

# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP *with Fusi Akinkugbe*

## Leadership and celebrity culture

**T**oday we live in a world in which a person's exploits and even daily activities can be projected around the world. Social media has made this possible, and with it fuelling the desire to be famous and become a celebrity. Nicky Gumbel, author, lawyer and Reverend said a survey of millennials revealed that 50% of young adults said that a major life goal was to become famous. According to him, in the past people wanted to be famous for doing something. But now celebrity has become an end in itself: people just want to be famous. On social media, celebrities and popular stars across different genres each have hundreds of thousands or even millions who 'follow' them. For some, whose followers have exceeded a particular threshold, they are in an elite category called 'influencers'.

Getting more followers is a goal that is relentlessly pursued, and some even deliberately create controversy just to get attention and more followers. The New York Times in 2018 exposed the extent to which some go to become more popular. The exposé focused largely on just one company involved in selling "Twitter followers and retweets to celebrities, businesses and anyone who wants to appear more popular or exert influence online." These customers included: "... reality television stars, professional athletes, comedians, TED speakers, pastors and models." These celebrities (who people aspire to be like), purchased fake followers! These

are some of the lengths people go to, just to increase their popularity. Social media companies are now waking up to the need for integrity on their platforms, and Twitter announced in 2018 that it would remove millions of fake followers from various accounts: a step that would result in a significant drop of 6% in its total follower count. Unilever, one of the world's biggest advertisers also said it had had enough of influencers who cheat with fake followers. Clearly, even in the race for popularity there must be integrity.

We live in an age in which image is valued above substance, and illusion above reality. While celebrities set social trends and impact much of the popular culture, does this equate to leadership? Not at all. *There is a difference between leadership and the world of celebrity.* This is not to denigrate anyone or vocation, but to bring clarity in an age in which instant stardom and celebrity status can be attained. This distinction is important, particularly in today's culture that suddenly places people on a pedestal because of the popularity or commercial success of their work, image, or brand.

The focus of celebrities is often on extending their image, brands and products, or the brands they represent. This is the work they do, and there is nothing wrong with it. Leadership is however different, because as a leader you do not exert leadership influence based on the number of social media followers you have. Rather, you must earn

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respect, which becomes the basis for your influence. Leadership focuses on solving a problem that benefits others or on influencing others towards a specific goal for the greater good, often at great personal cost and sacrifice. This is why the greatest leaders are those who draw attention to those suffering because of a problem and who focus on finding the solution. Though there are differences between leadership and the world of celebrity, some celebrities can be said to have successfully made the transition to leadership because they have used the platforms that their work has

given them to influence change in a particular area to impact others positively.

Another area of difference is conduct. The conduct of celebrities doesn't appear to negatively impact their status (except perhaps rarely). Standards expected of them are often elastic, and notoriety seems to serve them well. On the other hand, the standards expected of you as a leader are not as elastic but more well defined. Your conduct cannot be separated nor differ from your message. Where there is a divergence, it can undermine your leadership.

Leadership is not about projecting your personal image or brand but projecting a cause or purpose that looks beyond you and benefits others and getting others to buy into and join in it. So, a leader really cannot be a celebrity. This reminds me of the case of a CEO of an international organisation who was let go because his image was becoming larger than the company's. He was becoming a celebrity - at the company's expense. The two couldn't go together. Leadership requires humility and an undiluted focus on the organisational purpose.

One term that mimics leadership has taken hold of the social media space: the term 'influencer', referring to those who have large social media followings. Leadership is influence, but in this context this word does not necessarily correlate with leadership. Influencers are often paid to sway others to purchase something or buy into a

lifestyle. While an influencer can represent multiple products or lifestyles because it's a job or opportunity to extend his or her brand, a leader often has a single cause (or a narrow suite of causes) that are a passion, for which remuneration or benefits are not the defining factor. Leaders have conviction about what they want to do and lead others to do and will pay a price to achieve it.

Leadership is selfless. Leaders don't seek the limelight. They don't have an image to sell rather a purpose to pursue, and they inspire others to join them in pursuing it. Are you ready to lead?

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



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