

MANDELA AND EXCELLENT AFRICAN LEADERSHIP:

Lessons from an appreciative thematic analysis

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Abstract

Nelson Mandela is highly regarded as an example par excellence of African leadership. In this regard he is praised for the ways in which he united South Africans, ushering in a new national order. Yet little has been done in Communication Study, in South Africa, to describe the key leadership communication traits that make up his leadership. What is more, notwithstanding some claims regarding how Mandela embodied ubuntu in practice, little has been done to locate and theorise his leadership style in relation to African traditions of communication. This paper presents an appreciative thematic analysis of how Mandela's leadership communication practices were eulogised and remembered in selected South African newspapers in the ten day period between his death and burial. This entails putting into play a methodological innovation that brings insights from appreciative enquiry to bear on established practices of thematic analysis. The aim is to arrive at key lessons for contemporary and future leadership that can be drawn from the praise of Mandela that is found in the extraordinary newspaper coverage of him that one finds in this time of mourning.

Introduction

It can be argued that the measure of a leader is the extent to which the world is improved by the way in which the leader and his or her followers conduct themselves. Study of human communication sheds light on how the behaviours of leaders and followers are related. This paper seeks to describe the excellent leaders that selected newspaper eulogists recalled after the death of Nelson Rholihlahla Mandela, former President of South Africa. Mandela is widely praised for extraordinary leadership that was fundamental to the ongoing transformation of South Africa from its apartheid past. For leading the struggle against apartheid, and for leading the first democratic government in the history of the country, Mandela is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding people of our times; a great exemplar of what it means to live a meaningful life. This paper is written in the belief that studying how people identify great

leadership traits in Mandela is an exercise that can yield useful insights into what desirable leadership is.

Because Mandela is said to epitomise ubuntu, this paper goes some way towards offering quintessentially African insights into leadership communication traits that make up his leadership style. This is important as little has been done to present African accounts of leadership communication and/or to locate and theorise his leadership style in relation to African traditions of communication.

It is important to realise that this paper cannot offer the evidence required to prove the worth of an African theory of leadership communication. It is well known that theory is always under-supported by facts. What the paper does seek to do is to provide some materials and lessons that may be useful for imaging what an African theory of leadership communication may entail.

Leadership and communication

Theory on leadership tends to focus on various aspects by which communication is achieved. Trait approaches tend to focus on the attributes that enable 'senders' to communicatively interact with others in ways that produce desired effects. Situational leadership approaches speak of how contexts affect the communication interactions by which desired productive cooperation may be achieved. Transformational leadership approaches tend to focus on the communication practices required to enable leaders to get others to cooperate towards desired ends, in various contexts. This is to say that leadership is widely understood as a process of 'locomotion' by which a member of a group leads others from one place to another. Considering that different contexts require humans to coordinate their actions in order to survive and thrive, evolutionary biologists tend to think of leaders as those people who coordinate the type, timing, duration and direction of collective activities so that leadership

appears to be a process by which followers are transported or moved from one situation, state of affairs, or context to another by the leader (Van Vugt, 2006, pp. 354-356). Given that communication as a process has long been understood as involving the aim of transporting meaning from one to another (Carey, 1989; Williams, 1977; Sperber & Wilson, 1995), it can be argued that leadership is fundamentally a problem of communication. Indeed, evolutionary psychologists have argued that human communication has evolved to enable human productive coordination (Tomasello, 2010; 2009).

The work of leadership involves communicating to get followers to orient towards group goals, coordinating how they cooperate in the pursuit of these goals (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Leadership and followership behaviours are not isolated to humans alone. Domesticated cattle have for example been shown to display patterns of leadership behaviour in terms of which certain animals consistently initiated changes in activity by which groups spontaneously made long-distance movements towards new feeding areas (Dumont, Boissy, Achard, Sibbald, & Erhard, 2005). The flocking behaviour by which birds draw patterns of lines by following leaders has been modelled by robotics scientists in experiments that confirm that leadership roles are taken by those with greater capacity for exploratory behaviours and follower behaviours are adopted by those whose behaviours are more narrowly defined (Pugliese & Marocco, 2013). This research strongly suggests that the behaviours of leaders enable followers to explore wider spaces and options than they would explore on their own. Findings of this research correspond with findings from other research that show that first movers in human interactions are most likely to become leaders (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008, p. 189). The common theme here is that leaders engage in practices that act as communication 'stimuli' to change the states of mind and associated behaviours of recipients (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Grice, 1957).

Among humans the communication of leaders is part of a broader cultural project by which, over generations, people have built ever more sophisticated lives that set them apart from nature. It is of great significance that human cultures and communities are achieved through and in communication. They are achieved on the open texture of the common conceptual grounds that human symbolic processes enact. These give much freedom of interpretation to those involved in human communicative interaction. Human communication has a richer texture than that which other animals engage in. Among other animals communication is mainly composed of practices that are imitative and exploitative while among humans there is wide evidence of rich educational-cultural processes that ratchet up knowledge and productivity over generations. What this means is that humans evidence and are associated with diverse and ever-evolving cultures. These cultures involve complex forms of leadership that enable humans to learn from one another, using language and a wide array of communication media to store, transmit and share knowledge within and across generations.

Among other animals, leadership often has a comparatively impoverished cultural texture. It is often just a by-product of dominance; movements of groups are determined by the behaviours of dominant animals. Here dominant animals are typically ones that win the competition for scarce and necessary resources and are hence able to dominate in other instances where survival and thriving are at stake. What sets humans apart from other animals is that we use communication to cultivate cultures in which altruism plays a part, redirecting the power that may have gone towards dominating others to goals of enabling others to thrive in communities and cultures that have ultimately ratcheted humans to the top of the food chain (Tomasello, 2010). Leaders have a special task in various aspects of how human communication enacts these rich cultures because they influence the ways in which communities form. Their acts are

pivotal to how, contingently, communities engage in cooperative action, producing social goods amidst uncertainty and risk. Among humans, efforts to achieve leadership by means of dominance are frustrated wherever there are alternatives. People tend to show a distinct preference to not be involved in relationships in which others dominate them (Van Vugt, 2006, p. 358). Humans tend to favour communities in which individuals are afforded the greatest freedom with which to act (Florida, 2002) and that humans tend to flourish where they are granted such freedoms (Sen, 2010; Mill, 1874).

Democratic leadership of democratic movements involves establishment of “a political relationship among leaders and followers for achieving democracy through sacrifice, courage, symbolism, participation and vision.” (Choi, 2007, p. 244) The key feature of democratic leadership is that followers are active participants in all aspects of affairs that concern them. Unlike what happens under autocratic arrangements, followers in democratic movements are not controlled by autocratic leaders who use various modes of cohesion to manufacture consent with the consequence that the extent and manner of growth and development of individuals is constrained or at least is subject to the control arrangements imposed upon them. Under democratic leadership, followers exercise their choice and discrepancy in free expression that enables them to be the most they can be.

From the African moral perspective of ubuntu, what makes democratic leadership desirable can be understood with reference to Metz’s (2009, p. 340) claim that when Africans claim that a person is a person in relations with others (in isiZulu: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*) this indicates, “in part, that the only way to develop moral personhood, to become a virtuous agent or lead a genuinely human life, is to interact with others in a certain way.” Mandela is named

a great leader because he is associated with agency that was expressed in powerful acts of solidarity aimed at winning freedom and democracy.

There is much to be said about what ubuntu should say about both leadership and Mandela's fight against apartheid. This paper does not assume to adequately address these issues that require attention elsewhere. But it is useful to note that on Metz's (2007, p. 338) view, ubuntu teaches that, "An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on goodwill; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill will". It does not take much effort to see that, on this Metzian perspective of ubuntu, Mandela's leadership that drove South Africa towards democracy and fought apartheid are consistent with what ubuntu would describe as morally desirable behaviour.

Mandela is praised as a democratic African leader. In gaining this praise, he is marked as distinct from the stereotypes by which contemporary African states have been widely regarded as a problem in need of radical new leadership: Neo-partimonialism characterises contemporary African statecraft (Chabal, 2009; Mkandawire, 2013; Lodge, 2014), the modern African state is in some respect an arena for the continuation of patriarchal chieftainship, kingship and warlord-like practices, albeit that this occurs in environments reshaped by colonialism and modernisms that are far removed from traditional African practices and in need of new forms of leadership. If this is so, and if Mandela is an example of an excellent transformational Africa leader, then it is important to seek lessons from what people found excellent in his leadership, to guide how we meet extraordinary contemporary and future challenges.

Nelson Mandela: An excellent leader

Mandela is an excellent example of someone who took the initiative to champion change when others were unable or unwilling to do so. He went on to be widely recognised as a paragon of excellent leadership for the way in which he led the pro-democratic movement which first fought against apartheid and which now tries to embed constitutional democracy in South Africa.

Mandela grew up in a traditional Bantu-speaking African pastoral economy that fits the description of communities

...presided over by chiefs and stratified by age, gender and wealth signified by ownership of livestock. Traditional leadership in most kingdoms and chiefdoms was based on ascribed power passed on through patrilineal inheritance. Values, customs, beliefs and rights were developed and codified through oral traditions. On the other hand, traditional rulers had to constantly seek the council of elders before resolving weighty or ambiguous matters that had no precedent. To a great extent, leadership was based on consensus among a select group of elders with regard to interpretation of oral traditions and customs. Men achieved leadership status as they advanced in age in the community. Age was explicitly associated with seniority and accumulated wisdom. However, failure to adhere to common values and norms often led on to be ostracised.... These situations and traditions were heavily influenced by leadership practices changed by European colonization. (Littrell, 2011, p. 67)

Mandela was the son of a chief. Thus his very earliest memories were of being comparatively privileged over others. This advantage was taken away by a show of colonial judicial force that

stripped his father of the chieftainship. After briefly experiencing the misery of life as a commoner, from the harsh perspective of one who had been previously better off, Mandela was taken into the home of King Dalindlebo of the Thembu royal family. There he resumed a life above that which the common Xhosa could expect in that period. He got Western education that few received. But, his escape from a traditional wedding that was arranged for him upon completing schooling at Lovedale revealed that he was not one to stand for the confines even of the traditional society that gave him opportunities that others were denied. In later years, following the guidance of Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki, Mandela was to embrace the struggle against the oppression of Apartheid, once again showing that he was not one to stand oppression and that he was willing and had the capacity to explore desirable alternatives through engaging in the struggle for freedom and democracy.

Methodology

To identify what a diverse range of people think makes Mandela a great leader, this paper uses the methodological innovation of 'an appreciative thematic analysis'. It applies the view that research can be an appreciative mode of enquiry to traditional notions of thematic analysis. Given African histories in which much has been sacrificed to advance the freedoms of many, there is some gain to be found in seeking to appreciate the great, beautiful and good in bodies of text.

Drawing on advances from appreciative enquiry and positive psychology, showing appreciation is important in that the acts of recognising and affirming thematic increase the value of that which is perceived in the process of analysis (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004; Seligman, 2006). This marks a radical departure from regular conceptions of thematic analysis

that do not to necessarily identify the need to find the great, good, and beautiful as the goal of the research.

The first step when one conducts an appreciative thematic analysis is to find content that is positive. This study finds this content in the positive reflections on Mandela that characterise the newspaper coverage of Nelson Mandela in ten days between his death and burial. The second step is to find a way to reduce this data to manageable quantities. This was done by roughly separating the newspapers into two batches that the co-researchers read thoroughly, identifying common categories of positive observations regarding President Mandela. Subsequently, themes were identified through discussion and consensus.

The third step sought to draw attention to similarities and differences in this the identified categories, weaving them together to form three positive themes. Evidently, this process and the earlier processes of data reduction and categorisation were guided by awareness that this paper intends to draw out Africans lessons for excellent leadership that can be found from study of selected newspaper eulogies regarding the late President Mandela.

Sceptics may contend that it appears the intention is to present an overly optimistic reading that does not adequately contend with unpleasant aspects of the content. However, that would be a misconception based on failure to realise that identification of positive and uplifting requires contending with the obverse of the good, beautiful and great. It is against the negative, ugly or harmful and petty that the good, beautiful and great arise. The themes identified through appreciative thematic analysis do not deny the negative, they will simply insist on speaking about the negative from a positive perspective.

Findings

The three themes identified regard Mandela as a leader who took initiative to enhance collective welfare, a loving leader who fought oppression, and as a leader who communicated for transformation and reconciliation.

Mandela: Leader who took initiative to enhance collective welfare

There is little dispute that Mandela “was the great reconciler, helping his countrymen cross the bridge from a repressive past to an era of hope” (Sunday World 15 December 2013, page 11 [Reference incomplete]). To earn this great praise, Mandela had to be a person who took initiative.

Mandela was a rebel, a revolutionary. He was always challenging the status quo and took on the ANC through the programme of action in 1949, which transformed the party and changed the nature of the resistance to apartheid. He was masters of his own fate. In fact, even in power, Mandela seems to have had more scraps with his own party or supporters than with his political foes.¹

This taking of personal initiative was, however, for Mandela, not a simple matter of dominating others for the sake of taking misanthropic pleasure in having power over them. Mandela “was a truly great man who believes that a leader exists for the sake of the led,” even to the extent that they learn to say sorry when they have done wrong.²

Farouk Araie³ of Johannesburg wrote in the *Sunday Sun* that

¹ Mthombothi, B. 2013. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *Master of his own fate to the very end*. p.5.

² Tutu, D. Sunday Times. Thanks be to God for giving us such a superb gift. p.3.

³ Araie, F. 15 December 2013. Sunday Sun. *Mandela was the light of the world*. p.13.

Africa's mightiest spear has fallen, with the death of former president Nelson Mandela.

Ben Okri's⁴ brief eulogy to Mandela says:

He exemplified integrity, ethical leadership, sacrifice, and the vision of a better life for the people.

He showed that it is never too late to begin the process of renewal; and that it is within the power of every citizen to use their light to change our world.

This view of Mandela is reiterated by Makhosonke Mkhalihi of Piet Retief who goes on to note that Mandela had pragmatic reasons for the love he felt for those whose oppressive practices he opposed. Mkhalihi⁵ wrote a letter to the *Sunday Times* in which he said:

Mandela was a symbol of hope, peace, justice, freedom and integrity. He loved the oppressed and the oppressors equally. He knew that the two parties would one day see eye to eye.

When people call Mandela the father of the nation they are obviously bestowing an honour on him. The bestowal of this honour in turn involves ascribing to him roles that he must carry out. He is father of the nation in the sense that he acted to give people the means to live with dignity and worth, first, by taking a leadership role in the fight against apartheid and then by continuing to fight to reduce the harms people encounter while providing them with welfare gains. Here it is worth saying that, one of the things that distinguish him as a proverbialised father is that, as

⁴ Okri, B. 15 December 2013. The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. *Eulogy to a great man*. p.1.

⁵ Mkhalihi, P. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *We need leaders to take baton*. p.10.

Slavoj Zizek (2013) points out, “Mandela is not Mugabe”. This is to say that when he was faced with the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, with the persistence of the structural violence of apartheid, Mandela did not elect to use vengeful redistribution means which did not take into account the full implications that this would have on the local economy. In so doing, Mandela avoided the extremely devastating effects on the domestic economy that Mugabe’s approach inflicted upon the economy of Zimbabwe. He is also widely credited with avoiding the extreme dehumanisation of people that Mugabe’s strategy for indigenising ownership of the land and industry of Zimbabwe has entailed. The view that Mandela is not Mugabe has apparently given Mandela universal acclaim beyond South Africa as he has shown that he is willing to serve any and all of those who call him father of the nation. On this account, Mandela’s *ubuntu* has seemingly proven to be available to a wider swathe of humanity, to a wider conception of community than Mugabe has allowed. But as Zizek (2013) harshly advises those who would be faithful to Mandela’s legacy should seek to make further gains on the long road to emancipation that began with the first step from apartheid that Mandela’s leadership made. Indeed, one of the critical notes that arises when people speak of the legacy of Mandela is that more needs to be done as far as ensuring that the means of production and the produce of the South African economy are shared fairly among all who call South Africa home. As leader Mandela is widely and fondly remembered as a great reconciler and nation-builder.

Sipho Hlongwane⁶ writes that growing up as a young man in KwaZulu-Natal, he had been taught to regard Nelson Mandela as a terrorist and that as an adult he had learnt to admire Mandela for the sacrifice he and others made in the struggle for the emancipation of those that apartheid oppressed. Hlongwane, with reference to Zizek’s harsh criticism of Mandela, also speaks of having personal regrets that Mandela abandoned aspirations to a socialist state.

⁶ Hlongwane, S. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Lifestyle. *Born free to fight on*. p.6.

However, he is then quick to note that when Mandela did rise to power, with the advent of democracy in South Africa, there were complex global political-economic realities that needed to be managed:

“This is why it is all too simple to criticise Mandela for abandoning the socialist perspective after the end of apartheid: did he really have a choice? Was the move towards socialism a real option?”

Mandela was a pragmatist. One could say that Mandela used everything possible and appropriate to advance the causes he found to be just and desirable. Novelist, Muzi Kuzwayo (2013, p. 2), who is also a columnist for *City Press*, wrote that, “...when the need arose, you were as fierce as a black-manned lion or as cunning as a fox.” As Habib⁷ says:

“Madiba was an astute political entrepreneur who understood the importance of pragmatism in a struggle for equality. He recognised that we live in a world that is, and not in a world that we wish existed.

Mandela recognised the importance of the realities of power and the need to engage – and sometimes compromise – with those who wielded power. But he believed that such compromises must ultimately enable a breakthrough to a better world.”

In an interview with Vomo⁸, famed South African musician, Johnny Clegg said the following when asked what kind of risk taker he thought Mandela was:

⁷ Habib, A. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *Avoiding a caricature of Madiba's legacy*. p.7.

⁸ Vomo, M. 15 December 2013. The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. *White Zulu looks back on Madiba Friendship*. p.12.

I think he would be a cautious player. He is the guy who has read all the rules. He knows the odds. He also knows that the odds operate in a fixed mathematical context so he would operate in that space.

Journalist Agiza Hlongwane⁹ spoke to Nokuzola Hlongwane, manager of the Nelson Mandela Museum, who says the ‘Mandela’s footprints’ tour of Quni, where Mandela grew up is important because:

“We want people to be inspired by him.” Thethani says. “These are the places that shaped his life. This is where he learnt stick fighting, when to attack and when to attend, skills which he used in his political life.”

Mandela fought with courage. Stengel¹⁰, who collaborated with Mandela in the writing of the autobiography *Long Walk*, discovered this courage when Mandela realised a small plane they were travelling on had suffered engine failure – but continued to read his newspaper as though nothing was amiss. Stengel learnt the following from this:

Courage is not not being scared. Courage is being terrified and not showing it.

So I was heartened. I was given courage by looking at him, because he was pretending not to be scared, and that’s what he did for his whole life. The more you pretend that you’re not scared, the more not scared you become. The more you inhabit that role. That’s what happened on Robben Island.

⁹ Qunu, A. 15 December 2013. The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. In *Qunu, prices are as high as the emotions: Owners of impromptu guest houses in Mandela’s home village saw it all coming*.p.6.

¹⁰ Stengel, R. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *Face of courage*. p.17.

Mandela: Loving leader who fought oppression

Mandela had a philosophy that reflected the value of love in its insistence on fighting for the freedom of the oppressed. In the words of Naidoo¹¹, a minister in his first cabinet:

He represented a philosophy that recognizes that every life has equal value and that our richest reward is in building hope and opportunities for those who are less fortunate than us.

What is more, as former American president Clinton¹² said, Mandela had a way of focusing on people as individuals whose lives mattered irrespective of what offices they held. Clinton says:

I saw in him something that I try to not lose in myself, which is no matter how much responsibility you have, he remembered you were a person first.

The care that Mandela showed for individuals can be seen in the story of how he intervened to save the life of actress, Florence Masebe's life, following a shooting incident. Shoba reports that Masebe said¹³:

“One of the earliest phone calls, which I did not even experience – I was told about it later – was from Madiba, who called Thabo to find out how I was doing.

He said: ‘Please don’t worry about [hospital costs] – worry about getting better.

He literally went out and found a donor who would make sure that everything [got paid] not just for when I was in hospital, [but] even afterwards when I was out..../

¹¹ Naidoo, J. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *A cocoon of energy*. p.8.

¹² Clinton, W. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. You were a person first. p.8.

¹³ Shoba, S. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Lifestyle. *Saved on sickbed by surprise call*. p.3.

Mandela did not only pay for the hospital costs, but also visited her to check whether she was eating properly.”

According to George¹⁴, For Mandla Mandela, Nelson Mandela’s grandson, it is important to note:

There is one thing that the world does not know about Dalibhunga [Nelson Mandela] – the fact that his generosity, kindness and willingness to share is something that he was socialized into.../

The values of kindness to your fellow men, and the culture of sharing, were instilled in our generation as well.

Mandela taught people that they matter and that they can make a difference in their own lives: Kabo Ruele¹⁵ says:

Six years ago I was down and out, and then I read *Long Walk to Freedom...*

What struck me while reading the book was that he was fighting and making a difference to the outside world while he was still in prison. That inspired me and I stood up and fought for myself, because I was a free man but had given in to life and its difficulties.

¹⁴ George, Z. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *Meeting my grandfather in Pollsmoor Jail*. p.18.

¹⁵ Ruele, K. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *Book gave me get up and go*. p.10.

I am a MAN now. I have a son named after Madiba and he will always be a reminder to me of this towering giant who left a big mark on my life.

Renowned singer, Simpiwe Dana (2013, p. 14), who grew up in the same areas of South Africa with Mandela, says:

Madiba was our home, our refuge from the ugliness of the world.

He was the best part of ourselves. Inside his words and his sacrifice we felt safe, we could build a new world. We are Madiba's people.

From the esteem of a burgeoning legal practice, high above the prospects of most Africans of his youth, to the lows of facing death in the gallows at the Rivonia trial, to the deprivations of harsh prison life, Mandela steadfastly sacrificed for his country. Acknowledgment of Mandela's sacrifice is fundamental to understanding the greatness of his choice to live in ways that did not merely seek to maximise personal gains, but that involved seeking to give value and worth to others in community. This is to say that sacrifice is a fundamental element in the establishment of the sense of community solidarity by which Africans would come together to produce a society in which individual and social welfare are maximised.

An understanding of Mandela's relationship of love with South Africans would however not be complete without understanding that he knew that he owed them his very survival and success. Thus, his first speech after coming out prison ended with the following words: "Ubomi bam busezandleni zenu (My life is in your hands)." In the fading light Madiba read it as "Ubomi

bam busedlanzeni zenu.”¹⁶ He meant that his life is in the hands of South Africans. This is fitting for one who sacrificed so much for South Africans. As Boyle observes,

You did not have to spend much time with Mandela to learn that people were his energy source. He would sometimes arrive at a rally or a meeting looking tired or even sad. But once the crowd rose to greet him, he would inflate and grow and the beam would return to his face... But it did not have to be crowds... he was interested in listening to ordinary people – though I never heard him call them that. To him, they were people, not ciphers or votes or statistics.¹⁷

Mandela: Leader who communicated for transformation and reconciliation

Both in the way he was a unique individual and in the ways in which he approached others as unique individuals, Mandela showed that individuals are powerful agents of change who deserve to be granted dignity and worth. Respected praise singer, Zolani Mkiva (2013, p. 2), who travelled frequently with Mandela since 1991 says “Madiba was such a warm, nice, genuine man. He was a leader who showed compassion and had love for all people and did not discriminate against anyone.”

Mandela had the humility to meet other people without assuming that he knew all the answers and that he had nothing to learn from them. He is hence also spoken of as someone who was approachable since you could trust that he would listen you. In other words, Mandela had a fecund sense that it is important to listen to other in order that they ‘get on’ productively. The great African writer, Ngugi wa Thing’o (2013, p. 13) wrote of his first meeting with Mandela:

¹⁶ Macozoma, S. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *A sudden walk into the world*. p.12.

¹⁷ Boyle, B. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *The man who loomed so large in the world*. p.4.

“he grew on me by the second, a towering presence because he did not try to be towering... What stayed with me... was his soft, introspective tone.”

Mandela led by teaching. Khanyi Mbau¹⁸, noted South African socialite and newspaper columnist, says

“The teacher is no longer there to whisper in our ears but it is up to us to show what we have gained from the gifts bestowed on us by this great man”.

Many people expressed thanks for lessons Mandela taught them, leading them to improve themselves and to change their circumstances. “Thank you Tata for teaching us the meaning of sacrifice, strength and compassion. We are grateful for your guidance in helping South Africa become a thriving democracy. Inspired by your legacy, we remain committed to maintaining a safe financial investment environment in our country”. [Lala ngoxolo Tata \(City Press 15 December 2013 \[incomplete reference\]\)](#)

The greatness of Mandela is arguably not because he has done something unachievable – “his essence, the things he stood for, those are things we know we can attain. They do not require wealth or status or fame, just strength, relentless strength and a decision.”¹⁹ Because of this, Mandela’s greatness is something that can be learnt by those who are willing to take the necessary decisions.

Boyle, B. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *The boy from Qunu returns home as a man of the world*. p.8.

¹⁸ Mbau, K. 15 December 2013. Sunday Sun. *Kandidly Khanyi Is this all we have left? Table Mountain and Robben Island?* p.3.

¹⁹ Roberts, O. 15 December 20013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *The long wait to find that he’s gone*. p.4.

Great people such as Mandela are always learning, says Wadhwa²⁰ – who finds that even while working in limestone quarries on Robben Island, Mandela was always learning to perfect himself. Mandela wrote from prison to his, then, wife Winnie: “Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps trying.” For the saint to keep trying he has to take responsibility for his personal part in how things develop. Wadhwa reports:

Mandela was once asked whether he did poorly as a law student because of racism among the faculty. “Yes, I did have a racist lecturer, but that is not why I didn’t do well.” He knew he had to take responsibility for his performance.

Jonas Mafarafara, a *Sunday Sun* reader²¹, wrote that

In Nelson Mandela I’ve learnt three most essential qualities.

I’ve learnt perseverance against all odds, humility, compassion and a selfless duty to humanity.

In an interview with journalist, Bongani Nkosi, Witwatersrand University professor of Social Anthropology, David Coplan²² says:

Mandela was a brand, and in death he’s still a brand. I don’t see anything this big (as his passing) happening in the near future. We’ll not see another Mandela.”

²⁰ Wadhwa, H. 15 December 2013. *Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. The evolution of a great leader.* p.9.

²¹ Mafarafara, J. 15 December 2013. *Sunday Sun. Lessons from Madiba.* p.13.

²² Nkosi, B. 15 December 2013. *The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. Mandela stature reason why he lay at Union Building.* p.9.

Mandela cultivated a personal brand that was so instantly recognizable that Former South African President, FW de Klerk²³ (with whom Mandela negotiated the transition from apartheid to democracy) observed of his first meeting with Mandela:

I went away from that meeting feeling that I was dealing with a man whose integrity I could trust, that I could do business with. I found him quite an impressive figure. He was taller than I expected. He had an aura of calmness and of authority around him.

And I sought of liked him. Just on appearance and on first impressions.

Corrigall²⁴ notes that Mandela used clothes as an instrument for strategic communication. She reports that Joe Mathews, a friend from Mandela's early years in Johannesburg said:

“He was different. Mandela's clothes always looked as if they had been specially picked to fit him exactly. Where he picked it up I don't know. It's just a characteristic of his. Maybe it reflects a kind of ego as well, wanting to be the best-dressed,” recalled Mathews.

And “Mandela was big on symbolic gestures” as he demonstrated by wearing the jersey of the springbok captain after South Africa had won the rugby world cup.²⁵ This gesture is widely seen to have changed the hearts of many people in South Africa, encouraging especially some hardened white racists to imagine the viability of a racially reconciled South Africa.

²³ De Klerk, F.W. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *One on one*. p.17.

²⁴ Corrigall, M. 15 December 2013. The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. *Clothes maketh the man: Mandela viewed clothes as a political tool of resistance and reconciliation*. p.3.

²⁵ Mthombothi, B. 2013. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *Master of his own fate to the very end*. p.5.

Mandela, Corrigan argues, used his dress sense to communicate a personal aura of “elegance, pride and sartorial bravado associated with those who frequented” the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown, to challenge “established protocols” such as that of wearing a tie when meeting the queen of England, to communicate professionalism as a lawyer, and even to express resistance – as happened when he wore traditional Xhosa regalia at the famed Rivonia trial where he was sentenced to life in prison for treason against the Apartheid government.

Boyle²⁶ notes that the fact that Mandela was strategic in constructing and using his image requires an additional qualification be made.

I came to know him as a tough negotiator, a consummate strategist, an instinctive publicist; but his fundamental decency was always there.

His self-deprecation only thinly masked considerable vanity. He was fallible, authoritative and quite arrogant, but unlike anyone else I have reported on, his sheer humanity was always part of the equation.

Concluding discussion

Mandela is praised for having been a democratic leader of a democratic movement, moving the people of South Africa from apartheid by founding a constitutional democracy that seeks to extend freedom, dignity, worth and capabilities to all. Mandela’s personal and political integrity and vision which were communicated strategically²⁷ and with courage, allowed him

²⁶ Boyle, B. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *The man who loomed so large in the world*. p.4.

²⁷ Cf. Boyle, B. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *The man who loomed so large in the world*. p.4.

to act as an inspiration, a wise teacher²⁸, counsellor and guide²⁹ in the fight for human dignity, worth – a fight for democracy, against apartheid.

Mandela is praised for the ways in which his fight and apartheid and subsequently his battle to secure democracy involved resolute actions to be strategic – in ways that distinguish him – as Zizek noted, from Mugabe whose leadership is now associated with economic devastation and human rights abuses. Mandela’s leadership as State President, which was primarily aimed at securing national reconciliation, is at once more limited and more positive than Mugabe’s leadership. The impression is that Mandela, as President, knew better than Mugabe how to strategically direct the country to what is achievable.³⁰ Lessons that can be learnt from this include the following:

1. Develop strategies to attain great things by focusing on actions you can achieve.
2. Develop and implement strategies to get the most value out of situations without ever denying the humanity of others or your own humanity.
3. Learn to make decisions that make the most significant changes.

Where autocratic leaders may achieve a great deal by getting others to translate their tyrannical visions into action – as well described in Kershaw’s (1993) famous “Working Towards the Führer” concept, the greatness of Mandela is widely identified by the ways in which he communicated to get people to ascribe to the struggle for freedom, democracy and nation-building through personal self-mastery and prudence that elevated those he touched (Rotberg, 2012, p. 42). To the student of leadership this suggests the following lesson:

Boyle, B. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *The boy from Qunu returns home as a man of the world.* p.8.

²⁸ Mbau, K. 15 December 2013. Sunday Sun. *Kandidly Khanyi Is this all we have left? Table Mountain and Robben Island?* p.3.

²⁹ Ruele, K. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *Book gave me get up and go.* p.10.

³⁰ Roberts, O. 15 December 20013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *The long wait to find that he’s gone.* p.4.

People the world over loved and respected Mandela because he used the unique human gift of communication to stimulate others to change their circumstances, to move towards democracy and its associated freedoms and developments. The last Apartheid President, South African President, FW de Klerk³¹, with whom Mandela shares a Nobel Peace Prize, observed that in his first meeting with Mandela he was struck by the observation that he “was dealing with a man whose integrity [he] could trust”. This suggests that a good leader should:

4. Communicate his or her vision in such a way that others can work with you to achieve it; doing more to achieve it than you could on your own.
5. Develop a strong personal brand associated with enough integrity to withstand the challenges that arise when one must lead one’s organisation or team by going against its stated views.
6. Show love by enabling team members to become the most they can be.
7. Teach even adversaries to recognise his or her personal integrity.

One of the attributes of leaders is that they engage in exploratory behaviours to a greater extent than others who do not become leaders (Pugliese & Marocco, 2013). Mandela demonstrated a great appreciation of his and other’s freedom to choose, even when options were limited. He is hence celebrated as a rebel, a revolutionary, a challenger of the status quo, who mastered his own fate³² while it is said that he sought to value everyone equally and to honour the dignity of each individual by giving him or her hope and opportunities, freedoms that are commensurate with the democratic value he treasured³³. Mandela is praised for his pursuit for

³¹ De Klerk, F.W. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *One on one*. p.17.

³² Mthombothi, B. 2013. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *Master of his own fate to the very end*. p.5.

³³ Naidoo, J. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times. *A cocoon of energy*. p.8.

freedom, for the fact that this individual pursuit entailed freeing others and ushering in the dawn of a democratic, non-racial era for South Africa.

For freedom and democracy, Mandela was willing to sacrifice his privileged position as a professional black lawyer under apartheid, to sacrifice his freedom and family life. Such expressions of love indicate that Mandela was an ethical decision maker – as great leaders tend to be. Ethical leadership practices direct the leader to honestly and compassionately reach out to others in ways that seek to give them the support they need to work for the common good. As Ben Okri's³⁴ said:

He exemplified integrity, ethical leadership, sacrifice, and the vision of a better life for the people.

He showed that it is never too late to begin the process of renewal; and that it is within the power of every citizen to use their light to change our world.

As a man of integrity, Mandela accepted that he is fallible and was hence willing to say sorry when he realised he was wrong. Mandela “was a truly great man who believes that a leader exists for the sake of the led,” even to the extent that they learn to say sorry when they have done wrong.³⁵ Mandela managed his open fallibility by cultivating relations with his comrades and colleagues that were strong enough to enable him to disagree with his followers without losing their loyalty.³⁶ Humanistic lessons that can be drawn from this include the following:

8. Be willing to change your mind and to say sorry when you think you were wrong.
9. Be willing to face the consequences of your actions when you think you are right.

³⁴ Okri, B. 15 December 2013. The Sunday Independent: My Mzansi. *Eulogy to a great man*. p.1.

³⁵ Tutu, D. Sunday Times. Thanks be to God for giving us such a superb gift. p.3.

³⁶ Mthombothi, B. 2013. 15 December 2013. Sunday Times: Opinion and Analysis. *Master of his own fate to the very end*. p.5.

10. Form relations of filiation that are strong enough to withstand disagreement over important issues.

The idea that Mandela was a loving leader is consistent with understanding him to be a democratic leader since, as Kouzes and Posner (1992, p. 480), point out; such leaders ethically recognise the needs of their constituencies, creating “exchanges and interactions which leave the latter more confident and capable than before their encounter.” Leadership works to enable people to negotiate living in circumstances characterized by uncertainty and risk, enabling people to transform their realities by assuming responsibilities for those things they change and by letting go of those things they cannot control.

Excellent leadership is characteristically ethical and loving in the ways in which it translates subjective insights into objective and productive action for the freedom and growth of the beloved (Fromm, 1993, p. 129). Jonas Mafarafara³⁷ wrote that

In Nelson Mandela I’ve learnt three most essential qualities.

I’ve learnt perseverance against all odds, humility, compassion and a selfless duty to humanity.

The freedom we speak of here is well described by Traber (1997, p. 335) who says: “Freedom must seek out, and intentionally open up to, other freedoms. In brief, freedom is not oriented toward objects of desire but toward people. Only in the free encounter with others can genuine freedom be experienced.” Being an honest, compassionate and loving person who reaches out to extend the freedoms and capacities of others is elemental to how

³⁷ Mafarafara, J. 15 December 2013. Sunday Sun. *Lessons from Madiba*. p.13.

Mandela has been discussed by many who speak of him as a preeminent advocate of the participation of all stakeholders and/citizens and promoter of reconciliation. Rotberg (2012, pp. 42-47), for example, speaks of Mandela as a ‘consummate inclusionist’ – suggesting that his African cultural heritage and Christian educational background combined to make him a self-contained, humble and courteous person – one who was inclined to appreciate, listen to and uplift those he led. Simphiwe Dana (2013, p. 14) found him to be a leader who allowed people to see the best of themselves and what is more, she thought that: “Inside his words and his sacrifice we felt safe, we could build a new world.”

This paper, with the innovation of what we have named an appreciative content analysis, suggests that Mandela’s leadership had hallmarks of excellence that embody values associated with ubuntu. Quite how ubuntu is expressed in the excellent leadership that Mandela is associated with is yet to be addressed. What the paper does say is to say that Mandela is praised for expressing virtuous agency in the ways in which he interacted with others, in the ways in which he led both the fight against apartheid and the establishment of a new constitutional order that values freedom and democracy for all. Characteristics of this leadership and lessons from it are described, with particular reference to aspects of relevance to leadership communication.

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