

# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP *with Fusi Akinkugbe*

## Why leadership matters

Leadership is now front and centre in virtually every sphere of life – from the public sector to private organisations, non-profits and even in informal settings. People are increasingly appreciating the significance of leadership, and the role it plays in any endeavour or setting. But why really, does leadership matter? Let's look at four reasons why.

*First, leadership matters because organisations need those who can successfully deal with challenges.* Since they all face challenges (though not in the same measure nor in the same way), the greatest leverage an organisation can give itself is to ensure it has the most capable people who can successfully deal with its challenges. Satya Nadella, Microsoft CEO in his book *Hit Refresh*, says: "Constraints are real and will always be with us, but leaders are the champions of overcoming constraints." Leadership is about being able to consistently overcome challenges. If you don't want to deal with problems or challenges, then leadership in any form isn't for you.

*Secondly, leadership matters because similar circumstances can result in different outcomes.* Two different people facing the same set of circumstances will have different outcomes. Some organisations (and even nations) have succeeded where others have failed, in spite of having similar resources, opportunities, challenges and operating circumstances. The reason for the success of some and failure of others is the presence (or lack) of leadership: it is what

makes the difference. There are nations that have had less auspicious beginnings than ours but are now far ahead of us in development terms and economic standing, because they have had more effective leadership.

*Thirdly, leadership matters because organisations need those who can lead others in fulfilling a shared purpose.* Leaders must be able to successfully lead others, because almost every endeavour in life requires the participation of others for it to be successful. This is why organisations require leaders who are able to effectively lead others in achieving their purpose and solving their challenges, because no one can achieve anything of significance on their own. Leadership is not a one-sided enterprise.

The fourth reason why leadership matters is that *no one knows the circumstances in which they will be required to lead.* Leaders must therefore be able to lead effectively no matter the circumstances. Leaders of nations all over the world have found themselves coming 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. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinta Arden assumed office in 2017 at the age of 37 and could not have known what circumstances she would face in the course of her leadership. 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 hav-

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ing one of the best responses in the world.

According to American Presidential Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin: "While the nature of the era a leader chances to occupy profoundly influences the nature of the leadership opportunity, the leader must be ready when that opportunity presents itself." Effective leaders must be ready to seize the leadership opportunities that present as problems and challenges. Jacinta Arden did not know what circumstances she would face as a leader, but because she 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 were by a leader who only turned 40 in July 2020!

On the other hand, someone in a leadership position who faces challenges but whose response is that he (or she) didn't think things would be so bad during their time or that they would have to deal with such problems, is clearly not ready for leadership. Such a person should never have got to that leadership position in the first place. Every time we allow people without the required capability to rise to leadership, we undermine the organisation, the entity or nation as the case may be, and sabotage success.

It cannot be disputed that when capable leaders are at the helm, they are more likely to succeed, because leadership capability prevails over circumstances. Dr. Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State wrote in his foreword to the book "From Third World to First" by Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, that: "...the ancient argument whether circumstance or personality shapes events is settled in favor of the latter. Circumstances could not have been less favorable." Singapore's circumstances at its birth were most unfavourable. With virtually no natural resources, it was in 1960 described by one magazine as a cesspool of squalor and degradation. It's eventual political stability in spite of its multi-ethnic nature, rapid economic growth and resulting affluence have not been

accidental but the result of former Prime Minister Lee's outstanding leadership capability, support by a few like-minded people and effective policies.

Singapore's example proves firstly that circumstances do not have to determine the outcome of a person or the future of an organisation or nation; and secondly, that the leadership capability of the person at the head, plays a strong part in determining the future of that organisation, entity or nation.

This is why leadership matters. Ultimately, nations and organisations founder or succeed based on their leadership.

Thank you very much 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.*