

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP *with Fusi Akinkugbe*

5 realities of power

When you are in a leadership position exercising the power of the position, there are realities about power you need to be mindful of if you want to be an effective leader. Let us look at five of them:

The first is that Power is given. If you have power, you were given that power. In political contexts, power is given to leaders through elections, and the source of power is those who elect them i.e. the people. President Biden (then President-Elect), after the US Electoral College affirmed his victory said: *"In America, politicians don't take power...People grant power to them."* He was saying that power is given to politicians by the people. It is the same in all democratic societies. Unfortunately, we see people in power – especially in the public sector (appointed and elected) who act as though the power they have is self-originated and are therefore not accountable to anyone. If power is given, it can also be taken away. It is therefore a trust for which one must be accountable.

The second reality is that Power must have purpose. Power is given to achieve a purpose (or purposes). If power doesn't have purpose, it cannot be used to benefit others. Unfortunately, many seek power not to benefit others but to benefit themselves or interests they represent. An example comes from the political life of US President Lyndon Johnson (who succeeded President J. F. Kennedy). Before becoming President, Johnson had tried being elected to the US Sen-

ate. He lost, became depressed, and abandoned his goal of improving the lives of others which had been his focus politically.

Seven years later (after amassing a personal fortune), he won another senate election. He became Senate Majority Leader, but now as a rich, powerful Majority Leader his primary focus was himself and no longer helping others. *He had power but with no purpose beyond himself.* But a life changing event helped him reset his bearings: he had a heart attack. It was a turning point, as he questioned himself regarding the purpose of the power and wealth he had and realised that simply accumulating power had no beneficial purpose. After recovering, he rededicated himself to his original values, that government was for the purpose of helping those in need. Are you in a position of leadership today? What is the purpose of the power that you have?

The third reality is that Power can be abused. Power is given for the purpose of fulfilling the responsibility of your position. It is not given without a purpose or for purposes contrary to the responsibilities of your position. You demonstrate accountability for the power you have by fulfilling the responsibility for which it was given. Someone who uses the power of her position to fulfil every other purpose except the one for which it was given is not showing herself accountable. In this way, power can be abused or misused. In Singapore's early days, Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan

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Yew said: *"We had to be careful not to abuse the absolute power we had been given."* He knew power was given for a purpose, that it could either be used properly or abused, and as a government they had to be accountable for it.

The fourth reality is that Power exposes you. Abraham Lincoln said: *'All men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.* Power tests character because a leadership position magnifies character weaknesses. Having power exposes you: character flaws that are unresolved before you get into a leadership position

only get amplified in the light of that leadership platform, because a leadership position puts a spotlight on you.

If you have not dealt with character flaws before assuming the new position, you will carry them into it. For example, if you cannot control your emotions and explode at the slightest provocation, if you take up a leadership position without first dealing with it, you will only have this flaw exposed once a situation that tests it arises. This will end up undermining your influence. Anyone who thinks they can separate their conduct from their leadership does not understand the impact of character on leadership. Many leaders have failed, not because of technical incompetence but because their leadership platform exposed their character flaws, which ended up compromising their leadership.

The fifth reality is that Power is transient. Power is transient because it is usually dependent on or derives from something external such as a leadership position and lasts only for as long as that position exists. President Bill Clinton after leaving office said: *"When you get out, you change all that power for whatever influence you have and whatever your experience and contacts will permit you to do."* He knew the transience of power.

Many who wield power as a result of the positions they hold lose sight of this reality, acting as if the power they have is theirs personally and not dependent on

their positions. All too soon the power is gone when the appointment or term ends. Former President Goodluck Jonathan speaking recently about the transience of power said: *"There are people who act like they can't eat without you when you're in a position of power.* But once you're no longer in that position, they move on and act like you no longer exist." Indeed, power is transient.

Don't find yourself on the wrong side of these five realities. Accept them and walk in them so you can be an effective leader.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to begin to lead from where you are.



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