

EUSEBIO AFRICANO DOS REIS VARELA  
Leadership Concepts, Theories And Issues

## **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NELSON MANDELA'S LEADERSHIP STYLE**

### **1. Introduction**

Leadership is a concept that has evolved over time. Individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa have emerged as defenders of the social issues of their time. This essay looks at one of the most prominent leaders of our time Nelson Mandela, from 1963 to 1999. First it will critically analyse Mandela's Leadership style in the perspective of two leadership theories: Leadership as a Career, including its four stages of leadership: Formation, Accession, Incumbency and Divestiture. Then it will analyse it in terms of Transformational Leadership Theories, which was Mandela's Leadership style during his governance. This will cover aspects of Idealised Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation and Individualised Consideration. Ultimately, this review will show that Mandela's chosen leadership style reveals both his successes and failures as a leader.

### **2. Nelson Mandela and his Social Context**

When the National Party achieved power in South Africa in 1948, the government usually composed by "white people" created a policy of racial segregation under a legislated system denominated by apartheid. According to this regime the black South Africans were forced to live in separate areas from whites and to use separate public facilities. Despite consistent struggles to defeat the apartheid regime, its laws persisted in effect for the most part of 50 years.

It is within this environment that Nelson Mandela was born and raised. Mandela is a South African lawyer, prominent activist. He was also the leader of African National Congress (ANC) party and the first black President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999.

Mandela is famous for his dedication and struggle against Apartheid regime in South Africa. In 1993, he was rewarded the Peace Nobel Prize.

### **3. Historical Background about Leadership Theories**

Leadership is defined as the capacity that one has to guide others to achieve a desired goal, (Marshal, 2011). Therefore, throughout the years the attempt to an effective leadership performance has originated different theories. According to Horner (1997) the theories of leadership were born in the first few decades of the 20th century. Horner (1997) explains that originally leadership was described in terms of traits, qualities and beliefs held by individuals. Consequently, this theory held that leaders possess positive qualities and personality traits, which distinguish them from their followers. Horner (1997) clarifies that leaders were viewed as being born not made and were superior to employees.

### **4. Theory of Leadership as career**

Gronn (1999) suggests that leadership as career is a means that helps individuals understand the conditions in which the leader led as well as the factors that contributed to the leaders' birth. Gronn (1999) defines these factors as the historical background, the cultural aspects and the social issues that surrounded the formation of the leader. The historical aspect has to do with the time in which the leader lived. Therefore, Gronn (1999) states that every person is a product of their own time. In terms of culture, the individual tends to act according to the ideology, norms and values asserted within his community. The social aspects refer to the pressure of media and groups. All these together are substantial elements to shape the individuals and motivate the birth of leaders.

Additionally, Gronn (1999) suggests that leadership as a career should be analysed in four complementary stages. These stages are Formation, Accession, Incumbency and Divestiture. The analyses of these stages are essential to understand the leaders' trajectory. This framework will be used to analyse Nelson Mandela's leadership journey.

#### **4.1. Formation**

This stage consists of input that an individual receives at an early age. These inputs can come from family, school, church, peers and social media (Gronn, 1999). These inputs are responsible to raise the person's awareness of his expected roles and responsibilities.

When analysing Mandela's formation, three important factors can be identified as key turning points for his transformation into a leader. First, according to Mandela's (1994, 1995), Mandela was inspired by both his own father and by the king Jongintaba. His father was a community leader and the counsellor of the king. After his father's death, he was raised by king Jongintaba, (Mandela, 1994, 1995). During this time, he observed how the king carried his kingdom. He was captivated by the way the king listened to all the counsellors and then made a decision in the end. Therefore, during Mandela's leadership, he always tried to lead from behind, (Mandela, 1994,1995); (Stengel, 2012).

Furthermore, some important individuals such as Abraham Lincoln had contributed to his formation. Stengel (2012) explains that Mandela stated in one of the interviews with him that he had learnt a lot from Lincoln through his textbooks. He considered Lincoln's leadership style as the best. Lincoln defended dialogue and peace. This influenced Mandela to believe that persuasion is better than violence. Therefore, it is noticeable as part of his leadership he always sought negotiation and dialogue with his opponents.

According to Stengel (2012) the schooling he received had also greatly impacted his life since the values praised by the British schooling system were different from the tribe's where he came from. Stengel (2012) explains that the contrast of values immensely affected his behaviour and perception of the world. For example, because of the contrasted values, Stengel (2012) views Mandela as a man of many contradictions. Stengel (2012) explains that although Mandela was indifferent to material possessions, he is capable to send his bodyguard for an hour drive just to get his favourite pen. Stengel, (2012) highlights that Mandela's persona is a combination of the simplicity of African Royalty and the British Aristocracy.

Perhaps the greatest factor that shaped Mandela's character and perception, as a leader was the time spent in the prison. According to Stengel (2012), Mandela's friends describe him as an emotional, passionate and sensitive person before he went to prison. However, after the incarceration, Mandela revealed to be as more mature and disciplined person. Stengel (2012) explains that the hardship of prison conditions allowed Mandela to learn about life from a different perspective. These new perspectives have strengthened and sharpened him to become the person and the leader he is today.

#### **4.2. Accession**

According to Gronn (1999) accession is a test phase. Aspiring leaders are usually disposed to test their capacity of leading. They are aware of the opportunities and they strive to prove that they have the necessary tools for the leadership activities. Mandela's first leadership ability probation happened at Fort Hare University when he was elected president of students' council, (Mandela, 1994,1995).

### **4.3. Incumbency**

At this period the leader is publicly recognised. They usually have respect from authorities, because they have normally had various achievements, (Gronn, 1999). Gronn (1999) states that at this level of leadership, leaders seek to bold more their personalities. According to the wide literature in the field, Mandela has significant achievements along his leadership career. For example his achievements range from the presidency of students council at Fort Hare University to the Presidency of South African Republic, and head of ANC Party.

### **4.4. Divestiture**

Gronn (1999), states that this phase is the end of the leadership life cycle. This end can be triggered by different reasons. For example, age, lack of performance, illness, and/or overthrow. However, after this period leaders can reinvent a new trajectory. Mandela had formally divested in 1997, as the president of ANC, and in 1999 he also divested from the Presidency of South Africa, claiming the age factor, (Boddy-Evans, 2013).

## **5. Transformational Leadership Theory**

According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership occurs when individuals interact with each other in a form that both the leader and the follower can achieve high motivation and morality. This idea is also supported by (Anne M. Barker, 2006).

Similarly, Marshal (2011) reinforces that transformational leadership is a “style of leadership in which the leader identifies the needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executes the change with commitment”, (p.11).

Additionally, Bass (1990) argues that within the transformational leadership there are four vital elements that constitute this leadership theory: Idealised Influence,

Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Simulation and Individualised Consideration. Bass (1990) explains that Idealised Influence is the ability that leaders have to inspire trust, respect and commitment to a cause. Concerning the Inspirational Motivation, the leaders create and share a vision towards the future and highly encourage the followers to achieve it. Relating to the Intellectual Simulation, the leaders are highly educated and well informed. They always find new creative solution to the problems. Finally, the Individualised Consideration is when the leader recognises and values the contributions of the followers. These explanations are also supported by (Marshall, 2011).

### **6. Analysing Mandela's Leadership Style**

Analysing Mandela's leadership performance under the scope of these elements of transformational leadership discussed above, his leadership ability fulfils these requirements. For example, concerning the Inspirational Motivation, Stengel (2012) refers that Mandela was publicly recognised as a visionary and charismatic leader. Another example refers to 1943 when he and his friends organised a group to convince the President of ANC that something must be done in order to prevent the ANC from being marginalised, (Mandela, 1994,1995). This vision was shared within the ANC and it became the group's vision in which everyone was committed to its achievement. As a result, they managed to form a Provisional Committee League and recruited new members to ANC, (Stengel, 2012). Additionally, Sinclair (1995) notes that Mandela had a charisma, an ability to motivate others to be the hero and to guide the country.

Mandela particularly possessed the ability to appeal to others through his individualised consideration, (Sampson, 1999). For example, he would remember people's names and infuse warmth and energy, relating to people closely. This supports Sinclair's third leadership characteristic of Interpersonal Skills where the individual possesses human

resource management capability, listening skills, clear and open communication and the ability to lead people (1995, p. 30). Furthermore, according to a publication on the website [www.allfrica.com](http://www.allfrica.com) (2013), Mandela's leadership transformed common people into the extraordinary people. According to this site, great leadership consists of the capacity to inspire others to greatness.

Concerning, intellectual simulation, Sampson (1999), states that Mandela particularly possessed the ability to be creative and innovative. He demonstrated an above-average memory, and the ability to learn and remember things quickly. He always saw the issues from positive and negative sides and strategically approached them.

However, despite these great characteristics that Mandela presented as a leader, the principle of shared vision as defended by the Burns (1978) was sometimes severely violated. As an example, Stengel (2012) explains that Mandela had decided and initiated the negotiation process between ANC and the Government secretly. This attitude first violated the ANC policy concerning negotiations. Second, even the President of ANC was not aware of this negotiation. Stengel (2012) considers that this attitude could have deepened the country into even worst chaos, such as a civil war, since some members of ANC were not comfortable with his attitude.

Curiously, the harsh social and political context of that period, and the growth of ANC were putting high pressure on the government. Mandela as a great visionary understood that the government would not reject a negotiation proposal at that moment, (Mandela, 1994,1995). In fact they did not. So, this shows that he had substantial arguments to convince his fellow prisoners and the President of ANC that it was the right time to take actions. However, he started the negotiation alone. Why?

Mandela was not thinking as a transformational leader when he said that his colleagues would condemn and fail the idea of negotiating with the government: “I knew that my colleagues upstairs would condemn my proposal, and that would kill my initiative even before it was born”, Mandela as quoted in (Read, 2010). First, Transformational Leaders don't use possessive words such as “I” but “we”. Second, he relates to that initiative as “my initiative”. Under Transformational Leadership principles, this sort of language is avoided at all cost. Instead, Leaders share the vision, encourage the group to get involved and assume the vision as a common goal. However, when reading Mandela's autobiography or pieces of interviews, there is a sensation that Mandela boasts himself for this act as his exclusively, in which without it no such achievement would have been conquered. In Stengel (2012) Mandela tries to justify this attitude, saying that if the negotiation had gone wrong, the group (ANC) would know exactly who to blame. Based on this argument, it can be concluded that if the negotiation was successful, the group would also know clearly who to praise. However, in the light of transformational Leadership Theory, the leaders and the followers share the responsibilities. The successes and the failures belong to the group, not to a particular member.

Additionally, Stunner (2007) explains that although Mandela adhered to the idea of collective leadership, he normally believed that leaders must decide and do things without consultation. He argues that Mandela's personality often clashed with ANC's political trend. This had often led to some internal conflicts within the party. Based on these facts, the following questions may arise: Why did he act alone to begin the negotiation? Did he want to be the only protagonist in the process of negotiation? Did he want to take all the credit as the only promoter in the change of South Africa's



destiny?

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, this essay has chosen one of the most remarkable leaders of the current time, Nelson Mandela and critically analysed his leadership style in the perspective of Transformational Leadership Theory from the period of 1963 to 1999. This essay has analysed the factors that contributed to his birth as a leader as well as his governance. This review has shown that Nelson Mandela was a great Transformational Leader, that he fulfilled most of the requirements of Transformational Leader Theory, and that he had some failures when regarding decision-making.

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