

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP with Fusi Akinkugbe

Leadership: Age or Preparation?

When it comes to leadership, the issue of age is often contentious, especially in Africa where younger people accuse the older generation of not yielding leadership opportunities to them, as they hold on to power at all costs. Uganda's President Museveni for example was re-elected to a sixth term in office this year! In Nigeria, the Not too Young to Run bill which lowers the ages for public office has been passed into law and assented to by the President, though the Constitution has not yet been amended to incorporate this.

But does age really matter in leadership? I say the evidence points out that Leadership is about preparation. Yes, in some respects and instances age can be an asset because of experience, but preparation for the responsibilities ahead is what matters. When it comes to leadership, many are old but never ready because they were not prepared.

The reason why readiness for leadership is paramount is because no one knows the circumstances in which they will be required to lead, and leaders must be able to effectively lead no matter the circumstances. Leaders of nations have come to leadership in times of global crisis like the ongoing pandemic, or in times of wars and financial crises as has occurred in the past. They have had to stand up to these extraordinary challenges (some unforeseen) and mitigate their impact, seizing the opportunities that present as problems and challenges.

In an article on the BBC website

in December 2016, about 18 months into President Buhari's first term, Nigerian contributor Manir Dan Ali wrote that the President said: *"he had the misfortune of coming to power at a time when very low oil prices meant the country was paying a high price for its expensive habits."* While this was true, the fact is no one chooses the circumstances of their leadership. Ali further said: "Mr Buhari admitted he felt like absconding from the job when he found how bad the situation was when he took office..." Frankly, I can only see this in the context of a man who became President on his fourth attempt - showing how much he wanted the job. No one knows the circumstances in which they will be called to lead but once we get there, we must be ready to face whatever challenges we are presented with.

Let's look at two internationally acknowledged world leaders (one young and one old), to see whether from their stories we can learn anything about leadership, age and preparation. Incidentally, both are women.

First, is Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. In 2010, someone wrote in the Harvard Business Review what the job description of the President of Liberia in 2005 would have looked like: *"Wanted: president to lead an African nation of 3.5 million people from 16 ethnic groups with 90% unemployment, \$4.9 billion in debt (the equivalent of 700% of GDP, 2,300% of exports, the highest level of indebtedness in the world), following 14 years of civil war, consisting of armed warring factions needing to be integrated into civil society, with an economy*

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This was the job Ellen Johnson Sirleaf applied for and got at the age of 67, becoming Africa's first freely elected female head of state. The job description doesn't sound like anything most people would want. But this exceptional woman's life was one of preparation for this job that looked like no one could succeed in. From serving as a Junior Minister in

the Treasury at the age of 31, to being Minister of Finance, working in the World Bank and UN, and being jailed for being outspoken against the government, she was undoubtedly ready for this assignment. On becoming President of Liberia in 2006, she worked hard to earn credibility, throwing all her efforts into rebuilding post-conflict Liberia, and attracting international support in the process. She faced numerous challenges and worked to provide solutions to them. Certainly, in the older generation, what qualified her for leadership was her readiness and not her age.

In 2011 she was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and in 2018 was announced the recipient of the 2017 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. She also received the highest civilian award in the United States, which along with other awards and honours acknowledge her success and capability as a leader.

The second person is from the other end of the age spectrum. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinta Arden assumed office in 2017 at the age of just 37 and she could not have known what circumstances she in which she would be required to lead. Within three years she had to deal with a terror attack in Christchurch, and then the pandemic, for which her country has been credited with having one of the best responses in the world. Because Jacinta Arden was ready for leadership, she was able to see the problems she faced as Prime Minister as opportunities to demonstrate her leadership. She

and her party were rewarded last year with a landslide re-election victory. To put it all into context, these achievements have been by a leader who only turned 40 in July 2020! So, it's not about age! It's about preparation and readiness for leadership.

When someone gets into a leadership position which they are not prepared for, the result can be disastrous as the organisation or entity suffers and the expected results are not achieved. If you desire leadership in any capacity, your age alone will not qualify you - your preparation and readiness will.

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



Akinkugbe qualified as a Chartered Accountant. He served as treasury controller at DHL and later as CEO of a technology services company founded by Accenture.