

LEARNING TO LEAD WITHOUT BLINKERS

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2008 13: 213 - 216

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In the first half of 2008, two catastrophic events highlighted the need for all South Africans to remove our blinkers and face up to our collective denial about racism, sexism, xenophobia and intolerance. The events are of course the racist Reitz video and the brutal xenophobic attacks on African immigrants that erupted in the Alexandra township and elsewhere.

After the anger and horror of the images we witnessed have subsided, we need to engage incisively about the real meaning of these events if we are going to have an impact on the nature and quality of the post-apartheid society we are trying to build. This is especially true for the higher education sector, not only because one of the incidents took place at a university (the University of the Free State), but because we always claim as a sector to be shaping the future leaders of the country.

At the University of the Free State the impact of the video was devastating and continues to reverberate throughout the institution. It shows how such an incident has divided us: because we understand racism differently, and have experienced racism differently. But despite this polarisation, there was a heartening sign of an emerging white and black solidarity against racism on the campus of the UFS with white and black staff protesting against the incident. This is clearly something to build on in future – a true coalition for change.

On the other hand though, there were also completely unacceptable signs of racist behaviour in reaction to the video, particularly from some black students, who targeted white staff and students with threats and intimidation. Quite correctly, the UFS also condemned these actions, as it condemned the racist and sexist actions of the four white students who made the video.

One should also point out that, just a week before the Reitz video exploded onto the scene, some black and white students vandalised the university in a highly co-ordinated overnight raid. This was done in protest against what they regarded as management's intransigence. Ironically, there may be an emerging white and black solidarity here too among student ranks, though misguided in my view (misguided because one of the student demands was that management back down on its human rights approach).

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But the fundamental questions posed by the video remain: Is this a microcosm of the challenges still being faced by higher education and South African society? What has happened to the rainbow nation? Did it ever exist? What is the state of race relations 14 years after apartheid? Did we get the balance right between reconciliation and transformation? What is happening at our universities – are they transforming? What kind of young leaders are we producing as a country? How do we really free white and black from the legacy of colonialism and apartheid that still pervades our society?

But then it got worse. In mid-May of 2008, South Africa and the whole world were horrified by the brutal xenophobic attacks on immigrants from African countries in ghettos like Alexandra. This time the images were bloody and murderous. A man being set alight and engulfed in flames, surrounded by a cheering crowd; mobs armed with all manner of weapons going from house to house evicting the inhabitants and looting property.

What made the situation even worse was the government's lack of firm and decisive leadership and action. Furthermore, it seemed as if no one could explain (least of all government ministers) why this was happening. So many reasons were proposed: from criminal elements, to tribalism, to corruption, to unmet expectations, poverty and unemployment, and of course the so-called third force. But once again we were forced to admit that as a society we are failing to deal with our prejudices, our intolerance: this time towards our fellow Africans.

So what does Reitz really have to do with Alexandra? Why is it so tempting – almost unavoidable – to link them? Precisely because they show that we South Africans are in the grip of a leadership vacuum at all levels of our society and affecting so many institutions. Furthermore the two incidents show that a new concept of leadership needs to be developed which is truly rooted in our African condition, and which can become our national ethos. In other words all South Africans still have much to learn and unlearn about:

- valuing difference and diversity;
- how to deal with conflict;
- the futility of violence;
- finding solutions;
- the rule of law;
- owning up to our past;
- believing in the future;
- taking responsibility for our actions;
- our self-worth as individuals;

- the need for community; and
- co-existence.

This is what the Reitz video and the xenophobic attacks have exposed about South Africans – the need to learn new values, attitudes and behaviours and the need to unlearn the old ones, and in this way beginning to develop a new leadership concept and cadre.

This is precisely where the University of the Free State and other universities in South Africa must play their role as places of learning and unlearning, places that can begin to develop a new kind of young leader who can provide hope and vision at the UFS, in Alex, in South Africa.

The young students who enter our campuses must learn tolerance and unlearn racism; they must learn respect and unlearn hatred; they must learn to embrace peace and unlearn violence. These are rather deep-seated values, attitudes and behaviours that must change (and I am mentioning only a few). The interventions that are required to change them don't just revolve around respecting difference or diversity – they go way beyond that – they imply a rewiring of the individual and of the national psyche.

Universities are well-placed for such leadership development. They provide a platform for academic debate and intellectual inquiry in the classroom. They can create an environment where the search for knowledge becomes a shared experience for white and black. They can support research and publish findings on these matters of individual attitudes and macro-social trends (although this is something universities have been criticised for not doing enough of). Universities can draw on international networks and resources. They can work in partnership with other organisations, whether from the public or private sector, or from civil society. This is a critical feature which is absolutely necessary if we also want to extend this programme to rewire our communities. After all, well-considered community interventions are going to be decisive to overcome the damage that has been done in Alexandra and elsewhere and to prevent such episodes in future.

At the University of the Free State, the proposal for some kind of institute for diversity and transformation leadership is to be welcomed. Such an institute can help to co-ordinate, energise and give impetus to developing a new generation of leader, who can espouse a new style of leadership as well.

But not only universities should seek to produce this new cadre of critical citizen. All institutions in our country (government, the private sector, civil society) must help to develop this new leadership – we need a national effort to turn our country into a leadership academy – that is the scale of the challenge we face. Other institutions, especially the faith-based institutions, have a vital role to play. In the past decades, they produced hundreds if not thousands of young leaders who were recruited into other spheres of leadership, including the anti-apartheid struggle. Wherever we can, we must create an environment where this new leadership can flourish.

Some say our society is leaderless and rudderless. Some say we are ungovernable and ungoverned. Clearly there has been a huge failure of the conventional political leadership that used to give direction to black communities in South Africa, pre-Polokwane and post-Polokwane. But other communities and institutions have been sailing blindly too, leaderless and rudderless, happy with the status quo and not realising the pressures that were building up from so many different quarters for real transformation. To move beyond this rather bleak scenario will require a new cadre of critical citizen with vision and imagination.

We need people with imagination who can re-imagine a future for the country, because the post 1994 “new South Africa” is not so new anymore and not so attractive – not to its own inhabitants and least of all to African immigrants right now. For sure, the rainbow nation is dead. Perhaps it died a long time ago – and what we have witnessed so far in 2008 is not its death, but the traumatic and bloody birth of something that will take its place. The pessimists are saying that it is the birth of a new age of barbarism. But perhaps we should hope for something more beautiful. That is the beauty we have to re-imagine.