

Leadership is also about caring

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Since the beginning of creation, the subject of leadership has been dominant in our lives. There are millions of publications on the subject, including, but not limited to, books, magazines and journals – to name a few. It seems, though, that the more we talk about the subject of leadership, the more we observe that we lack understanding of it. Whether it is in business or in society, you often hear statements like “there is a leadership deficit here”.

According to John C. Maxwell, “everything rises and falls on leadership”¹. So, it means that whenever you observe success or failure in an organisation, it is because of leadership. There are various definitions of what leadership is all about and what it stands for. Through observations in my personal and professional life, I have come to the realisation that “leadership is also about caring”. Perhaps the reason why our leadership styles often leave a lot to be desired, is because they do not incorporate the element of caring. It is all about prestige, power, money and ego.

One of the reasons for writing this article is to share my experiences about two people I worked for who truly demonstrated the art of caring, as a leader. Having worked with them for a period of over three years, they left an indelible mark on my leadership walk, to the extent that after over a decade, I feel the need to document the experiences. The other reason is that I often encounter people being very unhappy about their leaders – even to the extent of making statements like “good leaders are hard to find”. Perhaps this article will show that there are still good role models out there, even though we might not be exposed to them – but they are there.

The two gentlemen that made a huge impact on my life were Mr Len Hinkel and Mr Thami Toni. Len was my immediate manager in my first job; I was still a technician back then. Our Head of Department was Thami Toni, who was affectionately known as Mr T, and who was managing a staff component of about 500 people.

The first time I encountered Mr T was when two other guys and myself had just finished our experiential training, and we were desperate for a job. He and one of his managers interviewed the three of us jointly. From that interview the recruitment process continued through various iterations until we were fully appointed as technicians. Looking back, one could argue that we did not deserve the positions we were hired for, based on our experience and background. However, Mr T saw something in us that even we ourselves could not see: potential.

Leaders should always see potential in people. As leaders, rather than just seeing people what they currently are, we should also see them as what they are going to become. Even when we address them, we do so on the basis of what they are becoming. This is the caring side of leadership. You care about people’s aspirations and dreams, you motivate and support them in what they want to be.

The other aspect of this is about giving people a chance, even though at times they might not deserve it. On a deeper level, it could be observed that the positions we hold in our organisations are simply because someone gave us a chance because they had a belief in us; this all lies in the potential. It is therefore vital for leaders to always be on the lookout for opportunities to give people a chance. The challenge with managers, sometimes, is that they tend to focus too much

on the subordinate's job description, to the extent of totally neglecting people's aspirations. You often notice this when a subordinate brings forward a brilliant idea on how matters can be improved in a department; some managers would completely undermine the person, to the extent of reminding them of their current role. Other managers would even take the idea, and, in turn, present it to their management as their own idea, then receiving the glory, while the subordinate may not have that experience.

When we graduated from engineering studies, the three of us were still passionate about the technical side of the business. The latest technologies and innovations were some of the aspects that interested us. Len did nothing to kill this kind of passion. In fact, his aim was to enhance it by always urging us to look at the 'bigger picture'. His objective was that we should also be passionate about the subject of leadership. He started to facilitate informal meetings with us on Monday mornings. The main topic in these meetings was leadership. He would ask us what we learnt over the weekend about leadership, and each person would then share his views, based on what he had read.

At first, none of us liked these meetings, but we attended because we respected him. One of the fundamental reasons behind our reluctance was that we did not see ourselves as leaders, but as technicians. Len sensed our reluctance, and was very patient with us. He emphasised the fact that "leadership is everyone's business", irrespective of one's role in the organisation. Later that year, I read one of John C. Maxwell's quotes: "Leadership is not about the position, but disposition"². It was only then that I could make sense of what Len had tried to instil in us.

A year later, in 2000, Len encouraged us to attend a programme in business leadership; this was under the auspices of Rhodes University. By virtue of our status in the organisation, many would argue that we did not qualify for this programme, because it was meant for supervisors and managers, and we were neither – just technicians. However, Len and Mr T saw beyond this, and allowed us to enrol for the programme. That programme made the purpose of the Monday morning meetings so clear. It was clear to the extent that we became very passionate about leadership. We did not just see ourselves as technicians, but leaders! This improved our decision-making in our jobs because we now viewed matters from a leadership perspective.

Since then, our passion for the subject of leadership has increased. A friend of mine, Yandile Galada, whom I met when we were still working with Len, even today when we meet, no matter how casual the discussions are, we don't end without mentioning the subject of leadership. On many occasions we reminisce about some of the things that Len taught us. Len really instilled in us the passion for leadership.

Mr T, on the other hand, taught us a great deal about professionalism. Coming from a technical background, our training did not provide us with a good grounding in matters such as reporting to senior management. As young technicians, we would compile reports only we could understand, and even then the integrity of the data would be questionable! Mr T was very strict when it came to reports. He would reject a report until it had the desired professional 'look and feel'. None of us would be angry at him for doing this, because deep down we knew that he cared for us and wanted us to mature in this area.

In addition to reporting skills, Mr T taught us analytical skills, – which have been invaluable to me as a manager. Through him, we came to understand how to study trends, based on the data collected. From this, we could make many conclusions on various aspects of our job – especially

where continuous improvement was concerned. As a young technician, I understood that reporting was not merely a *reactive* process so that one could show management that progress was being made, but it was a *proactive* process that, when effectively implemented, could prevent the occurrence of many major crises.

Mr T thereby taught us that the main aim of reporting is not necessarily reporting, but to ensure that leaders can use the information to make effective changes. So many leaders can get caught up in the routines of reporting, and totally neglect the issues of effectiveness and efficiency. The reality of the matter is that if you did not deal with the negative aspects of the last report, chances are you'll be reporting on the same issues in the following cycle. Problems do not go away by themselves; effective leadership is needed to deal with the problematic issues decisively.

Sometimes we misconstrue how leaders should behave in organisations. We make statements like *"This is a dog-eat-dog world, so don't show your inner feelings to people or else people will trample over you"*. Some statements, no matter how true they are to some people, do not portray who we are as human beings. It is this idea of forcing people to neglect their emotions and pretend to be what they are not, in order to appear as great leaders, which perverts the role of leadership.

Mr T was a different kind of leader – a leader who would show his emotions to people. You could feel his genuineness. One particular time, in a team-build session, the floor was opened for people to voice their opinions on various issues that impede growth in the department. Staff members, in front of Mr T, then spoke about the bad treatment they were receiving from their managers, and these managers were reporting to him. As the people were telling their stories, you could see the disappointment in his face, and at times even shedding a tear. Even though at that moment he was not uttering any words, one could sense his disappointment, and the empathy he felt with the people who were being mistreated. One could feel the emotion emanating strongly from him, and one was certain that he was going to do everything in his power to improve the situation.

It is a leader's job to care about the career development of others – especially those who are reporting to him. Some leaders shy away from this responsibility, either because they do not want to overburden themselves with other people's problems, or else seem to be overcommitting themselves to something by way of making promises for a bright future.

In many instances, some leaders abdicate this responsibility to the human resource department. This should not be the case, however. The human resource department creates a platform for employees for their development, so that they can be competent in their current roles, and also to ensure that they are continually learning, in order for them to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Mr T and Len were so interested in career development, that they dedicated themselves to help us grow in our careers. Career development was not discussed only during performance appraisals, but on a continuous basis. If someone's long-term goal was to be in their own positions, they did not feel insecure about it; instead, they would guide the person and give them the support they desired. If we do not care about the development of those we are leading, how can we be of use to them? Career development is at the heart of people's aspirations; therefore,

if we do not care about this, it means that our leadership is very shallow, because it does not deal with the deeper issues in people's lives.

One of the pillars of team development is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of your team members. It might sometimes take you longer to fully understand this, but in the end it is worth it. When you understand each and everyone's strengths within the team, this means people can operate according to their strengths and not their weaknesses. In areas of weakness, the team members can complement each other. Some leaders tend to focus on the weaknesses of people to the extent that it can lead to frustration – and even resignation! Wise leaders know that by harnessing what is inside the person, that person can develop into what they should become.

This is what Mr T and Len used to do. From the first time we came to the department, they made it their responsibility to get to know our individual strengths. Each of them would have individual sessions with a team member; these sessions were informal, and one wouldn't even think that someone was studying one's strengths or weaknesses. After a while, as a team, we had a meeting to review the future of the department; central to this was to discuss promotion opportunities. The recommendations that were made in that meeting exactly fitted what people aspired to be, and highlighted their strong areas! It was only then that we realised that the one-on-one exercises had paid off. Within a couple of months we were promoted to various positions that had been identified, and we thus began to add more value to the organisation.

In some organisations, the time of performance appraisal cause great tension, and in some cases lead to constant and lasting resentment. There is enough evidence to show that leaders abuse the performance appraisal system to their own benefit. On a deeper level, it can be argued that no employee should underperform in a job, especially when she or he has a leader, as it is the leader's responsibility to ensure that subordinates do *not* underperform. A leader cannot, in the eleventh hour, tell a subordinate that she or he has underperformed and that they will not be receiving a performance incentive. If this happens, then it means that the leader has also underperformed, and should not be receiving an incentive either.

Leaders should continuously monitor and control subordinates' performance. Leaders need to guide their team members in areas where they are underperforming, to a level where they can excel. They need to support their team members by ensuring that they have the right tools for the job. They should be asking the team members, "What should I do, as your leader, to make your job better?" With Len, all of us were comfortable during performance appraisals. We knew what ratings we would receive, because this was something that he dealt with all along during the performance cycle. Feedback is important when dealing with subordinates; people always want to hear what their leaders say about their performance – and on a continuous basis. Feedback and appraisal are completely different; therefore, leaders cannot replace feedback with an appraisal. When it comes to performance appraisal, the water is already under the bridge. The only thing you can tell the employee is whether he has performed or underperformed. Feedback, however, is a proactive process which ensures that the employee is guided to a level where he can excel.

When leading young people in a job situation, one's role extends from that of merely a manager, to that of a father. Some young people might be entering the job situation for the first time, and at times may not use money wisely. This is what I appreciated about Len. At times, he would ask us about our personal financial goals, and how we were planning to achieve them. Once, he invited a financial planner to give us a talk on long-term financial planning. We then had to see

the financial planner individually. That intervention improved our relationship with money. In matters such as buying a house or a car, people felt comfortable to ask him for advice. After work, he would go and view the car or house with you, and give feedback.

The point here to make is that as leaders we need to speak to the hearts of the people – both in word and in deed. When we say “we care about our people”, we need to demonstrate that we care about the things they care about. This may sound a bit farfetched in a working situation where we managers imagine their role as managing deadlines and 'fighting fires' in a job. However, one of the ways of connecting with your people, as a leader, is to start becoming interested in the things that interest them. You have to show that it is not just about you and the organisation, but that you genuinely care about them as fellow human beings.

One of the challenges managers face is that they tend to be too busy attending meetings and to “strategic matters”. In the end, they have no time for their subordinates. The consequence of such behaviour is that there tends to be a drift between manager and subordinate, to the extent that there an emotional disconnect can develop. One might argue that employees do not need to be "mollycoddled", and therefore that this concept of visibly-felt leadership is not adequate for pushing productivity. The reality, though, is that people are relational beings. They filter matters through relationships. When you cannot relate well to your employees, it becomes difficult to inspire them to perform at their peak. They will comply with all the rules and policies because of your position, but will never be committed to you. They will only do what is expected. The statement that managers use sometimes, that “I am not here to make friends, I am here to run a business”, is not in line with who we are as human beings. This kind of mentality promotes a double-minded society, where people display a favourable behaviour towards their friends and family, and completely the opposite towards their colleagues. In the end, people lose meaning of who they are.

In reading this article, one would be tempted to think that there was no room for conflict in our department, and that we agreed on absolutely everything. This was not the case, however. In fact, both Len and Mr T understood that conflict is inevitable when working with people, but one needs to channel it so that it can generate positive outcomes. At times, as their subordinates, we would disagree with them, and strongly argue our case. Nevertheless, even in these differences, we still respected each other, knowing that everyone had the best interests of the business at heart. There were times where they would be wrong, and their decisions would have negative consequences. In those times they would humble themselves, and admit to us that they had been wrong, and we would accept the apology and move on. Some managers fail to do this. Even when they know that their actions are wrong, they waste more time trying to find someone else to blame, instead of dealing with the problem.

In essence, the work of leadership should not be taken lightly. It goes much further than merely achieving key performance indicators for organisations. It is not just about attending meetings and giving reports to senior management. Beyond the various purposes of leadership, it involves a great deal of caring for those who have been entrusted to us, and also the organisations that we serve.

References:

1. Maxwell, J.C. 1999. *The Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
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About the Author



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Lunga Msengana is a Professional Engineering Technologist Engineering registered with the Engineering Council of South Africa and holds a BSc Hons in Applied Science (with specialization in Electronic Engineering) through the University of Pretoria. Years later, his passion for projects led him to formally studying Project Management, which he obtained a Masters of Commerce in Project Management (Cum Laude) with Cranefield College of Project and Programme Management. He is currently busy with his PhD in Commerce and Administration with Cranefield College.

He has worked as a technician, Business Analyst, Engineer and Project Manager. He had the opportunity to work for Denel, Saab Tech, Molapo Technology, and Vodacom. He is currently a project manager for Eskom Telecommunications. He is also an Associate Part-time Lecturer at Cranefield College of Project and Programme Management and UNISA School of Business Leadership (SBL). Lunga is a member of Project Management South Africa (PMSA) and the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa (IoDSA).

In November 2012, Lunga published a book titled “*The Missing Link in Projects*”. The book gives full credit to the human factor in project management and it acknowledges the vital role people play in the unfolding of projects. He has been a featured speaker at conferences in South Africa and Botswana. He has also written articles for ProjectNet and *PM World Journal*.

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