

The Centre for Conscious Leadership (CCL) believes conscious leadership is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century and that the current challenges demand more of leaders than they have in the past. Emeritus Prof Njabulo Ndebele, well known public intellectual and former vice chancellor of UCT, is one of the leaders CCL has worked with over the last 10 years. Although unique in many ways, Professor Ndebele fundamentally exemplifies many of the traits that we believe leaders will increasingly need in the future



Njabulo S. Ndebele as a Conscious Leader: (Part 2)

Hallmarks of his Leadership

By

Barbara Nussbaum (Centre for Conscious Leadership (CCL) Associate);

Professor Njabulo Ndebele is many ways a national treasure and all the more precious because of his humility. He gives us a powerful lens through which to appreciate the complexity of the issues in South Africa through the conscious leadership he has offered as writer and leader of academic institutions. His enduring love for South Africa, his maturity, evolved consciousness and depth of vision elevates and emboldens his readers as citizens. As a leader and a writer and a committed South African, he helps people to reflect about themselves with more clarity. He is accurately described as a communal writer¹ because his writing contains great sensitivity to the diverse audience he addresses. As a conscious leader, astute commentator and literary giant, he also paints a picture of our society in an unusually textured way, enabling a more vivid appreciation of the issues at hand, highlighting what is changing, what is ambiguous.

This article explores some of the key hallmarks which define Ndebele as a conscious leader. How does he elevate and deepen our thinking? How does he invite and broaden our reflective capacity in a society where multiple perspectives co-exist? How does he point out the contradictions of our values which are continually being re-negotiated and contested in our national discourse? Clearly it is because he embodies the very qualities he writes about.

- His own awareness is dynamic **because** of his ability to navigate complexity and appreciate fluidity.
- His understanding of individual and collective multidimensionality is profound
- His humility, courage and thoughtful rigour consistently underpin who he is as leader.
- He embodies a leadership gift which calls for naming and describing the paradoxes his audiences cannot always see.
- His decisions are characterized by informed choice and higher order ethics
- As a leader he demonstrates a natural inclination to evoke inquiry and genuine engagement

¹ Sam Tlhalo Raditlhalo Fine Lines from the Box

- His ability to raise the consciousness of his readers is made possible through the sensitivity, depth and quality of his own level of consciousness.
- His leadership style reflects a strong trust in human beings

For all these reasons, his writing and his understanding of society is nuanced, profound and ultimately optimistic.

It is in his understanding that reality is fluid and that the context is always changing, that he helps us appreciate that we are all multi-layered, and multi-dimensional – individually and collectively.

Fluidity and uncertainty

It is difficult to pigeon hole Njabulo Ndebele. His strength emerges from a refusal to see events of the world as a stage where we are simply actors engaging in predictable roles. He asks more of himself and more of us. In fact rather than see “all the world as a static stage”, he invites us to engage with the reality of a more unpredictable context. We see this invitation to embrace uncertainty in the Steve Biko lecture he gave in 2000, “Iphindlela”. He described a longstanding individual and collective leadership challenge in South Africa: “We are finding our way through a turbulent sea of events. At each point we have to respond to events both anticipated and unanticipated. Finding our way through randomness, our own peculiar randomness. It is impossible to approach randomness from a singular perspective.”³

As one of South Africa’s foremost public intellectuals, he is rather like a literary captain steering a ship, giving us permission, in fact encouraging his readers to see broader horizons and think with the flexibility and fluidity demanded by an ever-changing external context. This is a quality of conscious leadership highly relevant to the 21st century context, where change is constantly rapid and uncertain.

Acknowledging our Collective Multidimensionality

Another quality which underpins his strength as a conscious leader is Ndebele’s passionate commitment to deepen our collective understanding and grasp of the complex challenges we face – as people, as a country. His writing invites not only a broadening of our individual perspectives but challenges us to see other perspectives with more curiosity and greater compassion.

In fact he believes that the South African of the future, is a person who **cannot** be pigeon holed. He sees this as a healthy evolution from our apartheid past, where the state sought to describe individuals and groups definitively⁴ and then assigned a role to each. In conversation, as in life, he resists stereotyping, the simplifications of labels, and essentialist notions of group identity. For example, for him, there can be no easy definition of an African and “Ubuntu” has become one of those terms that in his view mean everything and therefore nothing. “Moshoeshoe and Shaka have given us two different kinds of leadership styles in Africa. Which of them is African? Both are. This gives us the notion not of African leadership, but of different leadership types in Africa. There will be other types as in Africa, as in other continents, there will always be a variety in leadership styles. I am suspicious of the notion of “African Leadership.”

² Where are we headed?

³ Steve Biko lecture, 2000

⁴ Interview with Kate Turkington, Nelson Mandela Foundation

Ndebele acknowledges his own multi-dimensionality by recognizing that he has been a product of two societies - South Africa and Lesotho. He went to Lesotho at the age of 20, and returned at the age of 40. “ I thought I spoke better Sotho than Zulu upon my return. The significance of my life in Lesotho is that the country gave me the gift of living in a self-referential society, comfortable with and grounded in its history and identity. It had a universe of its own from which it could define the rest of the world and its own place in that world.

“South Africa on the other hand, lacked ‘centredness’” he asserts. “The enforced separation of social groups was meant to induce enforced cooperation in economic activity. It was all externally orientated towards feeding European economies. Instead of a sense of self, such conditions produced a service mentality orientated towards Europe. The South African economy has never been for its own people. South Africa then fundamentally lacked a self-referential character. We are still locked in that reality”.

Elaborating on what it has meant to be a product of two societies, Ndebele reflects: “So in one sense one society, South Africa, made me aware of restriction and possibility, while the other society made me aware of infinite possibility, and the limits of tradition. The latter with its inherent openness can result in complacency that can easily smother a creative and adventurous spirit, suffocated by conservative traditions. South Africa, on the other hand, pushes you to seek change. Lesotho, can easily incline you to resist the impulse to change through a reflex dependence on inherited familiarity. One society assaults your sense of personal and group dignity; the other supports it, builds it. One society lacks confidence; the other has tons of it. Both of them exist side by side in me, often interacting intimately”.

Ndebele combines his consciousness with his prowess as a thinker, writer and leader. One notices the artful way in which he is able to paint a picture of the multidimensionality which makes up what he frequently refers to as our “lived experience”. Writing in 1994, he describes rich and seemingly contradictory images that make up the canvas of South Africa: the toyi-toying workers, a symbol of “the purposeful coalescence of collective intention” and the white ladies, “immaculately dressed in the deliberate composure of their surroundings seriously engaged in bowls”. One is struck by his artful description which is all the more powerful because of the respectful and emotionally sensitive way the situation is described, where neither group is judged. But putting the two groups side by side in this manner produces a comparative awareness in which the relationship between the two groups yields the potential for appreciating social meanings.

Just as he won’t generalize about Africans, he won’t generalize about any particular group. Rather he recognizes the range of responses that underlie the diversity of lived experience, within groups and between different groups. Yet, his power as a public intellectual is that he is not afraid to name and diagnose our greatest national quandaries. In 2000, during the first Steve Biko lecture, he outlined a challenge which still remains: “the quest for a new white humanity will begin to emerge from voluntary engagement by those caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making with the ethical and moral implications of being situated between the inherited, problematic privilege on the one hand, and on the other, the blinding sterility at the center of the heart of whiteness⁵.” He then names the crisis of culture – “a chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, illusion and

⁵ Iph'Indlela? Finding Our Way Into The Future, First Steve Biko Lecture <http://www.vc.uct.ac.za/speeches/?id=1>

hostility.... a chasm that highlights the national tragedy of people who have long lived together but could do no better than acknowledge only their differences.”⁶ One of the hallmarks of his leadership is the blending of emotional sensitivity⁷ with risk taking and rigour.

Courage and Rigour

For Ndebele, courage requires rigorous thoughtfulness. In thoughtful courage, “strengths and weaknesses, the good and the bad, right and wrong are all in your hands and you decide to take a course of action, not knowing for sure what the outcome would be. For Ndebele, courage is never self-celebratory, “it is always about the willingness to stake a claim to a measure of certitude at the same time that you accept with anxiety its limitations. It is about recognizing limits to your span of allowable control: worry about that recognition but press on out a sense of conviction. But choices you have to make. Often, things will turn out they you had hoped. But you must have had that hope and that intention in the first place.”

Ndebele understands that rigour requires agonizing, changing revising and testing. He is not talking about scientific rigour, but the rigour of a writer, who is committed to reaching an audience he knows well because he has taken the time to observe, to engage and to consult. This blend of risk and rigour has become a hallmark of Njabulo Ndebele, as a writer and a leader. “You can’t be casual about taking a new and unusual position – you have to invest time and intellectual energy.” He mastered this principle early in his career, in the late sixties and early seventies in his poetry, and developed it in his fiction when he took the risk of writing in his collection *“Fools” and Other Stories* about the beauty in the ordinary lives of young people in the townships at a time when readers expected to read about overt political struggles and protest. His collection of essays *“Rediscovery of the Ordinary”* carries some seminal essays that represent his theoretical expression of his literary practice.⁸

Informed choice and ethics

Njabulo Ndebele’s rigour is linked to the need to make ethical and informed choices. As a conscious leader, he is acutely aware of the internal process which informs his choices as well as the complexities of the external context. Conscious leadership, according to Heidi Carter⁹, is both about being aware of internal responses to any given situation as well as responding effectively to the external context. Ndebele applies rigour in making an informed choice. “I am not afraid of making a decision, and acting on it. That for me has always been the smallest part of responding to a crisis. Rather, it is what leads to the decision that requires focus. I need information, interaction, wide-angle views, narrow views, different opinions, colleagues battling it out in front of me. There always comes a point when it all narrows down to me. Then I take the plunge and decide, accepting all the responsibility.”

⁶ Ndebele, *Liberation and the Crisis of Culture*, in *Fine Lines from the Box*, pages 60 and 61

⁷ See article 1 on Ndebele by B Nussbaum: *The Story of the Man*, for a greater insight into the roots of Ndebele’s emotional sensitivity.

⁸ *Turkish Tales and Thoughts of South African Literature and Redefining Relevance*

⁹ Heidi Carter is the co-founder of the center for conscious leadership. She has developed a robust model of conscious leadership, http://www.ccls.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24&Itemid=49

And a careful reading of Ndebele also reveals that the decisions he makes and the choices he invites us to make are always seeking more refined and explicit ethical imperatives.

His courage as a conscious leader can be seen through the exercise of a particular skill: the need to name and deal with paradox. This played out in a particular occasion when Ndebele had to navigate a great deal of institutional turbulence as vice chancellor at the University of the North.

Naming paradox as part of conscious leadership

The year was 1994 and Professor Ndebele had been vice chancellor for a year. It was the year that South Africa had its historic election. “I pondered my campus at that moment when our country began to renew itself. How would we renew ourselves: teachers, students, and workers in what was a traumatized campus? The psychology of an institution is not that different from that of an individual. Institutional behaviour carried from the past conditions the behaviour of new members of that institution, as they enter their new “family”. Everyone then becomes socialized into a pattern of expectations which become definitive of the “character” of the institution or ‘family’. Some of the expressions which characterized the institutional environment at the University of the North were: ‘apartheid institution’, ‘tribal university’, ‘Bantustan university’. These expressions carried and conveyed a negative connotation. Black students who faced limited higher education options and found they had to go to a place characterized in this manner carried ambiguities that could have a debilitating effect on their self-concept. There was only one way in which such students could respond to a situation which sought to contain them within the implied prescriptions of these expressions: they had to resist and defy. Students could only define an identity in opposition to the one the state sought to impose on them simply by admitting them to such an institution. Universities such as this were bound to produce and grow a politics of resistance. In time, the University of the North arguably was to become the only university in the world with an army of occupation for a prolonged period of time.”

Unafraid to consciously articulate leadership dilemmas in the context of those in the wider society Ndebele continues. “Such an institutional history has its triumphs and its pathologies. The pathologies showed up more clearly once South Africa became a free democracy. The momentum of resistance behaviour could become self-consuming. You might continue to resist against a university that had in fact become yours, and which required you to begin to take care of it and turn it into a haven of learning in a new democracy. This is not easy to recognize and learn. Even more, resistance conduct in a suddenly free society can transform into a sense of entitlement, where you demand to be given whatever you thought had been denied. If you were a student leader you could work up debilitating strike action if you felt you might not make it at the next examination, and you are able to advance good struggle reasons for the strike action. The freedom to create can coexist uncomfortably with the freedom to destroy, built on the momentum of resistance and, at the point of a now free society, unconscious of itself as a destructive impulse”.

Ndebele realized that certain aspects of the students’ resistance campaign was no longer transformative, but had become destructive and self-consuming. It was clear that many students were unaware of the negative impact of their sustained campaign. “Initially, the situation required that I recognize the need to allow students maximum self-expression and give legitimacy and dignity to

their voice. I recall endless meetings on campus with various staff and student formations, and some futile Council meetings that went on for the entire night, constantly hoping that dialogue will have a momentum of its own to that leads to critical self-awareness, institutional healing and deep transformation.”

Ndebele became increasingly aware of and distressed by the tragic situation before him: “I witnessed wonderful people doing things without being aware that their objectives had outlived their purpose. The task was to recognize it and deal with it. “ One defining moment was when he decided to call a meeting in the University hall. In order to help shift perspectives of his audience, he began by reading out Don Marquis poem about a mosquito.

“ a man thinks
He amounts to a lot
But to a mosquito
A man is
Merely
Something to eat.”¹⁰

He documented the many acts of corruption and the impact of the mayhem on the university including the destructiveness of the prolonged protest action. “The more we engage in debilitating protest action, the more we feel good that we are doing good. In effect we are demonstrating ourselves out of existence. We do not realize that the context of activist action has fundamentally changed. If we continue this way, we can only cave in and self-destruct.”¹¹

Reflecting on the challenge of those years, Ndebele said: “my intention was to create moments of recognition and by naming a paradox to enable reflection.¹² It took a lot out of me to write the speech and say everything I had to say with all the people there in the hall. It was one of those moments you decide to take a plunge and then you plunge in and you don’t know what is going to happen. You ask yourself, ‘will they rise up or will they reflect?’ I think they largely did the latter”.

Ndebele identifies an important quality of conscious leadership: naming and navigating paradox.

“I recognize paradox in many situations. Looking back – this is what is always happening in leadership. In a leadership context, it is those moments when I have **named the paradox** publicly that the people see it for what it is. Being intelligent people, they recognize that over and above the administrative situation is a human situation of perceiving paradox and conflict and then making a decision. In the situation I have just recalled at the University of the North, one paradox plays out in the following way: on going resistance behaviour will not increase the capacity of the institution to produce the institutional quality deemed achievable through such actions. But activist action is itself a necessary human act. But does it always have to be agitative? So, instead of reaching intended heights, you may end up being just something to eat by the mosquito. On the other hand, reflective

¹⁰ The University of the North in the New Era, page 53

¹¹ The University of the North in the New Era, page 53- 58

¹² Fine Line from the Box, Page 53

action, erroneously deemed passive, can leverage more change and even offer the prospect of such change being sustainable over time.

“Naming the paradox instead of ignoring it also builds confidence because it enables you to confront the sense of vulnerability inherent in paradox. Vulnerability occurs when you sense that you have to give up some tested behaviour which once worked. Giving up a comfort zone of this nature makes you feel exposed. In a sense, paradox publicly declared is both disarming on the one side, and affirming on the other as both the **speaker and listener realize that they are both faced by the common challenge of changing perceptions, understandings and making new decisions.** I think that recognizing and articulating paradoxes would help many leaders. Navigating paradox then becomes a leadership skill. By naming the contradictions and paradoxes, you solve the problem publicly when the contradictions are out there and you are aware of the multiple views of the audience. In a university setting, some are from different cultures, faculties, research institutes, and each one has its own culture. They come together through the paradox that you have named and then it can resonate back to their different places...so what you have done is to place it out there so each can work with it in their own individual way and in a sense, it helps provide a process of co-creation.”

The story of the University of the North provides a deeper understanding of how Njabulo Ndebele exercises his conscious leadership - by holding up a moral mirror. The power of his conscious leadership is embodied in a combination of skills -naming the paradox within the context of ethical complexity and through mirroring back what he sees, he gives his audiences food for thought and ethical clarity. This example illustrates how, in this instance, the leadership act of naming of a paradox called forth an understanding for the need for a communal transcendence of that paradox.

The speech worked and in that leadership moment, Ndebele enabled the University to shift somewhat out of an extremely difficult and continuing volatility.

Inclusion, consultation and trust in human beings

The inclusive, consultative style Ndebele brings to his leadership and writing, is related to the lived experience and the application of rigour. Consulting is about making sure that before taking the next step, “everyone who needs to be involved has an understanding that is shared.” He also holds the belief that people do better, when they are not told what to do, because conscious people are more likely to monitor themselves. “So if you have a deadline, you would monitor yourself in relation to the behaviour of others in pursuit of the same objective. Those others are either in your unit, below it, above it, or side by side with it. So there are many layers to an institutional objective. You know that everyone is working towards that deadline in their own way. So performance at the local, unit level is affected by the awareness of the overall institutional purpose as it is pursued at various levels. There is more energy, more resourcefulness, more work related purpose in an institution that works this way than in one that is closely directed.

“The kind of human efficient organization I am describing is already mirrored in the kind of society envisaged by the South African constitution. It takes a lot of work to bring it about. There can be no stronger society than that of resourceful, thoughtful citizens”.