

# Africa needs visionaries

## The challenges of leadership in Africa

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**South African Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi believes that strong leadership is crucial at all levels. As she explains to Capacity.org, Africa needs leaders who are prepared to intervene in complex situations without holding back for fear of criticism. They must also be able to find commonalities among the differences, put people first, and learn from their mistakes.**

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, South African Minister of Public Service and Administration, has earned her reputation as an enthusiastic politician who knows her stuff, and is very well aware of Africa's many pressing needs. She believes that one of the most important is to have good leaders – leaders who recognise that they must continuously improve and broaden their capacities in order to be able to deal with changing situations and difficult circumstances.

*In the African context, what makes for a good leader?*

Leaders need to have the right tools, especially solid information. Every leader needs to know what is happening. You need to have done your homework so that you fully understand the issue at hand. And most important, you need skills to engage with people. A good leader is not a populist leader. A good leader will, at times, need to take unpopular decisions but will be able to explain them so that most citizens can understand.

Africa needs leaders, visionaries in a way, who are able to grasp the challenges facing the continent. The most pressing challenges today are the eradication of poverty, as well as conflict prevention and resolution. We need people who are prepared to intervene in complex situations



their peers, outsiders or citizens. At the same time, the need for good leadership does not apply only to those at the highest level of government, but has to cascade down through all the levels of an administration, all the way down to the civil servants on the ground. When you have a disconnection between good leaders at the top and poor leaders at any of the levels below, the implementation of policy will be jeopardised.

And it is essential to realise that the demands on leaders change over time, as circumstances change. Leaders in the 21st century have to address an agenda that is fundamentally different from those of their predecessors. During the 1960s and 1970s the mission of most leaders was to

liberate their nations, and to liberate Africa. It was a mission accomplished.

The current crop of leaders needs to look at other themes, new missions. How do they make sure they have sound systems of governance? How can they achieve socio-economic development? Africa needs to build public administrations and governments that will really deliver.

*Many observers see the lack of good leadership as one of the main reasons for Africa's sorrows ?*

I am aware of those views, and recognise them. There was and still is a problem with leadership, but I believe that change is taking place. We should also emphasise that Africa has had good leaders in the past ? Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, and most recently Nelson Mandela. The mechanisms they had at their disposal in their day might not have been ideal to exercise their leadership so that it would have an impact on the continent as a whole.

Such mechanisms are available today. Through the African Peer Review Mechanism, for example, African leaders can now have the impact that is required.

*How can the Peer Review Mechanism help Africa overcome the shortcomings of its leadership?*

Within the African Peer Review Mechanism, a country allows other countries to look at the progress it has made in the fields of governance and development, among other things. Heads of state are then able to comment on progress made or stalled, hold their colleagues accountable, and offer them advice. The ability to learn from each other, and the recognition that we can learn from each other, are signs that leadership in Africa is growing to meet the needs. Many African leaders are prepared to participate in this peer review process, and take it seriously.

*Where can Africa find inspiration for the style of leadership it needs?*

Anything that is brought in or imposed from outside, and is not contextually informed, will most likely not work. We have seen the export of various models and dogmas to the developing world, and they have not worked. Concepts like the 'lean' state hardly ever took into account the needs of a particular state, society or situation.

Here in South Africa we are building a developmental state, but not one based on the models of Southeast Asia. We have our own constitution, and our own set of values. The essence of what South Africans call bathopele, which means 'people first?', is that we owe our humanity to a shared humanity, and therefore have to ensure that lines of communication among all members of society remain open. That is a thought we can use when we speak of a new foundation for leadership in Africa.

But bathopele on its own is not sufficient to argue for going back to a traditional African value

system. There are certain aspects of African culture that are quite conservative if they are applied too narrowly. Besides looking into our history and traditions we also need to see if there is anything specifically 'African' that we should and could do. When I look at the way in which African leaders, and especially Thabo Mbeki, have recently dealt with conflicts, I think there is something quite unique about it.

*How does it differ from other kinds of leadership?*

Normally when you look at leadership, it is about the triumph of the powerful over those less powerful, of the strong over the weak. We are looking at the emergence of a different approach, one that South Africa used while mediating in conflicts in the Great Lakes region, in Burundi, and in parts of West Africa. It is a style of leadership that focuses on the questions of how we bring opposing sides together, and how we can find commonalities among the differences.

In South Africa we have learned from our own past, in which we moved relatively peacefully from a minority regime to a broad-based democracy. Our constitution-making process was premised largely on seeking consensus, rather than on saying 'go for broke' on any particular subject. It takes a particular type of leadership to do that.

What I see coming through in Africa, and within leadership in Africa, is the insight that we need to find ways to lead within diversity. To bridge the gaps, we need a kind of leadership that can look at power not in the narrow meaning of the term, but as a means of bringing people together.

*What is the role of citizens in building better leadership?*

In some African countries you will find a vibrant citizenry demanding clear answers from their politicians. They do so not only at election time, but also in between. As a former Kenyan minister once said to me, 'We can no longer go back to what we had, so we are going to move forward, thanks to the vibrancy of Kenyan society?'. Every country needs leaders who are courageous enough to accept that vibrancy and openness, and who are strong enough to use them to society's advantage, as well as citizens pushing for that openness.

In South Africa we also have another concept, imbizo, to refer to a leader who brings together his people so he can engage with them. It is a process through which a president or a mayor faces communities directly - they can ask questions, and there will be follow-up.

*As a minister, are you able to practise what you preach?*

The Department of Public Service and Administration is a learning environment. To talk about your achievements and successes is easy, but getting up and saying 'This is my mistake, and this is what I learned from it' is far harder.

We need to look at learning differently, not as someone looking down on his or her pupils, but as an actual engagement with real people and situations. What is more useful than putting people

into a classroom, I believe, is to nurture their talents and allow them to learn from their mistakes.

I think it is necessary to allow for those in leadership positions to have coaches, for example. A coach could be anyone ? a professor at a distant university, a colleague in the state next door, or a community anywhere.

*What does such learning look like in real life?*

In South Africa, following the political changes of 1994, the year of our first truly democratic elections, many new people were appointed to senior government positions. Since they were new, they had not had the chance to grow into their organisations. They were appointed to change the face of the public administration, and to bring in the diversity required to reflect the new South Africa.

We now have a programme in place to empower these new senior managers, some of whom are responsible for entire departments. We don't bring in a teacher; we bring in a cabinet minister to engage with the group, and to work on real life cases. Or we work with a senior negotiator, or an outstanding professor.

Wisdom abounds, and we need to tap into it.

## Links

[Africa Leadership Forum \(ALF\)](#)

[Africa Leadership Initiative](#)

[African Leadership Institute \(ALI\)](#)

[African Leadership and Progress Network \(ALPN\)](#)

[African Peer Review Mechanism](#)

[LEAD Africa](#)

[Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability & Professionalism \(LEAP\) Africa](#) \_\_\_\_\_

## Further reading

R.I. Rotberg (2004) Strengthening African leadership,  
[Foreign Affairs, July](#).

Z. Ntshona and E. Lahiff (2004) Decentralisation in South Africa: Too many chiefs and not enough democrats?  
[id21Research Highlight](#).