

## Looking up for a way forward

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GOOGLE the word “leadership”, and you’ll get 171-million results. Add SA, and you’ll still end up with a staggering 13,6-million results. From the Afrikaner battle cry for a new De la Rey to the glossy Leadership Magazine and presidential succession saga, there’s an obvious need to grapple with the leadership issue.

That’s what business mogul Eric Mafuna has been preaching for about 30 years now. “Ninety percent of SA’s problems are the result of poor leadership, bad leadership or lack of leadership. And until you sort out leadership, SA will remain a basket case,” he says.

Leadership is about setting examples and moving people forward. Sound leadership motivates and structurally changes our environment in every aspect, from the psychological and the social to the physical and the economic.

“Apartheid was very good at destroying black leadership at community level,” says Mafuna. “You’ll be hard-pressed in the black areas to find a community that functions to the same extent as the Jewish or Indian ones. And if you don’t have communities that function, can you have families that function?”

Mafuna, who is regularly quoted by President Thabo Mbeki, is a “leadership guru”.

In 1976 he founded the Black Management Forum (BMF), which developed from a social group for black graduates into a powerful institution that would devise black economic empowerment and affirmative action. In 1995 he established the think-tank Africa Now. And last year Mbeki officially launched Mafuna’s twin projects of the African Leadership Development Trust and the African Leadership Group, which has the basic aim of helping SA develop proper leadership on every level.

Talk to Mafuna and you’ll meet a 60-plus man still on a mission, his thinking a blend of black nationalism and pragmatism, a man who thinks affirmative action has run its course, and who wants to throw Nelson Mandela’s style of leadership in the mix with Indian, Jewish and black American success stories to create something uniquely South African, which he calls “constellational leadership”.

His biography reads like a metaphor for the attempts of the apartheid government to thwart black attempts to progress.

Bitterness still lurks in his voice as he recounts how in the late 1960s he was denied the opportunity to study group dynamics at the American Stanford University, even though he had been admitted. The rector of the University College of the North sabotaged his dream, citing bureaucratic reasons. “I understood why, because by the

third year I was a student president and had lots of scrimmages with him. I was really at the forefront of campus activism," Mafuna says.

Mafuna did manage to do an honours degree in group dynamics, and was subsequently snapped up by the Joburg office of the US advertising company J Walter Thompson, which happily used his knowledge of black consumer behaviour. They rewarded him with overseas trips, and enabled him to get a management diploma from Tufts University in Boston.

Mafuna loved the US. In the late 1970s he travelled from New York to Texas, Alabama, Chicago and Detroit, feted by representatives of the flourishing black civil rights movement who drove him around in a long green Cadillac.

"I was amazed to hear that in America there was an organisation with an African name that had been in existence for over 150 years. A black organisation that old! Older than the African National Congress (ANC)! So by the time I got back, my message to the BMF was very different. It shifted from black study group to something with a political, an economic and a communal mission.

"I began to understand why it is we cannot develop far-sighted leadership. It's because we didn't have organisations to support that leadership."

He dug deeper into the leadership issues, asking himself why, for example, the Jews, Indians and Afrikaners got it right, while black South Africans didn't.

He identifies two major problems. Firstly there's a serious lack of black organisations at community level, which partly explains the culture of greed and corruption that has emerged over the past few years. "You find greed and corruption in any human society everywhere," says Mafuna.

"But in our particular situation, we are fast-tracking people without the nets to capture them when they fall out, without the mechanism to provide the discipline, without the moderating structures. So the person feels no responsibility to the family or the community. There are no organisations that tie them to the community, no structures that force them to go back to the extended families."

Secondly, there's still a lack of nationhood. While the US has put a lot of effort into creating a melting pot, SA is still in the stage of potjiekos, with lots of hard-to-digest bits and pieces. "One of the few times you were able to feel and see and taste its real common context and texture was when we won the Rugby World Cup. Sports help us to articulate our newness."

But at the same time SA does have a perfect case of successful leadership in Mandela.

"Mandela's secret of success is the issue of paradox, how to manage the paradox," says Mafuna.

After studying the Mandela machinations, Mafuna's organisation coined the phrase "constellational leadership": something which from a distance looks like one bright star, but in reality is an interplay of many stars.

In the case of Mandela, there were the smaller stars of the ANC delegates who decided Mbeki would make a better deputy than Cyril Ramaphosa, even though Madiba preferred Ramaphosa.

Subsequently Mbeki became the less visible star who did the organisational legwork, while Mandela reflected moral leadership. "This is a binary leadership model. In essence it works within this constellation of leadership."

Given that this is essentially an inclusive model, it's not surprising Mafuna sees little future for an exclusive policy such as affirmative action.

"Black economic empowerment still has legs to go, but affirmative action has run its course. It has been relatively successful in putting black people into organisations and positions where they previously were not. The problem we have is that when these people arrived in organised life, they were not able to connect to professional or workplace networks which the whites had before.

"So a lot of affirmative action people today are battling because they cannot find connection to the informal networks that normally run business and have been lobbied in restaurants or clubs."

SA needs something new, that goes beyond race. And that is not the responsibility of the government. "The BMF and their fellow travellers need to come up with a post-affirmative action policy. They'll have to target young South Africans, regardless of social, racial or economic background."

After two hours I've heard complex analyses and sound theories, but it still lacks something tangible. It's like climate change, you can ponder forever.

Okay, the practice is simple, says Mafuna. His organisation will do research, acquire the rights to concepts from places such as Harvard and London School of Economics, choose case studies, work with world-class academics, leaders and educators, and devise unifying models and programmes for young South Africans of all races.

The country should no longer be satisfied with getting the odd fish from foreign donors as a stop-gap to structural problems. "We're still in the tooling phase," he admits. "That's why I go to Europe to raise money. Let us acquire the skills to fashion the fishing rod so we can fish ourselves."