

Leadership is A Journey

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I want to thank the students for inviting me to speak this evening and Jean Cooper for sharing with me what this programme is all about and what you have accomplished. I applaud the students who took the time to invest in becoming a leader. I also applaud the students who developed and facilitated the leadership workshops. It is quite an innovative design that creates multiple layers of theoretical and practical learning for all involved.

I just want to spend a few minutes talking with you about the leadership journey you have embarked upon.

I have been associated with the Center for Creative Leadership in the USA for a number of years. They focus exclusively on “leadership development”—understanding it from both a research perspective and developmental perspective—how to help people become effective leaders! For a long time leadership development was a black box, largely because our theoretical understanding of leadership was also elusive. Although there has always been leaders and leadership, its social scientific study only formally began at the turn of the 20th century, starting with scholars looking at the traits and characteristics of leaders, then moving to a focus on leader behaviour, next the situation became the key to understanding leadership, and now in the 21st century we have gone almost full circle with the current genre of leadership theories—authentic leadership theory, servant leadership, charismatic leadership, ethical leadership, and transformational leadership—very much rooted in the leader as a person!

A same time, we have figured out a good deal about developing people into leaders.

One of the core ideas that has emerged is leadership is a journey—not a destination. Leadership it is always *about becoming*. *Finding* the leader within is very much a quest for understanding the very reason for our existence and who we are in this world and *what we can be*. It is reflective journey that others can only guide you towards but most of the work resides with you.

What are the keys to a great journey?

- First, engage in lifelong learning. A hallmark of the 21st century is the exponential growth and speed at which knowledge is being developed and transmitted. The world is changing in ways none of us can predict or even anticipate. I read a recent forecast that stated, “The

knowledge we have today represents only 1 percent of what will be available in 2050.

Your leadership workshops have given you some tools and ideas about leading others but there is still much to be learned. Be prepared to drop your tools and take up new ones as conditions change! CCL research has shown that learning agility—the ability to be flexible and adaptable—is a greater predictor of potential than raw intellectual talent!

- Second, be sober and reflective about accepting the call to lead. I do hope all of you and more young people will accept leadership roles. You are what some are calling the Cheetah generation on the continent. Young Africa is rising and growing. Fourteen of the 15 youngest countries in the world are on this continent. Seventy percent of today's Africans were born after the end of colonialism! The challenges we face in South Africa, Africa and the world need each of you to be willing to make a contribution, to make difference. As you can tell from my accent, South Africa is my adopted country. But having lived and worked here for nine years, I have gained a profound appreciation of the complex and formidable needs of our society. *A great challenge that confronts all of us as Africans is to make sure that in this century Africa defeats poverty, disease, unemployment, and conflicts that daily deprive so many of happiness and even life.*

Don't choose to lead because of what it can do for you—big office, big title, new car, power over others—leadership roles can be a seductive ego trap because of the heady benefits that come with them; yet, if you choose leadership because of *what it will do for you*, then you will likely do more harm than good. The Center for Creative Leadership research (with thousands of leaders) found that the best leaders had a socialised ego need. They chose to lead because they wanted to do something for others.

What do you want to do for others? Are you willing to use your mind and heart to make a difference in the world! If you have read Mandela's autobiography, he shares the moment when he shifted his focus from how apartheid was restricting his life chances to understanding it was not just about him but how many others were also suffering. From that point his mission in life changed: "I saw my mission as one of preaching reconciliation, of binding the wounds of the country, of engendering trust and confidence." We have an expression in the African-American community in the United States that I would also like to share with you, "*Lift others as you climb*"—which means using individual achievement to uplift others." Your education is going to open many doors for you. As you go through the doors of opportunity, remember to take others with you. You are the promise of everything South Africa can be, everything the world can become. Your time has come. Believe in yourself. Believe in your capabilities.

- Third, becoming a great leader requires listening to the voices of others. Along your leadership journey as with all journeys you will encounter many different people. Effective leaders have the ability to compassionately understand what others need and to empathise with and even vocalise what others may be feeling or experiencing. They know how to connect to others in a profoundly authentic way. Listening and connecting is about helping others to find the genius within, always appreciating and respecting the value and worth of each person.
- Fourth, great leadership requires that you know yourself! And probably this is one of the most difficult aspects of the leadership journey. This part of the journey is about self- discovery—*becoming more knowable and visible to ourselves and to others!* So often we lose ourselves in the pressures of the situation or we retreat from doing the hard work of knowing ourselves. Stephen Covey says, “Knowing yourself requires an individual to change from “human doing to a human being.” We spend most of our lives mastering how to do things, but in the end it is the quality and character of the individual that defines good leadership. It is about bringing your authentic self, drawing upon your humanity in the work you do with and for others. Knowing yourself is to understand your values and principles. Knowing one self is intimately related to another principle of great leadership: Integrity. Integrity means living your values and principles. Integrity is about trustworthiness and morality. The importance of being trustworthy is succinctly summed up by a proverb from the Ashanti people of Ghana, “One falsehood spoils a thousand truths!”

Morality is about one’s definition of what is right and what is wrong. James Clawson argues that leaders constantly face moral questions because we live in a social world, and our decisions and actions as leaders affect the lives of others. There is a wonderful old proverb from the Khoi-San people that speaks to the personal nature of morality, “Good is when I steal other people’s wives and cattle; bad is when they steal mine.” I ask you tonight, *what is your moral compass?* What are your values and convictions? What are you willing to stand for?

- A final piece of advise for this journey is to never stop dreaming, dreaming of the possibilities of what can be! You may be thinking what can I do, a single human being, about the daunting problems in my community, in my country? I think sometimes we can get discouraged or feel overwhelmed about the prospect of leading. We may mistakenly believe that we must be a Nelson Mandela or a Mother Teresa to be a leader. Or, that we have to literally be able to walk on water or perform miracles! These iconic images can be discouraging to us ordinary folks! But, I know and I believe ordinary folks can do extraordinary things!

Let me share a story that may help you to see the possibilities of what one person can do, ordinary people like us.

This story comes from Benjamin and Rosamund Zander authors of the book, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*.

Strolling along the edge of the sea a man catches sight of a young woman who appears to be engaged in a ritual dance. She stoops down, and then straightens to her full height, casting her arm out in an arc. Drawing closer, he sees that the beach around her is covered with starfish, and she is throwing them one by one back into the sea. He lightly mocks her, "There are stranded starfish as far as the eye can see, several kilometres up the beach. What difference can saving a few of them possibly make?" Smiling, she bends down, picks up a starfish and once more tosses it into the sea, saying serenely, "It certainly makes a difference to this one!"

As you go forth tomorrow, I ask you to never stop dreaming about the possibilities of what you can accomplish as a leader! Robert Greenleaf said it well, "Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality; but the dream must be there first." What is your dream for the kind of leader you want to be? What value do you want to add to your community, your country, to Africa, to the world? What do you want your legacy to be?

I want to close with the words of the poet, David Whyte from his poem: What to Remember When Waking

To be human is to become visible
while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others.
To remember the other world in this world
is to live in your true inheritance.

You are not a troubled guest on this earth,
you are not an accident amidst other accidents
you were invited from another and greater night
than the one from which you have just emerged.

Now, looking through the slanting light of the morning window
toward the mountain presence of everything that can be
what urgency calls you to your one love?
What shape waits in the seed of you
to grow and spread its branches
against a future sky?

I wish you all the very best on your leadership journey!