

“In fact, so many people with the copper name-plates are very far from being leaders.”

Malema, Chuene, the Mugabes, Silvio Berlusconi, the CEO's of the Big American Banks, a whole cluster of recent SAA CEO's (we can fill the page here, but that would be a waste) – so-called “leaders” who give leadership a bad name.

But how can it be that people give leadership a bad name – or is it that we have given bad people the name of leaders? I think it is the latter. We take the name leader in vain. It's a sad fact.

We all know people in leadership positions who cannot stand the test of leadership criteria. We have to listen to them, humour them and follow them because of their rank in the structure. The nauseating irony is that they think we follow them out of respect!

The people we follow because it is obvious that they should be followed are few and far between. In fact, they are sometimes not in the official leadership positions, but are people with informal power. Most of us know one or two if we are lucky. We follow them because they have a compelling vision or because they have the ability to move a person towards something that is worthwhile. They get us to sit up straight and take notice.

The point is that they are not the average Mr. Boss. In fact, so many people with the copper name-plates are very far from being leaders.

So why are they called leaders? We abuse the word; we

misuse the concept entirely. In a time where true leadership is so staggeringly absent, we call hundreds of people leaders when they are not deserving of the description. Have we lost our minds? It is like calling a third year medical student a doctor or calling Lion's Head Table Mountain. Close, but no cigar. It is like asking a young child to drive a car or asking Italian men to fight for women's rights. It is dangerous and naïve!

The system gives out a clear message: leadership is achieved by being promoted. It is, ultimately, a position. This is the essence of our leadership crisis today – people have no idea what it means or takes to ultimately be one.

I propose a clear distinction between filling a high position and being called a leader. Only those worthy of the word leader should be described as one – it cannot be used to categorise a layer in the hierarchy. Some companies call the days where the top two levels of their structure meet “Leadership Days”! I urge them to reflect on the message they are giving those in the audience who backstab, manoeuvre, blame and hide.

Leadership in the true sense of the word denotes leaders that can first and foremost lead themselves. They have acquired a minimum level of self-mastery. This is a fancy word for people who know themselves and can actively take responsibility for the gifts and the inevitable dark side they bring to the table, in a manner of speaking. They have

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a realistic view (not arrogant, not coy) of themselves and the impact they have on people. They understand power and use it well, not abusively. They make mistakes and are willing and able to be accountable.

Therefore they can lead others. They can lead people despite themselves, not because of themselves. They do it because they can do the right thing, not the self-serving thing.

How? How do people develop their ability to stand up and be counted as a leader?

1. Be brave and emotionally honest. Be willing to do your own work – and then get busy with it. Get to know yourself well – warts and all.

2. Be open (non-defensive). Be willing to hear people when they tell you about yourself and the impact you have – listen out for patterns in the messages.

3. Get real with yourself. Be willing to challenge yourself regarding your intentions when you act: is this for you/your ego/ your success or is it for the benefit of your team and the collective goal?

4. Be humble. Don't take yourself or your success too seriously.

This still leaves us with the question of how. How do people grow their ability to be brave, open, real and humble? It is a tall order.

There are courses, counseling, coaching and real-time life experience that help people along the path of leadership development. Then there is another powerful way to challenge and support leadership

development that is often an untapped source: it lies within a leader's team of peers. In a team situation, individuals can get the challenge and support they need to become brave, open, real and humble. No man or woman sitting on an island can do any of these things.

We need others to hold up the mirror with requisite compassion. In the words of David Richo “For change to happen we need the comfort of safety and the challenge of risk”. One can argue that the learning you gain from your closest colleagues is more sustainable than the best MBA. They see things about you that you cannot see and if these insights can be shared with you in a constructive manner, the benefit is obvious.

Through the right team development process, people can do large chunks of the work they need to do to get closer to self-mastery. The frustrations, the conflict, the observations and the appreciation for and with each other in a team provide the ingredients for challenging conversation that enables people to grow. In the process, quite magically, the team develops too. Each team member and potential leader can own their piece of the puzzle that makes the team a great team. The team becomes a leadership team when enough of the people become real leaders.

In summary, it is a win-win-win situation.

Individual team members gain insight and momentum from the team regarding their personal

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leadership development. Caring colleagues are in the perfect position to judge whether you are being honest with yourself, whether you are being open, honest and humble. They can also observe and share when they see change and progress.

The team grows when the individuals grow; and so the organisation develops too: a well-developed team can drive the execution of strategy at twice the rate of a misaligned team. There is a saying that organisations don't change, people do.

But be warned: it is challeng-

ing and potentially life-changing. It requires people to take the risk of finding out things that others may know, yet you are oblivious about. The reward, however, is great: you can confidently say that you are connected to reality – that how you think you are and how others think you are are, in fact, aligned. The blind spots have been eliminated.

However, the road to great leadership never ends. There is always more to learn, more to remember. What is your next step on this journey?