

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



Prof Njabulo Ndebele, Hallmarks of the Man (Part 3)

By

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This final section continues to explore the many hallmarks of Professor Njabulo Ndebele as a role model for conscious leadership. In traversing his two main roles as vice chancellor at UCT and his continuing role as a respected public intellectual, it is clear that he combines hope and humanism alongside sober concerns about emerging trends in our social and political context. In moving between these two roles, one notices his ability to hold paradox and complexity, idealism and realism. We begin with his belief in the value of consultation and

fundamental trust in the human beings and learn something about his reflective process as a leader.

Inclusion, consultation and trust in human beings

The inclusive, consultative style Njabulo Ndebele brings to his leadership and writing is related to his rich inner reflective process and the application of rigour. Consulting with others is an essential process for him, because it is “about making sure that before taking the next step, everyone who needs to be involved has an understanding that is shared.” Ndebele 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”.

Leadership involves vulnerability and genuine engagement with self and other

Two themes regularly arise in Ndebele's language. His writings always encourage readers to engage with the broader society, with issues, with themselves, with the complexity inherent in life lived with dynamism and passion in ever changing varied contexts. Because his engagement is emotional, passionate, and authentic he purposefully elicits connection with his audience, whether he is a leader of an institution or a public intellectual. His own awareness and connection to the emotional dimensions of our shared humanity produces impactful results. In his writing and leadership he applies the effective use of engagement as well as the power of rational analysis. Njabulo Ndebele is not afraid to apply powerful metaphors or to use emotional words – such as “anguish” or “agony” whether it is to gain access to his readers or communicate a strong and timely message to colleagues in the work place. He is not afraid to embrace the discomfort, the vulnerability and humaneness that inevitably comes with the territory of leadership. In fact, his acknowledgement of personal vulnerability, his use of powerful language and metaphor to name a problem and to create genuine engagement is a core leadership skill. An example of this skill can be seen in his own story which begins around the end of the first 100 days as Vice Chancellor at UCT.

Seeking to create genuine engagement with members of the University Council, “I went about it somewhat along the following lines: ‘as I am about to present my thoughts to you, let me confess my feelings about my early days at UCT. I have felt like I am riding on a train that is already moving, and it keeps moving, sometimes very fast. It stops at some stations and whittles past others. But I am not inside the train. I am riding on top of it (somewhat like a staff rider). I am somewhere in the middle of the train and I am trying to get to the engine room so I can gain some control. And it is hard getting there because the train is going fast and the winds are buffeting and there is a risk of falling back or being thrown off the train and getting injured, and not being able to get back on at all. I have made some steady progress. At this point, I am close to getting into the engine room, but not quite in there yet.’

Ndebele explains: “I wanted to own up to what I think the vast majority of CEOs experience at the beginning of a new job. The sense of not being in control is palpable. Everybody knows the institution or business, better than you. So you think. Despite that, they are looking to you. What can you give them: you who knows so little? So you think. What's more, the institution is running on its own “without my contributions” to recall Russian poet Yevtushenko's line.¹ It is running on a momentum of its own. There are two most likely reactions. One is to substitute performed confidence for the deeply felt sense of vulnerability. This is likely to set up barriers to the new CEO's ability to enter the new environment with his entire sensibility. The other way is to remove the dissonance between the vulnerability you actually feel and the presumed difficulty it will cause you in your adjustment to your new place of work, by actually embracing that vulnerability. This embrace signals your acknowledgement of your own state of mind, emotion, and sensibility.”

For Ndebele, the choice to embrace vulnerability turned out to be redemptive. He believes that “embracing this sense of inadequacy and vulnerability soon becomes the source of the most powerful

¹ Yevgeny Yevushenko, “Zima Junction” in Selected Poems. Translated by Robin Milner-Gulland and Peter Levi. UK. Penguin Books, 1962. P. 24.

motivation and creativity. They become the springs of the vision you personally develop not the ones you read about in management books.”

Self-reflection has always been a crucial *modus operandi* for Njabulo Ndebele. He describes vividly and openly the reflective process which led to profound internal transformation during the third month of his tenure at UCT. “It happened in response to very simple yet deeply felt questions I asked myself: where have you been? What do you really feel and think about your new institution? What are the things that work here? What are those that do not work? What do you bring to all this? What is the broader world within which the institution functions? How has it interacted with the different strands of that world? This was the kind of creative thinking that came out of space of deep discomfort. It was a personal brainstorming experience that resulted in a presentation first to my executive team, then to Council, and then to Senate.” And so, we witness in his story of the train driver and the council how Ndebele took his personal reflections through to the collective and then into the institution.

Personal authenticity becomes institutional through relationships and shared vision

For Njabulo Ndebele, the personal is richly alive and “becomes deeply institutional.” He is deeply suspicious of what he calls the “self-declared collective”. “I did not think so then, but now I look back and feel I can make some bold remarks about the power of leadership that emerges from personal sources. I can say no matter how much Madiba can glorify “the collective”, the collective is meaningless without the personal authenticities that make it up. The collective that does not acknowledge the dense authenticity of individuals that make it up, succeeds only in allowing some of those individuals to escape personal responsibility by handing over that responsibility to the group. In such a situation, the overall quality of the collective may become the sum total of individuals who have escaped from themselves and have given nothing of themselves to that collective. Such a collective tends to become too self-conscious of itself as a collective. The lack of relative independence of individual group members accentuates group control over them, and accords virtue to that control.”

For Njabulo Ndebele, the collective of **conscious** individuals is different. “If that collective chooses a leader from among them, they should be open to the inner resources of that leader in influencing the course of events. The leader is accorded more leeway than everyone else to give direction. It is simply more leeway and not the diktat of authoritarian decree. There is no power in the world that can measure up to the “collective” of authentic individuals giving the leadership that comes from within, and having the leeway to express it through the leader they have chosen, and who in turn, has been given more leadership leeway to exercise judgment, responsibility, and accountability.”

Linking this insight back to the story of his experience with the UCT Council, Ndebele continues his story:

“So I was not in the engine room. Not yet. But now that I had articulated my sense of UCT’s next future, I felt pretty close. I also had a sense of what I would find once in the engine room. I would have the leeway to drive the train and stop at those destinations where I thought we needed to stop and whittle past where we did not need or want to stop. But once I got into the engine room I would have to work with the dials and controls on the dashboard and with the entire staff of the train. I

would have leadership leeway, not more than that. It is amazing how much can be achieved with leadership leeway. Madiba had tons of it: both what he captured with the force of his authority, and what was given to him. This leadership leeway is the source of the false impression of ‘benevolent dictatorship’. What it really is, is shared vision, authenticity and genuineness”.

What is the power of the story and what does it say about Ndebele’s leadership?

“I’d like to think that my introductory story created an important emotional link between me and the council as a result of my inviting them into my personal space. I hope they could recognize that story in the trajectories of their respective lives. This gets you as close as you can to the sharing of intimacies in the impersonal setting of institutions.”

As Vice Chancellor at UCT (from 2000 – 2008), Njabulo Ndebele exemplifies the power of personal, the humility in being vulnerable and the courage to make the personal institutional. He also listens to the call of leadership and creates the context for weaving together important personal strands in the collective tapestry of an institution. In naming the personal vulnerability and challenges he faced by using the metaphor of his desire to get into the engine room of real leadership, he deepened the conversation, establishing the opportunity for genuine rapport. The authentic bridges he created with the council through genuine dialogue, paved the way for a shared vision within UCT’s council. This is the kind of leadership strength that was to become a hallmark of his tenure as vice chancellor.

Distributed Responsibility, as opposed to excessive monitoring

Ndebele was described by a colleague as a benevolent dictator at UCT - someone who managed to get things done without a long stick. “Benevolent dictators can be dangerous people,” laughs Ndebele. “They can lull people into a false sense of confidence. I could never aspire to be such a leader. If things got “done without a long stick” it may have been because a purpose was identified, defined, and pursued through extensively inclusive means across the institution. Layers of responsibility distributed across the institution then drove institutional purpose according to transparent rules, regulations, and agreed practices.”

Because of his belief in shared and distributed responsibility, he is not a fan of excessive monitoring and evaluation processes designed to facilitate accountability. “Everything must be done to avoid a monitoring and evaluation system that ossifies into a self-sustaining bureaucracy, which absorbs more information than it gives feedback. If that happens, the bureaucracy will passively subjugate the entire organization to serve it through a combination of mandatory information supply and unfulfilled expectations arising out of limited feedback.

To avoid such a scenario, Njabulo Ndebele believes that creating an environment which supports a strong personal sense of responsibility is crucial. In this way, employees feel a sense of ownership towards the work to be done. This emerges from the inclusive circumstances that originally led to the requirement that the work be done. The monitoring and evaluation process then becomes more a human rather than a mechanical instrument.

“ A human instrument of this nature activates and combines the sense of professionalism, the sense of duty, the ethics of self-respect, the imperatives of conscience, all of which drive the desire for the personal fulfillment that comes from work well done. What you seek to achieve in such a system is a shared sense of genuineness.”

Taking the personal to the societal

Njabulo Ndebele, the leader of university institutions, cannot be separated from the man in his leadership as a public intellectual. Reflecting on the current South African context, he believes that the government needs to avoid creating a bureaucratic monster that potentially can grind the government machinery to a halt, “because the monster demands and swallows tons of information while giving back minimal feedback. While the monster keeps demanding more and more planning on the one hand, and monitoring and evaluation, on the other, these demands may interact with each other in such a way that they establish a loop that then becomes the reason for its own existence. The resulting system then lives for itself. The inertia that can be created through the transference of initiative by all government units to a single point of reference can have a debilitating effect on the entire system of government. It is something to think about very carefully.”

Part of the appeal in Njabulo Ndebele’s writing and his leadership is the linking of consciousness with accountability, emotional sensitivity with complexity and inquiry with rigour. In his writing and in his leadership, we witness the lived inner experience of “agonizing, changing, revising and testing”. One witnesses the powerful coalescence of intellectual clarity with emotional depth. This illustrates his own ability to apply both curiosity, humanity and thoroughness in decision making. In being able to see issues so clearly, he delivers sound judgment, always thoroughly thought out.²

A proud yet sober South African

Whether leading an academic institution, or taking a stand as a critical social commentator, Ndebele is proudly South African. He writes as an act of hope because he cares about giving credit where credit is due. However, he also will hold up a moral mirror inviting South Africans to heighten our collective ethical bar. Always taking a deeper view, he believes, that what makes South Africa world-class isn’t “swish stadiums or a good football team. South Africa isn’t Germany.” What makes South Africa world-class, Ndebele says, ‘is that it talked its way out of civil war into freedom and has kept talking ever since. There’s a constant national discussion in which everyone disagrees with everyone else, but in which everyone is respectfully heard’.³ He retains the hope that this will continue most of the time. “We have to hold on to this. It is the one foundation on which we can make a country different from all others in the world.”

Unafraid to be courageous and controversial, Njabulo Ndebele has an interesting take on the 2010 soccer world cup. Although he treasured his experiences of the Fan Walk in Cape Town, the opening game in Johannesburg and loved both matches he saw in Cape Town, he is clear that it was not the world cup festival that “defined us as capable, as has been claimed. It all worked because we all agreed to construct and live for a moment in the bubble of a well-managed and well-resourced spectacle.” He goes on to say, “the reality of perfection was within the bubble. But viewed from outside of itself, it was bubble of unreality. The reality of life within the bubble could not be transferred into real life as many a politician had hoped.” Always a leader who stands for deeper truths, for Ndebele, reflects life within the bubble is soon exposed for what it is: an unforgettable but

² Heidi Carter at the Center for Conscious Leadership speaks about whole person leadership. All the points above are interconnected and make up the wholeness which comprises the human being that Ndebele is.

³ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/27b0ba2e-8a33-11df-bd30-00144feab49a.html>

transitory aesthetic moment, in our case of global proportions. We should have enjoyed it as such, and not claimed more out of it.”

“The reality of ordinary life in South Africa hit us as soon as the spectacle had ended. We could not reproduce life in the bubble in the real world of our townships, towns: not the day after. The spectacle of efficiency was the very nature a sporting experience driven by FIFA with South Africa as its most willing implementing agent. Any lessons to be drawn from it were the lessons of a model of efficiency and fun in the process. Beyond that is the sobering reality that to achieve that level of efficiency in the functioning of the entire South African society requires a commitment to decades of focused political will.”

In part 1 and 2, mention was made about several of Njabulo Ndebele’s strengths as a leader and public commentator. Referring to his own experiences in a new vice chancellor role at UCT, he believes it is essential to acknowledge that “we have a long way to go, and to own the fear and sense of vulnerability that we may not make it.” He reminds us that it is our humanness, our vulnerability and humility, that “promises to be the source of the most genuine politics of the future”.

The Challenge of being South African and the call of leadership

Njabulo Ndebele gives heartfelt tribute to our resilience as South Africans as the same that he names some of the sobering and significant challenges for the future. “We are a durable people, forged out of the fire of suffering. Within sixteen years of freedom we have transformed a house of oppression into a home of freedom. But we are also a complex people. Our durability conditions us for the long term. It is another foundation for a new politics.” Yet, he is deeply concerned about our country. As a public intellectual he continues to demonstrate some of the leadership qualities mentioned in this series of articles: seeing the ever changing dynamism and complexity of the whole; painting a vivid picture of our national landscape; continuing to hold up a moral mirror by naming paradoxes and calling forth ethical integrity. In December 2010, the Mail and Guardian published one of Ndebele’s most powerful and courageous articles, Toxic Politics: Diary of a Bad Year ⁴

He writes: “In the minds of many, the ANC, once at the vanguard of one of the greatest humanistic revolutions in history, may arguably have become the richest political party in the world. In a period of fierce capital accumulation, this development may not be that surprising but it does bring about a scenario in which a party in government is in competition with its own citizens for commercial gain. In that position it has the capability to corrupt public systems for its benefit. The party of a government in power, which competes with its own citizens for commercial gain, can be tempted to seek a monopoly over political and economic power by any means and for as long as possible. It can transform (or deteriorate) into a commercial syndicate carrying out some of its business clandestinely in the shadow of its political legitimacy”. At that time he voiced concern about four defining features of governance in a country where “identities of nation and dominant party have coalesced”:

- secrecy and selective messaging through media control;
- paternal surveillance through state security agencies, with the army partly transformed into a school for patriotism (and the chilling prospect that it can be deployed against the “unpatriotic”);

⁴ <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-12-23-toxic-politics-diary-of-a-bad-year>

- populist self-assertion where quantity (a million-member campaign, accumulation of ministries) is valorised above the selective, qualitative rigours of a professional yet caring state; and
- enormous wealth and privilege for those at or close to the centre of power.”

And then he always includes all of us in a community of fellow conscious citizens.

“If we put the above scenario in the context of the seismic shifts currently under way in the global economic order, we can ask whether as a country we are responding to them with the requisite robustness and creativity of a nation that has dedicated itself to a constitutional future. We can ask whether in the international arena we have identified our niche in the light of our solemn commitments at home. We can ask whether we are confident enough in the success of our national project at home as a foundation against which to assert our solemn homegrown principles even against the most powerful countries in the world.”

In his own words about the meaning of leadership, given at the Moshoeshoe Inaugural lecture at the University of the Free State in 2006, he perhaps describes the experience and meaning of his own leadership. “Leadership is what all of us do when we express sincerely, our deepest feelings and thoughts; when we do our work, whatever it is, with passion and integrity; when we recall that all that mattered when you were doing your work, was not the promise of some reward afterward, but the overwhelming sense of appropriateness that it had to be done..”⁵

And in many ways, Njabulo Ndebele, does exactly that, not only describing deeply, passionately the meaning of leadership but living leadership consciously, sincerely, authentically and powerfully.