



LEADERSHIP, ETHICS AND COMPASSION

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I am fortunate that I occasionally run marathons, as grueling as they often are. The atmosphere, the support and the relief at the completion of 42 kilometers are among the things that make runners torture themselves as we do. Completing is the ultimate prize. It is the triumph of the human spirit. It is the test of endurance. It is proof of resilience. It is evidence of tenacity.

Runners are also ethical, in many ways, at least during the marathons. Of course, like in all endeavors in life, there would be those that let us down at times. In marathons, we see leadership, ethics and compassion all at play. Leadership, ethics and compassion must indeed go together at all times, at least for those who are in positions of power and influence.

Leadership involves influencing others to achieve a particular goal. It is also about supporting others. It is also about caring and many other things such as listening attentively. We see this in many sports codes, but perhaps more so in running particularly in long distance races. There are “buses”: the “driver” leads a group of runners who aim to complete the race, usually in particular time.

Indeed, anyone can be a leader. However, leaders should be guided by certain principles and values. Integrity is probably one of the most important values. The sacrifice that athletes in various sports codes make involve deciding what is more important, and what to do less of in order that there can be more time and discipline for the required training.

Leadership roles have power, influence and authority which should be used carefully. How would or is a leader remembered when he or she has left the particular leadership role is important. In marathons, those of us who are average road runners, we never forget the “bus drivers”. In the 2022 Soweto marathon, where I probably needed a bus more than ever before because I had not sufficiently prepared for it, we appreciated the bus driver greatly. We probably do not remember his name, but we remember him fondly.

Our bus driver used power to the benefit of the many. Power usually has a negative connotation, and many people want power for wrong reasons. During marathons we see amazing positive use of power. As Deborah Gruenfeld puts it, “power – at least that lasts – comes from doing what is best for the group, in terms of advancing shared goals and interests...”

Ethical leadership is the process of influencing others through principles, values and beliefs that are shaped by what is considered to be right behaviour. The world needs more of this. At times ethical leaders might come across as weak or too nice. It is important to be true to who you are. To be a proper leader, there is no need to be abrasive and definitely no need to bully anyone. These are lessons we learn from some of the great leaders; people who

have left indelible marks and have had significant impacts on others. All such leaders earned respect, even when they were viewed as too nice, because they beat others on results. These are leaders who lead by example. They delegate. They support. They have empathy and compassion. They are genuine leaders. They lead by example, so to speak. That said, it is important that leaders are firm and decisive as and when contexts demand such.

Ethical leadership is leadership that is involved in leading in a manner that respects the rights and dignity of others. Ethics are principles, values and beliefs that define what is right behavior and what is wrong behavior. Ethical leaders demonstrate integrity and they are trustworthy. I link ethical leadership with thought leadership and critical consciousness. Thought leadership is about better understanding of the critical issues and the ability to come up with possible solutions to the challenges. Critical consciousness involves being always aware of your circumstances and surroundings as well as willingness to *speak truth to power* (call out injustices and demand change).

Leaders should be people who are honest, trustworthy, truthful and should have integrity. This is even more important for those of us who value participative leadership. The American author and philosopher Aldo Leopold defined integrity or ethical behaviour as *doing the right thing even when no one else is watching*.

Marshall Goldsmith gives us questions that we should regularly ask ourselves:

1. am I doing my best to stay healthy?
2. am I taking care of my wealth (or building it)?
3. am I working hard to build positive relationships with people I love?
4. Do I feel like I'm making a positive impact or difference?
5. Am I doing what is meaningful for me and what makes me happy at the same time?

Runners, many of us as runners I should say, are already addressing the first most important question; we are trying our best to stay healthy. As for wealth, just like happiness, should be about meaning and having impact. Wealth is not mainly financial resources. It is indeed, as Goldsmith argues, meaningless to be happy but not having a positive impact.