
Are We There Yet? Perspectives on Women and Leadership

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Are we there yet?

Perspectives on women and leadership

Nkululeko Malinga

This profile highlights different perspectives of leadership developed from the experiences of leaders from various sectors and organisations throughout South Africa.

Introduction

This *profile* explores notions of leadership by highlighting the perspectives of six leaders (five women, one man) from diverse backgrounds. They shared with me the challenges and pleasures of being a leader. In everyday conversation or instances where I am required to lead, I am able to reflect on their experiences as guidelines on the type of leader I would like to become. This experience has made me realise that as a woman and a potential leader, I do not have to compromise my sense of self.

I interviewed:

- Dr Namane Magau – President of the Businesswomen’s Association;
- Neva Makgetla – Coordinator: Fiscal, Monetary and Public Sector Policy at the Head Office of COSATU;
- Gloria Buthelezi – Provincial Chairperson of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) Gender Structure;
- Dr Devi Rajab – Dean of Student Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal;
- Nomusa Dube – eThekweni Municipality Council Speaker; and
- Bafana Khumalo – Deputy Chairperson of the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE).

The discussion below is based on themes that emanated from interviews with the above leaders.

Definitions of leadership

Participants responded to understandings of leadership by reflecting on their own capacity as leaders and on the ideals to which they aspire. For Magau, leadership means living for a purpose and committing one’s life for oneself and others. It is about inspiring hope and enabling communities to rise above existing challenges. Rajab’s conceptualisation is similar to Magau’s. She perceives a leader as someone who is inspirational, visionary, motivational, and who allows subordinates room for growth and acknowledges the contribution of all players.

Makgetla believes a leader is someone who can represent her constituencies, understand their positions and be able to develop sustainable proposals. For Buthelezi, leadership entails being responsible and fulfilling duties expected of you.

Khumalo also explains leadership as being about servicing and encouraging people. It is about the bigger picture and understanding the purpose, as Magau also mentioned, of one’s organisation at large. He adds that leadership involves the ability to inspire those being led and to unleash their creativity so that a defined purpose is achieved with enthusiasm and commitment. Dube believes that leadership is about being responsible and understanding the direction of the organisation you are leading as well as understanding the opinions and needs of its people.



Gendered expectations of leadership

Interviewees expressed the view that society has perpetuated a one-dimensional view of what a leader is. Men have been, more often than not, aligned with leadership and this has made it difficult for women to locate spaces and obtain acknowledgement for their leadership. Magau highlights that women are capable of leading and bringing unique strength to the world. Women are in touch with their feelings and are able to sense others' feelings in their environments, which contributes to effective leadership. Courage and compassion have been displayed by leading women when confronting difficult situations, which enables an environment beneficial to humanity.

Makgetla says most people imagine a man when they think of a leader. Women, therefore, tend to be more criticised than their male counterparts. Women leaders are expected to be both authoritative and mothering which is contradictory and fuels persisting criticism of women leaders. Buthelezi believes leadership qualities should be of more importance than whether the leader is a man or woman.

Women's capabilities as leaders should not be questioned because they manage households and work efficiently.

Rajab believes that there are varying perspectives of leadership. If people are used to being led by men, they may not be comfortable being led by a woman. People have not come to a place where they are oblivious to the gender of a leader. However, if you are a good leader, the fact that you are a woman recedes into the background because people are not focusing on gender but on your leadership qualities. If a leader is ineffective, gender comes to the fore.

Our society is still largely patriarchal, says Khumalo, and notions of leadership are still premised on patriarchal views. In the world of work, for instance, models of leadership are informed by particular masculinities: masculinities of aggression, 'winner takes all' outlook, power, control, subjugation, etc. Women who enter this arena are expected to play the game by the rules defined by these notions of masculinities. For a woman to succeed, she needs to be 'one of the boys', and the culture in organisations is hostile to alternative forms of leadership. To illustrate: male executives often play golf on Fridays as a means of bonding or

finalising business negotiations. This may then be followed by socialising in a bar, which can sometimes continue into the early hours of the next morning. These practices are, by their very nature, exclusive. For women to cope with this lifestyle, it requires a major shift in how they organise their lives.

Dube believes that women and men are equally capable of leading. One needs to understand that if there is suppression, there is bound to be uneasiness within people. There needs to be equity in the way we do things, and we need to work towards creating balanced power relations.

Experience as a leader

When women work, they give their all and in so doing, they lose themselves

Magau feels it is important to encourage women to be true to themselves and to pursue their dreams against all odds. Respect for others is also crucial, for one cannot lead people one does not respect. She has great admiration and respect for the people with whom she works as they have contributed to her success. According to Makgetla, the fact that women face a glass ceiling has resulted in her reducing her expectations rather than having to face continual disappointment. An important factor is for women to understand that it is vital to build collectives. No woman has ever become a leader based strictly on her own efforts – so the question of whom one builds alliances with becomes critical. Upper-class women often seek alliances with upper-class men – which leads at best to the 'queen bee' syndrome, and at worst to continual betrayal of the women by the men involved.

Buthelezi took up leadership in NUMSA when she was approached by a male colleague within the union. She was hesitant at first because she did not believe that she could appropriately perform the task required in the regional finance committee. Her colleague assured her of his guidance and assistance

throughout her tenure of office, and his support and encouragement enabled her to face the challenges ahead. Being the only woman on a committee of six men made her feel isolated. However, she did manage to perform so well in her duties that she was also elected Chairperson of the Gender Structure in the region. Some of the men were not pleased that they had a woman heading this structure. Nevertheless, Buthelezi felt that her position allowed her to change the male mindset that gender was only about women. Over and above her duties, she is also a single mother who struggles to balance work pressure and her time with her children. Her experiences highlight the challenges faced by women who are leaders and mothers.

Rajab's experience as a woman leader began in the 80s when she was the first black woman appointed to head the counselling centre at the University of Natal. In 1990, she was promoted to Deputy Dean and three years later, she applied to be the Dean of Student Development. Once occupying the post, she realised she had hit a ceiling because she had two male superiors, the Deputy Vice Chancellor and the Dean of Students. She was greatly frustrated and felt her creativity was stifled as they controlled the budget and sealed all decision-making. Rajab also disagreed with their leadership style which was autocratic and non-transparent. To survive, she focused her creative energy into introducing a Master's course in higher education, and a project to encourage students to participate in extramural activities at tertiary level.

Dube's leadership has been one of mixed emotions as she is proud of the way she has managed to survive in her position, but feels that along that road, she has neglected other aspects of her identity. She believes that when women work, they give their all and in so doing, they lose themselves. She cannot go to gym or do the things she would like in her spare time because she has to be with her family and children. She states that being a woman defines her leadership because she brings beauty,

colour and nurturing to the boardroom.

Women leadership, quotas, gender inequality, perpetuation of patriarchy

Can women be leaders, should they be allowed to be leaders or are they just a means to a political end? I thought it would be useful to unpack the political dimension of women's leadership.

Magau believes that over the past few years, there has been an increase in remarkable women who are changing the way corporations and organisations function. She believes women have the power to make the world better and more human. Makgetla, on the other hand, believes that we should stop demanding more women leaders because as much as there are mediocre men, there are also mediocre women. According to Makgetla, women in leadership often do imitate men who have been standard role models. She says that we should opt for alternate models of leadership.

Buthelezi believes that when women are placed in positions of leadership, they are often not appropriately trained and supported in their duties. When a woman fails to do her job well it is blamed on the fact that she is a woman, but when men are unable to perform well, the blame is placed on other factors.

While presently women are being used to fill quotas and are the majority of the workforce in certain sectors, such as the teaching profession, men still dominate in decision-making. Rajab believes that this leads women to imitate men, which can be ineffective as they are superimposing an identity which is not their own. Women end up devaluing themselves, and when a few of them make it to the top, they do not believe that they should take along other women with them. They feel threatened that their position will be jeopardised and do not believe that they have become successful because of their individual competence or for socio-political reasons.

She believes it will take a long time to

address the present imbalances, but that as society changes and a new generation of younger women and men emerge, and we have a more egalitarian society, change is bound to happen. People will have a choice to do what they want freely and not because of gender dynamics, when perceptions of childrearing and sexuality begin to change. She says that while this is a slow process, in the meanwhile, we need deliberate interventions to raise the level of consciousness, and supportive working environments for both women and men.

Khumalo says he knows many women who are in positions of power and are holding their own, despite the fact that they also still have to deal with the hostilities of patriarchal society. However, he also believes that there are women who emulate the patriarchal model of leadership. One of the reasons for this is that operating in a predominantly male environment does not allow for the development of new leadership styles, as Rajab earlier stated. By their very nature, systems tend to be centrifugal and for survival purposes, women may be compelled to 'play the rules of the game'. Further, we have been exposed to the patriarchal form of leadership most of our lives; it is what we have known as the norm. We have been socialised to appropriate a certain style of leadership.

In Dube's experience, women leaders have excelled beyond expectation. She states that she does not know of any men who go to school to be 'capacitated' and therefore, does not believe that women should be questioned on the basis of their capacity. Women are not window-dressing and the more we constantly bring up the issue of capacity, the more we perpetuate patriarchy. Dube believes both men and women deserve a chance to learn.

Women have the power to make the world better and more human

Advice for future leaders

It is clear that these leaders have vast knowledge, skills and experience and it was fitting to ask what advice they would offer upcoming leaders.

Women in leadership have amazing lived experiences that define the power they have to create meaningful change. With that, Magau believes trusting what you know and have experienced should strengthen your focus and confidence to succeed. Building a sound, genuine supportive network aligned with your leadership position also assists, according to Makgetla. She strongly emphasises that one should not take it for granted that people in power will support you as a matter of principle. Buthelezi also stressed the importance of supportive networks and that leaders should be educated about the requirements of their duties to confidently effect their work.

Rajab added that leaders should always be in a learning mode. They must be goal-orientated and be able to inspire their people. Leaders must be accountable and exemplary in behaviour. Her last advice was that the leader should carry out the will of the people by being a servant of the people, hence the concept 'servant-leader'. Khumalo also emphasised the importance of supportive systems for women. Women are judged more harshly and face greater challenges than their male counterparts. Organisations also need to create an environment that allows women to flourish and grow. Dube believes that leaders need to adapt to new ways of doing by being flexible and sensitive to the needs of the people they are serving. They also need to provide strategic direction and communicate with the organisation, and work towards attaining equality in terms of gender, culture and age.

Conclusion

Leadership is about being able to lead, inspire, be visionary and responsible in the work that you are doing. Women have to work harder to prove their capabilities in the workplace and fulfil their responsibilities in the home. Organisations still have to develop to a point where they can lessen the burden for women and be more sensitive to the needs of working mothers. It is very clear that there is a need for alternate leadership practices that allow women to be themselves and be the best leaders they can be. However, it is still apparent that not all women have been properly trained for these positions and need to find sound supportive networks. Society needs leaders who are exemplary, motivated servants of the people, and who are able to bring out new meanings of what it means to be a leader. I conclude with some final words from the leaders interviewed:

- Magau: 'It is important to encourage women to be true to themselves and pursue their dreams against all odds.'
- Makgetla: 'Leadership is about change.'
- Buthelezi: 'I want my children to be proud of me and I want to show them that you have to work hard to succeed.'
- Rajab: 'If a leader projects him/herself in a fair and non prejudiced way then he or she stands as an example on those issues.'
- Khumalo: 'Leadership is about enabling others to realise their goals.'
- Dube: 'The only way to address challenges is by talking about them and enabling understanding, because they are here to stay.'

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