

Less really can be more if you have soft power

Finding a path to enlightened leadership can be a transforming thing and bring purpose to life

WE ALL experience deep yearnings for purpose. We want to mean something. We want to touch the inner reaches of ourselves and live full lives, but there are tall gates blocking the way to our inner landscapes and potentials. Learning to scale these gates is the life work of all true leaders.

It is a hard and long path that involves changing old ways of thinking, shrugging off pointless influence and standing upright in virtuous fortitude.

For example, a man had a wonderful childhood knowing no financial constraints. At a young age he filled a position on the board of a prestigious international company, where he fought for shareholder interests. All was well, it seemed, but the man longed for holidays and lacked joy and fulfilment in his work – coming to believe that work was a form of necessary suffering. The man had a job, not a purpose. But he changed drastically one day when, inspired by his mother who advised him to live life passionately, he asked himself a few questions: What am I doing on the planet? Is there something or someone larger than me? What lifestyle do I want? What are my values? How can I lead more fully, and with purpose?

How can I translate my intent into real action?

This introspection and meditation forced the man to make the courageous choice to move away from his imagined safety from pain toward a revealing openness to life and wisdom.

The opportunity to question our purpose is presented to us at various stages in our life. When we start out at a young age, entering the workforce where raw potential is easily defined and harnessed, success is characterised by the need to impress others or to achieve acknowledged independence or to mask anger with compromise and to never say “no” and questioning is usually far from most people’s minds. But this stage is usually followed by a period of doubt and questioning. The trends suggest that most people experience a crisis between the ages of 30 and 40, when opportunities for dramatic change present themselves, along with doubts and fears.

A person’s reaction to this determines them thereafter, not necessarily their fortune or fame, but their selves. Anger and power could dominate or there could be a shift to an enriched life experience.

I am the man in the story mentioned above. I went through this crisis and it led me to resign my job to focus on leadership and what



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A RESPONSIBLE LEADER WANTS TO BE THE BEST FOR THE WORLD, NOT IN IT

it means to be truly efficient and effective with equal concern about what it means to be responsible.

My life opened up as I started to embrace it fully, the entire experience of it – I started to understand true leadership; leadership through moral courage and an unwavering sense of responsibility.

But the process does not end here. The gates are still there, blocking the way to further self-knowledge. They are made up of a few things – inhibitors one must face to become a better leader, through becoming a fuller person.

There is first a need to overcome romantic notions of the ordinary and not allow celebrity – often individuals without substance – to set the norm. Then there is the pain and loneliness of standing alone in the face of criticism and being ostracised. And finally one must break mental models, stereotypes and deeply-held subconscious sets of beliefs and assumptions.

It is important to deal with issues of resentment and identity, too.

In South Africa, such subconscious beliefs are particularly deeply held. Apartheid caused damage in that it destroyed confidence and self-esteem; as a result much anger broods. But, we need to ask ourselves what else we will do to

compensate, and how long a person can stay angry.

The point is to move on, acknowledge the past and construct a narrative of possibility for the future – one determined on necessary inner work and confronting the dark night of one’s soul.

If we refuse the call of our own inspiration, fear the responsibility of stepping into a pathway without a blueprint and shun the sometimes uncomfortable and unsettling inner work yesterday, our pain and our memories will always unconsciously hold tomorrow hostage, to the extent that many of us will be unable to act upon our good intentions, which are therefore continually blighted by resentments.

Instead there should be a reclamation of self, a finding of identity and pride and consciousness. And from that position of awareness and confidence a person can start to control their personal dream, their life’s vision, directly, through the decisions and choices they make.

The enduring impact of the choices we make along the way, among the patterns that we allow to enter our awareness, is not what we get in life but who we become.

And for those becoming leaders, it is imperative to know the two kinds of “power” or influence – one more forceful than the other, one less humane than the other.

“Hard power” is the ability to get people to do what you want – coercion. Words like military might, control, economic muscle, operating from one’s position and using one’s authority, encapsulate this form of power.

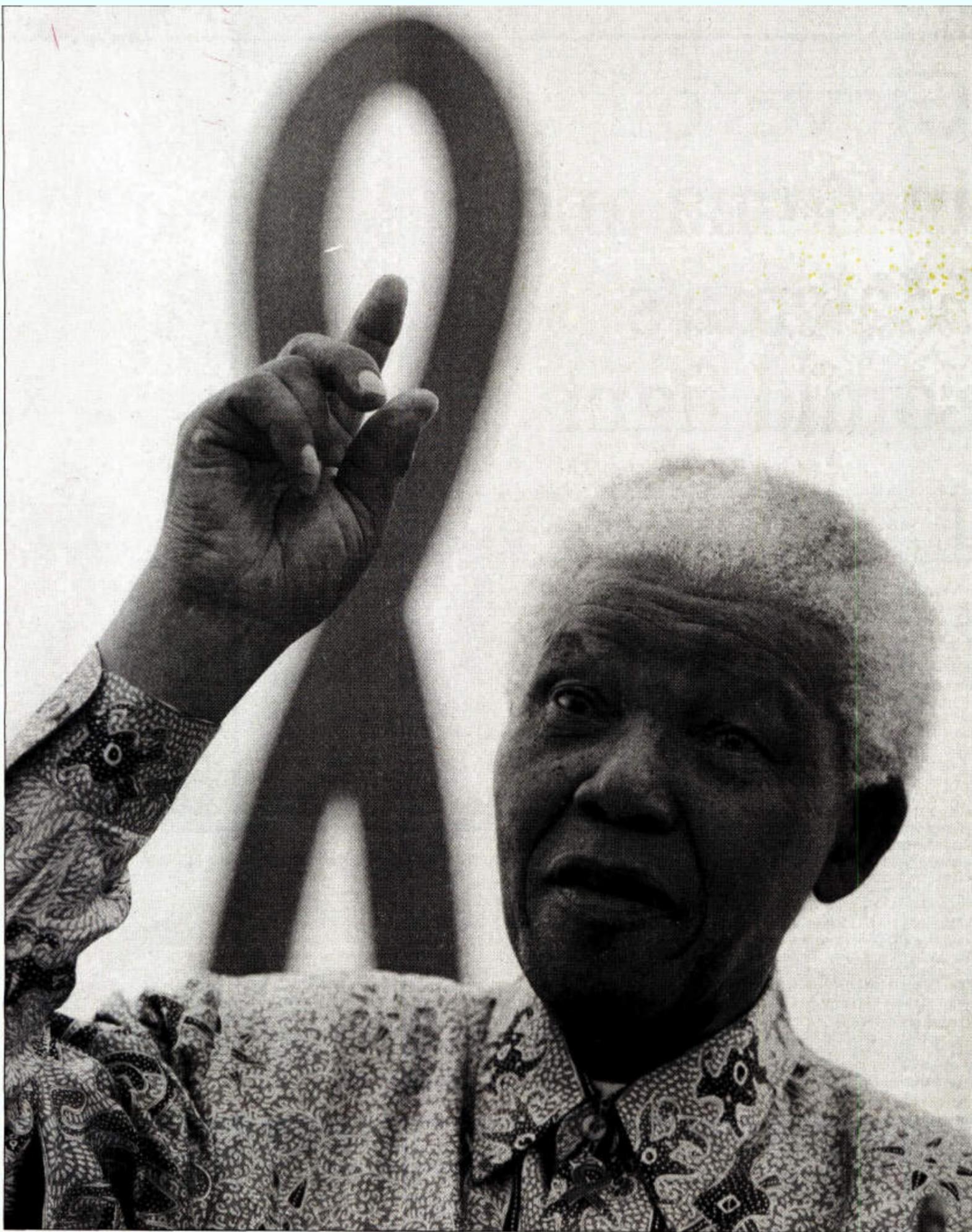
“Soft power”, equal or even more effective than hard power, is the ability to get others to want the same things that we do, responsibly.

This power is characterised by generosity, attraction and influence, the appeal of cultural, social and moral messages, a respect for others’ traditions and an approach of deep care and love.

This is the ideal – what Plato called the philosopher king – the only form of leadership he thought could support a successful utopian society.

True and lasting subjective well-being or happiness, through the lenses of this paradigm, comes when you treat the world as if it is not just a backdrop of your own journey; and if you have a relationship with the world that isn’t based on triumphing over it or complaining about it. It is premised on a dedication and orientation to something other than your own interests and concerns. We put ourselves at the centre of the world, and attract willing followership, by eliminating





SHOWING THE WAY: Former president Nelson Mandela embodies the kind of leadership that can be achieved if qualities of leadership are to have a purpose – and the opportunity to question our purpose presents itself at various stages of our lives. PICTURE: AI

our concern for the smaller self, the selfish self, the political self, the material self.

This is a form of leadership that looks deeply into the role of a leader; one that embodies four components.

First, the role of the leader is to be the custodian of values, character and resources. Virtue must be understood and used in ways that heal and build community, as opposed to appealing to old stereotypes. This involves hearing the minority voice, the marginalised stance, the “other”, and widening the conversation, helping others cope with uncertainty and ambiguity, and avoiding the trap of absolutes, while teaching compassion (actionable empathy).

Second, a leader needs to invest in personal renewal – taking time

out for serenity, growing in gratitude for those who have influenced their lives, investing in those people who, and practices that, make them resilient, living out a purpose and saying “no” to all that is not in that purpose.

Marcus Aurelius, a benign Roman emperor of depth, wisdom and morality and unshakeable influence, embodies such a leader.

Third, leaders must be agents of healing – helping people to work through resentment and to become connected, restoring their sense of belonging, and reconciling conflicting images of the past with a vision for the future.

And the philosopher king must provide hope – becoming a voice for the marginalised and actively taking stances against and opposing despair, and embodying hope in

one’s words, actions and deeds.

And, fourth, leaders must move beyond just telling it “how it is” and practise “telling it how it could be” – to help others to see the potential and possibilities. Such leadership necessarily requires continuous active stances against the evidence to change the deadly tides that could lead to despair (it is not just about being optimistic or merely speaking about what could be, but actively taking stances and getting involved to help bring those possibilities to fruition – and, whenever and wherever encountered, to challenge hegemonic paradigms, people who are stuck in fractured and irrelevant ideologies, and evidence that highlights only spurious beliefs).

Leadership begins with the knowledge that we become whole when we exercise our efforts.

emotions and spirituality to make others powerful. Leadership is thus the ability to live on purpose, by being authentic and consciously aware of oneself and others, thereby creating value for yourself and others.

In summary, responsible leadership starts with an intention of wanting to be the best for the world, not necessarily only the best in the world. It is the basic call for all of humankind to become more than we currently are. But you can only be more if – through purposeful action – you help others and allow them to be more than you. As the man in this story has learnt, you can’t be more if you don’t know how to be less.

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