

## LEADERSHIP

### Leadership and Making a Difference.

By *FW de Klerk*

*President of South Africa 1989-1994,  
Peace Nobel Laureate 1993.*

I would like to share some thoughts with you this evening on leadership and how people make a difference.

All the human beings who have ever been born have made a difference of some kind. They make a difference to their parents and their families. As they mature they make a difference to their friends and their communities. All people - created as they are - in the image of God make a difference of some kind, however small or apparently insignificant that difference may be.

Nevertheless, it is true that the scale of the difference that we make depends to a large degree on the leadership positions that we hold. The reality is that the higher we climb on the leadership ladder, the greater is the potential that we have to make a dif-

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ference - for good or for bad.

From the perspective that I have gained during my long career in law, politics and civil society I have been able to identify the following requirements for leadership.

**The first requirement of leadership and to really being able to make a difference is actually to become a leader. The world is full of brilliant people who have all the right solutions to the problems of the world. However, if they don't have the ability to turn their ideas into reality they remain spectators and armchair commentators in the great game of life. Becoming a leader isn't an easy process.**

A very small number of people are born to leadership. Others achieve leadership. And others have leadership thrust upon them.

In my case, it could be said that, in part, I was born into a long tradition of political service and leadership. My father was a senior cabinet minister and President of the Senate. My uncle, J G Strydom, was Prime Minister.

In other respects, I achieved leadership. I served long apprenticeships as a student leader; as a leader in various civil society organisations; as a backbencher in parliament; as a cabinet minister and as a senior officebearer in my party.

However, despite my family background and despite my long preparation for leadership, there was a sense in which leadership was thrust upon one. This occurred at a remarkable caucus meeting of my political party on the morning of 2 February 1989.



- atives
- sformation
- t Us
- e Klerk
- d Members
- ferences
- letter
- cations
- ches
- it News
- entaries
- me A Member
- o Gallery
- ct Us
- atest Speech
- atest Publication
- atest Newsletter
- Creative Arts Award Children's Rights
- HERE
- Afrikaans
- ch Page

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It is a great pleasure for me to congratulate Nelson Mandela on his 90th birthday. He is the most famous South African who has ever lived and is universally regarded as one of the greatest figures of the 20th century.

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## LEADERSHIP

Without the slightest prior warning we received a message from my predecessor, President P W Botha, announcing his decision after a serious stroke to step down as party leader. We decided there and then to elect a new leader. I won the subsequent caucus election by a narrow margin of only 6 votes and emerged as leader of the National Party and de facto President elect.

The fact that I was elected leader of the National Party enabled me to make a difference.

Exactly one year later, to the day, I rose to make the speech in Parliament that launched the democratic transformation of South Africa. I announced the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of all political parties and organisations. I said that all of us would have to work together to negotiate a new non-racial democratic constitution.

What leadership factors enabled us to achieve this goal? I would like to identify a few:

Leaders must have the ability to make a cool and impartial assessment of the situation

**Real leaders must be able to climb above the daytoday hustle and bustle and take a critical view of the direction in which events are moving.** And if they see that their

people are moving in the wrong direction they must have the ability to persuade them to change course. Nearly all great leaders have had this ability: Abraham Lincoln adamantly insisted that slavery was wrong and was determined to lead America in a different direction. Before World War II Winston Churchill warned against appeasement and insisted that Britain should change course and prepare to resist Nazi Germany.

We started to do this in South Africa at the beginning of the 1980s. By that time it was becoming increasingly clear to many of us in leadership positions in the National Party that we were on the wrong course. We were becoming more and more isolated from the international community with each year that passed. The great majority of black South Africans were increasingly adamant in their rejection of our policies and the solutions that we were trying to impose on them. As a result, we had become involved in a downward spiral of resistance and repression that threatened at some stage in the not

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### The Nobel Peace Prize 1993

"for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa"



Nelson Mandela



Frederik Willem de Klerk

 1/2 of the prize

 1/2 of the prize

too distant future to erupt into fullscale conflict.

All of this was having an increasingly damaging effect on our economy and was threatening to shut down the engine of economic growth.

My colleagues and I spent a great deal of time identifying our problems and wrestling with the need for fundamental change. In open and often brutally frank discussions we examined the hard and unpalatable facts that confronted us. As Christians we also struggled with the question of what was right and what was wrong.

Our greatest challenge in managing the transformation process was to acknowledge these realities, to admit our failure to bring justice to all South Africans and to confront our fear of radical change. Our analysis of the situation led us to the inescapable and painful conclusion that white South Africans would have to accept the risks of being part of a nonracial South Africa in which we would no longer be in control.

The essence of leadership is the ability to persuade



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## LEADERSHIP

people to change direction. Knowing and admitting that you are on the wrong course and being able to do anything about it are 2 quite distinct issues. The prospect of imminent disaster has not always persuaded those at the helm of governments to alter course. History contains a woeful tally of leaders in many countries who have resolutely steered their countries into war and bankruptcy, despite the dire warnings of dangers ahead. Others, just as often, have, through indecision and inaction, allowed their countries to drift rudderless onto the rocks.

Resistance to change is deeply ingrained in us. We fear the unknown and dread the prospect of moving into uncharted waters. In our case, in South Africa, the whites and other minorities had well grounded reasons to fear change. We were deeply concerned about:

- communist influence in the African National Congress, the most important revolutionary movement;
- the failure of other African countries to build, stable, democratic and prosperous societies.
- the future of ethnic and cultural minorities under a majority rule government.

It would have been very easy for white South Africans simply to continue along the same old road. We could have weathered sanctions and withdrawn into a grim fortress of national isolation. After all, this is the kind of option that many other embattled states have chosen. For me the key point was simply the realisation that the policies that we had adopted, and that I had supported as a young man, had led to a situation of manifest injustice. It was this, in the final instance, that persuaded me and my colleagues that we had to accept the risks of radical change.

Leaders must avoid the temptation of pretending to change. They must have the strength to take tough and unpopular decisions.

Very often countries, companies and individuals who know they must change, pretend to change. They think of brilliant new ways of doing the wrong thing better. Former smokers, like myself, will tell themselves that if they cut down the number of cigarettes they smoke they will be addressing their problem. Others who are overweight will fool themselves that by taking no sugar in their tea, that they are really coming to grips with their problem. Change can be really painful. I know. I gave up smoking 2 years ago and am still suffering!

The same thing happens on an international and national scale. For example, when he launched his perestroika reforms, President Gorbachev continued to insist that there was basically nothing wrong with communism. It just had to be reformed and imple-

mented in a more open and democratic manner. In the same way, countries and companies will, for sentimental reasons, cling to industries that are no longer relevant instead of breaking through into entirely new cutting edge technologies.

For years we white South Africans also fooled ourselves that we could 'reform' apartheid and thereby avoid the traumatic decisions and risks that real change always involves. It was only when we accepted that we would have to take extremely uncomfortable decisions and risks that real change could begin.

An essential element in leadership is the ability to formulate clear and acceptable values.

The values that we identified as the foundation for our approach to negotiations included:

- acceptance of a new constitution in which all South Africans, regardless of race, would participate on a free and equal basis in a genuine democratic system;
- entrenchment of the rule of law - in which the constitution - and not the government of the day, would be sovereign;
- adoption of a bill of rights that would uphold the full spectrum of individual rights and protect cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities; and
- protection of property rights and broad free market principles

Flowing from the principles that they have identified, leaders must articulate a clear and achievable vision.

On 2 February 1990 I presented a new vision to the South African Parliament of a peaceful and democratic solution to our problems. I said that our goal was "a new South Africa:

- a totally changed South Africa;
- a South Africa which has rid itself of the antagonism of the past;
- a South Africa free of domination or oppression in whatever form;

a South Africa within which the democratic forces all reasonable people align themselves behind mutually acceptable goals and against radicalism, irrespective of where it comes from."

By 1994 to the astonishment of the world we had turned our vision into reality.

Leaders must have special communication skills and must have the ability to bring their constituencies with them. We live in a world of perceptions and perceptions are created as much by how we communicate as by what we do. For us it was very important to convince the media and the world of our vision. It was also essential to encourage our own supporters and reassure them that we were on

## LEADERSHIP

Frederik Willem de Klerk was born in Johannesburg on 18 Mar 1936. His father was Senator Jan de Klerk, later minister in the South African government. His brother Willem de Klerk was a founder of the Democratic Party.

President de Klerk graduated in law from Potchefstroom University in 1958 and then practiced law in Vereeniging in the Transvaal. President De Klerk was elected to Parliament as National Party member for Vereeniging in 1972.

President de Klerk was appointed Minister of Posts and Telecommunications and Social Welfare and Pensions by Prime Minister Vorster in 1978.

Under Prime Minister PW Botha, his ministerial posts included

- Posts and Telecommunications and Sports and Recreation (1978-1979),
- Mines, Energy and Environmental Planning (1979-1980),
- Mineral and Energy Affairs (1980-1982),
- Internal Affairs (1982-1985),
- National Education and Planning (1984-1989).

In 1985, he became chairman of the Minister's Council in the House of Assembly. On 01 Dec 1986, he became the leader of the House of Assembly.

In Feb 1989, de Klerk was elected leader of the National Party and in Sep 1989 he was elected President of South Africa.

the right path. Most people can deal with change and are even prepared to make painful sacrifices but they cannot deal with uncertainty.

It was the task of the party's leadership to assure its supporters that genuine reform could effectively protect their core interests, while at the same time affording full political rights to all South Africans.

Ultimately, most white South Africans accepted the necessity of fundamental change. However, some doggedly shut their eyes to the dangers ahead. They refused to give up the conservative Afrikaners' quest for exclusive national selfdetermination in some nonexistant homeland, and pointed continually to the chaos in Africa and to the threat of communist domination.

In 1982 some of the most diehard elements left the National Party and established the Conservative Party. They did so because the Government had, by that time, already begun to change course. It had decided, as a first step, to include our coloured and Asian minorities in a 3-chamber Parliament and was beginning to dismantle apartheid laws.

The departure of the Conservatives greatly facilitated the task of those of us who remained behind. It

was no longer necessary to make unwieldy compromises to keep them on board. Leaders must be prepared to encourage those who are steadfastly opposed to their vision, to disembark. It is better to accept a smaller power base than to allow a faction in one's power base to block what must be done.

Leadership Style is also critically important. Some leaders try to determine the course of events through the sheer force of their personalities, others by the brilliance of their intellect. I tried to do so by putting the emphasis on teamwork; by drawing all members of my management team into the process of analysis, planning and strategising; by listening carefully to all of them; by constantly interacting with the team in pointing out the right direction as I saw it; and by forging an acceptable consensus. This may not have been the most spectacular leadership style, but to my mind it was the best one. It helped to ensure that during the entire process the whole of our management team remained solidly committed to our common objectives.

**Leadership is not only about inspiring others to do the right thing: it is about empowering them to do so. The task of leadership is not only to define clear values; to articulate a vision and to set the course. Almost as important is the need to provide people with the resources and encouragement they need to do make their own unique contributions - and then to get out of the way. Under such circumstances they will nearly always astound the leadership by surpassing its most optimistic expectations. One of the central arts of leadership is the ability to unlock the enormous talent and energy of supposedly ordinary people.**

**Timing is crucially important.**

Even when you have become a leader, it is foolish to be vociferously right at the wrong time or to move so far ahead in the right direction that your followers can no longer hear or see you. History and events move at their own pace sometimes agonisingly slowly, at other times with frightening speed. A leader intent on managing change must watch the tides and currents and must position himself accordingly.

I was often criticised while I was a leading figure in the National Party and before I became President for not racing out ahead of the pack in the pursuit of reform. Had I done so I would probably have alienated important constituencies within my party. I might then not have become leader of the National Party in February 1989 and I would not have been able to initiate the transformation process in February 1990, and therefore to manage it.

## LEADERSHIP

As I mentioned earlier, a leader must have a weather eye open for changes in political tides and currents. More than this, however, he must also be ready to ride the wave of history when it breaks.

After my inauguration in September 1989 my hand was further strengthened by the great historic events that were occurring in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The collapse of international communism helped to allay fears of Soviet expansionism and of the influence of the South African Communist Party within the ANC Alliance. The stage was ready for the speech that I made on 2 February 1990 in which I launched our transformation process.

**A key factor in leadership is the willingness to take calculated risks.** At various stages in the transformation process we had to take calculated risks. Right at the beginning of my presidency I was confronted with requests by opposition groups - some led by Archbishop Tutu to organise peaceful mass demonstrations. Our security advisers argued that such protests could easily get out of hand and cause chaos. I nevertheless decided to allow the demonstrations - which proceeded without serious incidents. However, some of our followers were not prepared to take the risks that change nearly always involves. Early in 1991 the ruling National Party started to lose byelections primarily to the Rightwing Conservative Party. It insisted that we had lost our mandate to continue with reform and that we should hold a whitesonly general election. It claimed the right to speak for the majority of whites and began to undermine our commitment to change.

I decided that the best way to deal with this threat would be to call a referendum among the white electorate to renew and strengthen my mandate for reform. It was an enormous risk. If we had lost I would have had to resign and call an election. The whole transformation process would have been derailed - and so, understandably, most of my senior colleagues advised against my decision. In the event, the referendum, which was held in March 1992, resulted in a two-thirds victory for the continuation of reform.

Leaders must be able to persevere Having taken the decision to embark upon radical change, the main challenge is to persevere and deal with the inevitable problems and crises. I realised that the decisions that I announced on 2 February would unleash a chain of events with farreaching and unpredictable consequences.

It was rather like paddling a canoe into a long stretch of dangerous rapids. You may start the process and determine the initial direction. However, after that the canoe is seized by enormous and often

uncontrollable forces. All that the canoeist can do is to maintain his balance, avoid the rocks and steer as best he can and right the canoe if it capsizes. It is a time for cool heads and firm, decisive action.

We experienced many such crises after we began our own transformation process.

- The boycotts of the process by the ANC and the IFP;
- the terrible violence that continued to scourge the country during the negotiations;
- the ANCs campaign of rolling mass action involving strikes and massive demonstrations;
- the assassination of the leader of the South African Communist party Chris Hani.

All of these crises almost caused the process to capsize. However, on each occasion we succeeded in righting the canoe and in continuing our course toward the tranquil waters of peace and justice.

All of this enabled me to make a difference and to achieve the vision that I had spelled out on 2 February 1990.

Ironically, this inevitably led to the situation where I was no longer president and where my ability to make a difference was greatly diminished. The final test of leadership is perhaps to know when to lay it aside and to make way for the next generation of leaders.

**However, my message to you is that you don't necessarily have to be a President or a great leader to make a difference.**

Every player in every team can make a difference. Every worker in every company can make a special contribution. Every soldier who fought for the allied side in World War II made his or her own difference. Without their cumulative contribution the war would not have been won. Everyone in a democracy who votes in elections can make a difference. Cumulatively, they decide who the next president will be. Sometimes, just a handful of votes determine the future. However, everyone can all make a greater difference:

- If they keep on examining the road they are on;
- If they are prepared to admit it when they see they are on the wrong course;
- If they can formulate clear values and develop a vision of a better future;
- If they can inspire and empower the people they work with;
- If they have the courage to take the risks that change always involves;
- If they have the perseverance to pursue their vision until it is finally achieved.

**If people can do these things they will certainly make a difference.**