

Cultures of Leadership: A Legacy of Leadership

Q1, 2014

As another New Year begins and the remnants of 2013 are swept away, many of us will begin 2014 leaving the successes and failures of the past behind and a mind-set to start afresh. However, although there is great merit in this attitude of looking only into the future, one of the topics that came to the fore in a number of projects we worked on in 2013 was the concept of legacy, and what this means in terms of leadership, and its relationship to succession planning.

We therefore want to focus on this important topic for our Q1 article and as we continue into the business year.

The last twelve months have witnessed some hugely dramatic and significant events such as the US Government shutdown in October; the devastation of the Bangladesh factory collapse; the surprise resignation of Pope Benedict XVI; as well as the death of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the polarised reactions that followed in areas of the UK. However, arguably the most poignant moment of 2013 was the life, death and now legacy of Nelson Mandela.

The eulogies for Mandela have poured forth and his successes and achievements have been well documented. As the tributes to Madiba's incredible walk to freedom continue, there is much to admire and learn from his life and leadership. However, without wanting to bandwagon or piggy-back his significance, we want to write about three key attributes we see in his character that are reflected in many of the leaders we work with in our global activities.

I. Adversity: The Path to Greatness

Few leaders will have to endure the level of hardship that shaped Mandela's life and we in no way wish to trivialise or make light of the pain, suffering and injustice experienced. It is unlikely the issues we face as business leaders will ever compare to decades of imprisonment and injustice. But the reality is that the cost of leadership is adversity, perhaps to varying degrees, but still adversity. The last seven years have brought a phenomenal challenge to the global economy and business leaders have stood on the edge of a bleak point in history. Beyond the financial difficulties of global debt problems, technological shifts and market competitiveness each leader also

confronts challenges unique to their character and organisation. The cultural realities and conflicts can also become adverse, with issues of ethics and injustices more pertinent than ever, at home and overseas.

If adversity is inevitable in leadership, perhaps the life and legacy of Mandela offers two important points we can use to face our problems.

- Find solutions within adversity
- Resist the temptation to acquiesce to less

For Mandela, his experience of an 8ft by 8ft dark prison shaped his later political message. In his autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom*, he writes:

"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison"

In prison, as Madiba chipped away at limestone under the scorching sun, the anger of injustice could easily have burnt bitterness into his soul. I am sure that this was a battle each day, but after 27 years in prison Mandela decided that anger was not going to be the solution to the greater problem both he and his followers were facing. Rather he chose the path of forgiveness and collaboration with his enemies. It was a character forged by adversity, and that shaped his strategy as a politician and as a human being.

In 1990 Mandela walked out of prison expressing no bitterness towards his tormentors. Instead, he championed reconciliation working with opposing leaders such as De Klerk to rebuild the Rainbow Nation. Under extreme pressure it would be tempting to fall into cheap compromise to alleviate distress. The hardest test for a leader is to do the right thing for the business, even when it risks failure and could damage self-interest.

An example of this from Mandela's life was in 1985 when pro-apartheid President F. W. Botha offered Mandela freedom if he renounced violence and other illegal activity. The President tried to shift the blame for imprisonment onto Mandela himself. But Mandela did not accept, believing that it would betray his principles, his leadership and compromise the ANC's ongoing struggle. He sacrificed his own well being for the good of the larger movement. In adversity, core values and resolve are tested and, as Madiba writes:

“Difficulties break some men but make others.”
— A letter from prison, 1975

2. Diversity: A Global Mind-set

In our experience of working with senior leadership teams across the world we have observed that the best leaders are those with the desire and capacity to continue their learning. The most effective way to encourage learning is to embrace diversity and points of difference; giving space to those whose views do not easily match our own; going beyond what is comfortable and remaining curious.

In 1994 when Mandela was appointed South Africa's first democratically elected President, he immediately invested in the challenge of unifying the country's diverse and fragmented racial groupings. A well document example of how Mandela brought different sides together was in how he embraced the 'Springbok' during the 1995 Rugby World Cup. The green and gold 'Springbok' had long been an emblem of Afrikaner domination but in passionately supporting the national team, Mandela transformed the symbol to be one of unified support, with '*43 million people watching*'.

Mandela was also able to work with with an extraordinary range of international leaders. On one hand he was able to court leaders of the west over economic issues, yet he also made a strong stand against the giant world powers in defence of Africa. As President, he embraced leaders criticised by the United States such as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. His courage to both support and stand against western powers also allowed him to build positive relationships with both Russia and China.

In our work we use the term '*Diversity of Thinking*' to explain the ability of someone to understand and connect despite differences in knowledge, experience or perspective. Mandela understood this and used the language of empathy to communicate with leaders that differed to his culture, belief or attitude. Our MD, Peter Smith often says, a key aspect of leadership is "asking the question, how can I understand you, not how can you understand me."

3. Humility: One of the People

Leadership is sometimes confused with extroversion and of the language of winning. Of course effective leadership aims for success and depends on communication and engagement competencies, but in order to unite and maximise a team, a leader must

have humility. Above all things, Mandela understood this as he inspired a message of collective aspiration above personal ambition. Richard Branson (Founder of Virgin Plc) summed him up perfectly:

“He would start dancing spontaneously with people wherever he went, making them smile, laugh and feel completely at home. We found Madiba in the gallery on a Virgin plane to New York a while back. He offered to make everyone cups of tea!”

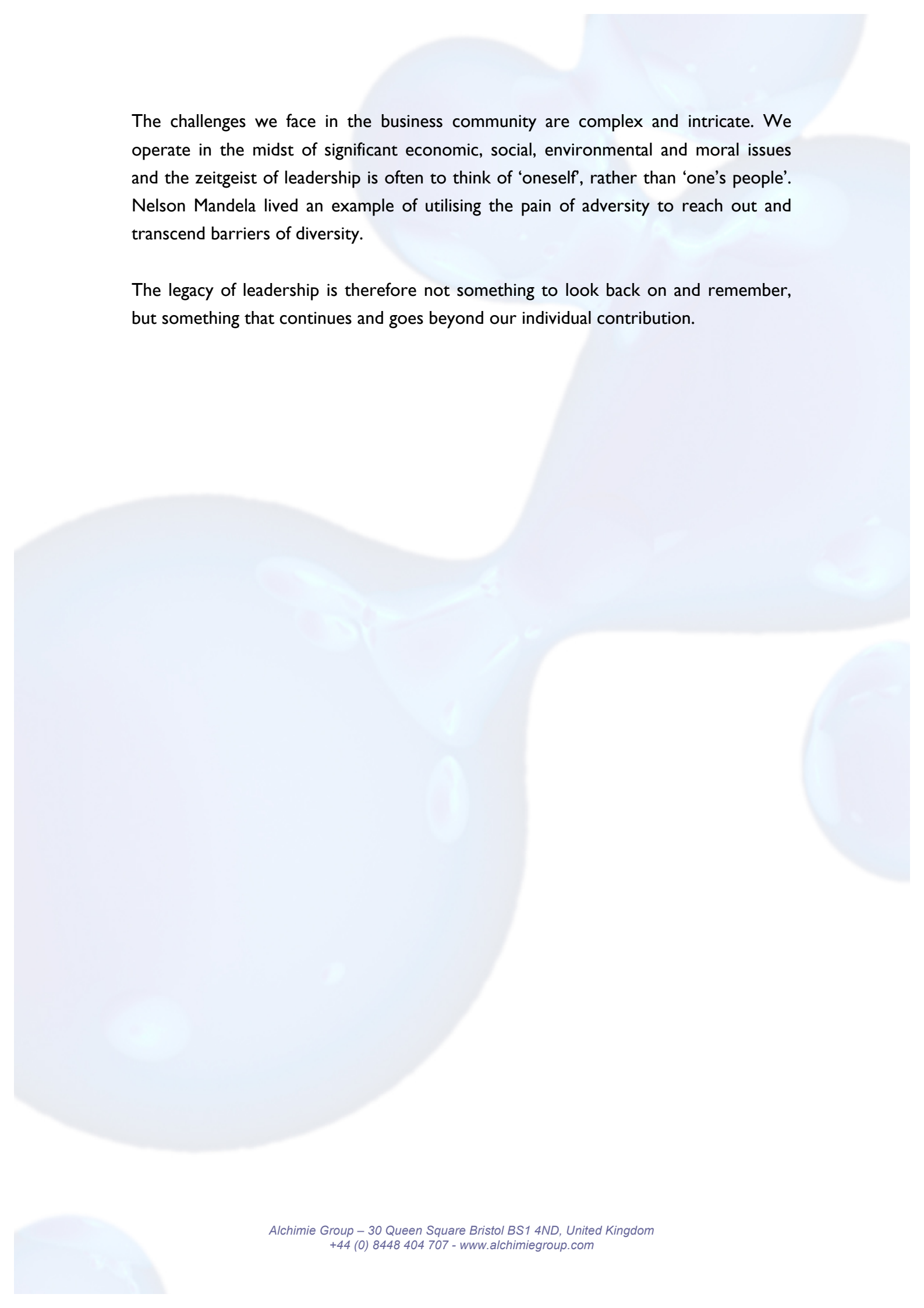
Mandela understood that in order to rebuild his country, he needed servants not superstars. An attitude of humility means that no-one is too high or too low to be acknowledged and this approach can completely alter wider perceptions. Mandela writes:

“A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

This mentality is also relevant for the business community. The health of an organisation is not reflected by those at the top but by the morale, care and value placed on the entire workforce. Effective leadership does not place a distance between ‘employers’ and ‘employees’ but rather serves everyone to improve the whole group.

Another example of Mandela preferring the larger vision to his own vested interests is how he refused to stand for a second term. Madiba’s goal when he took office was to begin the journey of racial harmony, forgiveness without forgetting, power sharing, and a strong focus on the future, not the past. Once he had taken the steps towards leading his country in that direction, Mandela then looked to pass on the leadership as part of a succession plan, whilst continuing an alternative fight against aids and poverty through his charitable foundation. His refusal to stand for a second term is extraordinary in the light of other political leaders around the world. There are many examples of those in political office that are incapable to entrust control or influence to others, sometimes to disastrous and despicable ends. Mandela’s legacy says ‘I am not the solution, but we are all part of the solution’.

Humility in leadership understands that it is the team that creates value and culture, that produces success and delivers change, and it also understands that others will follow and continue long after the leader has left. Humility in leadership will understand that the legacy does not belong to the leader, but to the people who continue in the cause.



The challenges we face in the business community are complex and intricate. We operate in the midst of significant economic, social, environmental and moral issues and the zeitgeist of leadership is often to think of 'oneself', rather than 'one's people'. Nelson Mandela lived an example of utilising the pain of adversity to reach out and transcend barriers of diversity.

The legacy of leadership is therefore not something to look back on and remember, but something that continues and goes beyond our individual contribution.