

Leadership Platform

By: Adriaan Groenewald

Let's be honest for a moment. As far as developing leaders is concerned, general society is failing. Add to that, training programmes mostly fail to equip leaders with the skills to really change attitude and behaviour, both of self as well as followers.

A senior leader once suggested that society should engage every person that officially starts leading others for the first time with the following pivotal philosophical leadership decision: decide now if you are going to serve from this day forward, or are you going to be served? Either decision takes a future leader on two totally opposite leadership journeys.

Unfortunately, as a society we are just not catching future leaders early enough – that is - we are not bending trees while they are young. The first school of leadership is the family. Sadly, in most instances families fail at this duty. The next leadership school is school itself. The general consensus is that our educational institutions are failing dismally. The next stop is university or college, or in some instances 'life experience' as youngsters enter the job market. In today's economic conditions, this does not bode well.

For those who are fortunate enough to attend tertiary institutions, the primary focus of training is technical or functional. Ironically, when a qualified youngster graduates and joins an organisation and she is passionate about what she does and becomes competent at her technical skill, the remainder of her career is spent moving away from that technical qualification. She starts leading within that field. Coming through the leadership development system I have just described, how on earth can she lead effectively? If she is fortunate her organisation sends her on a leadership course for a couple of days - thinking, or rather hoping - that she will somehow acquire the skills required to lead human beings that are different, unique and complex, or that she will change bad leadership habits and beliefs developed over years (the key word here is 'years').

Sadly, just as one cannot develop engineering, legal or accounting habits, beliefs and skills within a few days, so one cannot do it with leadership. There is no short cut!

While technical skills are critical for our nation to move competitively into the future, I put it to society that developing better leaders is crucial as we face a very uncertain and constantly changing future. If we don't somehow rectify this leadership development cycle our leadership vacuum will soon reach critical proportions.

What is the solution? Firstly, leadership development 'journeys' must become part of the curriculum in schools and tertiary institutions. I use the word 'journey' because leadership courses in isolation are – most of the time - a horrible waste of investment. Consistent and regular conditioning is the only way. And such programmes do exist.

Leadership development journeys must become part of a person's life as soon as they start leading another human being. More development spend should shift towards junior leaders, rather than spending millions on attempting to bend 'old trees' at senior levels by sending them on very expensive programmes, often to sooth their egos and retain rather than change them. Spending on senior leaders should be more selective and geared towards a consistent, regular journey over longer periods so as to condition or strengthen new thinking. I fear that we simply don't spend enough time developing junior leaders because there are too many of them and it costs too much.

Leadership development experts have to come up with innovative, cost effective journeys (as opposed to programmes) that positively affect the lives of young, junior or newly appointed leaders.

Budget controllers for leadership development programmes should approve only those journeys that are cost-effective and give both junior and senior leaders monthly, weekly and (where possible), daily exposure to leadership principles, practices and beliefs inside their workplace. Anything else will fail to change behaviour and will therefore be a wasted investment. The luxury of spending money on training leaders while blindly hoping they will improve no longer exist. So let's get it right first time! ■



Adriaan Groenewald is a Leadership Advisor and Strategist. He is also the lead contributor to a bi-weekly leadership page in the national Business Report and writes a weekly leadership column in the Star Workplace. For advice on implementing effective leadership journeys, email Adriaan@leadershipplatform.com