
Leadership lessons from Nelson Mandela

by Norman Chorn

I recently finished reading *Invictus*¹, the book describing Nelson Mandela's clever use of rugby to help achieve his political goals in South Africa. Written by Roger Carlin, it outlines Mandela's nation building strategy in South Africa, and the part played by the rugby world cup in 1995. Being of South African origin and a fan of rugby, I was naturally drawn to this.

But rugby is only incidental to the story. It is actually an account of Mandela's consummate skills in strategic leadership. The book demonstrates how he delivered international rugby back to the rugby-mad white population, despite the initial opposition by the ANC. It is also a graphic account of how he used the world cup final (in which South Africa defeated New Zealand) as a stage to unite the different races in their support for the national team, the Springboks.

While Mandela has too much humility to claim any unique insights into the subject of strategic leadership, there are many examples of this in the way he has gone about his life and pursued his political goals.

Without attempting to capture all that he stands for, I have nonetheless tried to distil a few of the key learnings that are represented in this story.

Always, always keep your eye on the long term goal

Mandela's 27 year incarceration is public knowledge. During that time, his vision of a non-racial democracy never wavered. After his release from prison in 1990, he continued to face stiff opposition from most whites and the far-right (blacks and whites) in the pursuit of this goal. But at every set-back and obstacle he kept his sights fixed on his objective and did not get distracted. He recognised that he would have to adjust his approach as the circumstances changed, but he never wavered in his goal.

Strategic leadership is about having a longer term, big picture view of your goal. It means that you have to be flexible in the particular tactics that you use. You should recognise that the more worthwhile the goal, the more

¹ *Invictus*, Roger Carlin, Penguin Books, 2008

obstacles and set-backs you are likely to encounter. But with every step you take, you should be able to explain how this gets you closer to your final objective.

Understand that the system drives behaviour

Upon his release from prison, Mandela could easily have been discouraged by the change-resistant, militant and revenge-seeking behaviours in different parts of the population. After all, his goal was noble and just – a peaceful transition to a non-racial democracy. But he realised that, in most cases, people's behaviours had been shaped by the system that surrounded them.

He recognised that the change resistance was driven by a fear of losing privilege. Whites had grown up in a society in which the media was tightly controlled and where the dominant religion of the Afrikaners (The Dutch Reformed Church) had embraced and espoused the notion that whites were a superior race and that separation of the different races was condoned by the scriptures.

He also understood that, in the main, the militancy and revenge-seeking was the product of a systematic denial of rights, the humiliation of having access to only inferior facilities and amenities, and an education system that was deliberately designed to only produce moderate levels of skill.

These are important insights from the perspective of strategic leadership. It suggests that one should attempt to understand the systemic causes of behaviours, rather than simply reacting to what is happening. Rather like an iceberg, the causes of behaviours (systems, structures and beliefs) are often below the surface and have to be unearthed in order to fully understand the situation. Because of this, addressing the systems and structures can be a more fruitful target for change management than simply focusing on behaviours.

One often finds that unproductive relationships are not necessarily driven by the personalities involved, but rather the situation in which these personalities find themselves. Addressing the situation through the systems and structures can offer better outcomes for the leader seeking to create meaningful change.

Seek the good inside people

This somewhat homespun philosophy seems to illustrate Mandela's interpersonal style. While he did come across some people in whom there was little or no good, he found something endearing in most people. He

understood that even the prison wardens were just good, simple folk caught up in a system they had little understanding of. By adopting this philosophy, he was able to relate and even befriend his captors and enemies.

His befriending of Francois Pienaar, the Springbok captain at the time of the world cup, was key to winning the support of the rugby-mad whites. He recognised that Pienaar was a politically unaware Afrikaner who simply wanted to do the right thing for his family and friends by excelling at rugby. He used Pienaar's obvious hero status and leadership skills to demonstrate to whites that he was "like them" and supported the Springboks in their world cup bid.

For a leader seeking to mobilise support for change, there are several lessons. Firstly, we need to recognise that we will come across some people who have little by way of endearing qualities. Forget about them, for they will never be mobilised or be of assistance to you. Secondly, find out what people are really interested in and / or good at doing. In most cases, you are likely to find that they can be of some help, even if only in a small way. Everyone has something to contribute. Thirdly, try not to judge people from your own vantage point. Recognise that they have good qualities, but these often have to be unearthed and understood in context.

Strategic leadership requires an understanding of the resources and assets around you, as well as the acknowledgement that the best contribution from an individual is achieved by recognising and mobilising their inherent strengths.

Recognise that ordinary people put their personal interests before ideology or strategy

As Mandela outlined his views for the transition process in South Africa, he had to work hard to gain support from the inner circle at the African National Congress (the now ruling party). His conciliatory and forgiving approach was at odds with many in the ANC who felt that a more hardline stance was appropriate. Even within the white community, his promise of a fair and just society in which they (the whites) would have an important part to play, was greeted with scepticism and suspicion.

But Mandela knew that ordinary people, on all sides of the political spectrum, put their own safety and prosperity before ideology and strategy – they wait to see which way the wind blows before deciding. He also knew that a minority (in overall percentage terms) would be fanatically opposed to him or unswerving in their support for him. The former group were a lost cause and

the latter was where he drew his inspiration from. But the ordinary people were his main focus.

Mandela knew that they, the vast majority in the middle, would wait to see how he acted and the decisions he made. They were less likely to be swayed by his stirring speeches and lofty goals. They wanted to see how he dealt with issues that affected them and whether they would be better off in the new society being envisaged.

These are important insights for strategic leaders wanting to introduce significant change. While grand visions and powerful presentations are important, they are not enough to mobilise the support and engage the ordinary folk in organisations. The people in the middle (between those who are strong supporters and those who strongly oppose you) will wait to see how the change affects them. They will wait for the change in the systems and structures and examine them from the perspective of their own self interest. Furthermore, if these explicit shifts in the underlying system are not forthcoming, they will dismiss the “change strategy” as meaningless rhetoric.

Rather than becoming disillusioned about this, leaders should recognise that the grand vision and powerful presentations are simply the opening salvos in a longer battle. These early initiatives will serve to identify the strong supporters and detractors. But the real work will be in following up with purposeful action to change the systems and structures that define the old order. Only then will the people in the middle be able to relate to what the change really means.

Don't say anything unless it serves you

Mandela was rarely caught off guard and always seemed to be appropriate to the occasion. In reality, he viewed much of his life as a public performance, recognising that people read meaning into his gestures, comments and actions.

He seldom voiced resentment or bitterness to those around him. One notable exception was at the dinner for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, at which he and FW de Klerk (the last President in the white minority government of South Africa) had received the joint peace prize for their efforts in the South African transition. Reacting to de Klerk's apparent disrespect during the singing of *N'kosi sikelel' i Afrika* (the “Prayer for Africa”, now part of the South African national anthem), his after-dinner speech focused on his distaste for the treatment meted out to political prisoners at Robben Island.

Apart from that, Mandela seldom said something that did not serve his purpose. He rarely made negative or resentful comments unless it was part of a deliberate strategy. He seemed to be clear about his intentions. He focused on the future and forgave people for what occurred in the past – he wanted to create a better South Africa.

There are obvious lessons for leaders in their communication and feedback to others. The most important seems to be a clear examination of your intentions. Why are you communicating or giving the feedback? Be clear that you are seeking to make something (different) happen rather than simply seeking revenge or to voice your displeasure. The latter rarely serves you well.

Also, strategic leadership is about learning from the past to focus on the future. So, look to the future and forgive the past in your communications and feedback with others. Use the “next time” approach to create a better atmosphere for change. Finally, although positive communication and feedback is easier to deliver and receive, don’t shy away from negative feedback where it is necessary. But remember to focus on what can be learned and how to move forward.

A lonely path

Mandela’s success as an international statesman and eminent leader was in stark contrast to his private life. His first two marriages broke down and he did not enjoy a close relationship with all of his children. He was bitterly disappointed about the relative “failure” of his private life, although he rarely discussed it or made reference to it. He does, however, acknowledge the fact that his long incarceration and forced separation from his family was an important contributor to this situation.

It is hard to know what lessons can be drawn from this, if any. What it does suggest, however, is that leaders have to remain ever vigilant to ensure that their personal lives are not forsaken as they pursue their professional dreams and goals. At the end of the day, it’s all about striking the right balance.

These leadership insights are based on my reading of the various accounts of Nelson Mandela’s life. Primarily, I consulted *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995) and *Invictus* (2008). I take full responsibility for any misrepresentation of Mandela’s leadership philosophies.

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