African spear) stands for what is glorious and true in African history. He learned to be fair. By watching educated Black role models, he became aroused and motivated, he began to change his perception of his White benefactors. His sense of African pride was deepened; he began to feel like one of the chosen people. Although there were moral, racial, and cultural dilemmas he had to work through, he felt like he was being groomed for success in the world. He became a leader of choice, a “mover and a shaker.” He learned not to bend, but to stand fast, whatever the cost. He also learned that he would not win every fight with authority. Of a certain incident he wrote, “We had remained firm, and we won. This was one of my battles with authority, and I felt the sense of power that comes from being right and justice on one’s side.” (2, p. 40) He learned diligence and discipline, also self-discipline and patience to build on one’s endowment. He learned that men who take great risk often suffer great consequences. He became sophisticated, but never forgot that he was a country boy who loved and missed country pleasure. It was in college that he had his first formal introduction to the *African National Congress*. From watching the President son’s behavior, he learned that a Black man did not have to accept the dozens of petty indignities directed at him each day. While he appreciated all his White benefactors had and were doing for him, he resented their absolute power over his fate. For it was in the countryside, running through open fields, that he learned to love freedom. If one is to become a leader, one will have to be in love with “The cause”. Mandela said this regarding one of his college experiences “It aroused and motivated us and began to alter my perception...(2, p. 36)

When Mandela returned home, his filial piety was intact, but he was well prepared to rebel against the social system of his own people, but not yet society at-large:

little wins. To avoid an arranged marriage, he took the risk of running away from home to Johannesburg South Africa. (2).

References

- (1) Kouzes, J. M. & Posner, B. Z. (1995); *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Don in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, California.
- (2) Mandela, Nelson (1994); *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Little, Brown and Company; Boston, MA.
- (3) Mandela, Nelson Rolihlahla
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