Leadership and the role of the intellectual

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Bio

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In the complexity of the South African political and business landscape, there has been a spate of recent revelations on the assumed 'intellectual' background of prominent leaders, with Pallo Jordan being perhaps the most well-known. This has raised interesting questions about both the nature and role of the intellectual within the context of influential leadership.

The current public discourse has spawned a number of debates on the definition of an intellectual. Let us therefore remove the most obvious arguments first, with the use of some set theory: patently, not all intellectuals have or need to have PhDs, and not all leaders with PhDs are intellectuals. Neither are all people who have advanced degrees in roles of leadership, just as not all those in leadership roles have advanced degrees. Not all academic work is intellectual in nature, nor are all academics viewed as intellectuals. For the most part it appears that, at least in the public mind, an intellectual advances issues by contributing ideas and insights, and sometimes by asking new and light-casting questions on issues that affect large parts of society. Intellectuals make contributions to advance the quality of the argument by providing new avenues and options for progress. They are able to process complexity by moving beyond divisive arguments. Based on these criteria, one may argue that we suffer a dearth of intellectuals in the current composition of our societal leadership corps.

Quality education is already a sensitive matter in our society, which has made many agree with commentators like Oscar Wilde, who observed, "Fortunately my education has had no impact on me whatsoever." Not that the value of education should be dismissed (of course), but it should not be confused with learning either. South Africa also produces a lamentably low number of doctoral graduates, as **reported** by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group.

Given the role of business and political leaders in society, it is not a tremendous stretch to examine the presence of these qualities specifically in the leadership corps at our disposal. Literature abounds with models and frameworks for what leaders should be, i.e. what constitutes their identity, and indeed what they should do, i.e. what should constitute their behaviour. Naturally, there is a great degree of overlap in an almost infinite number of sources, as academics and other authors scramble for supremacy in the popular and potentially lucrative space of Leadership, as described in an **article** on Systemic Leadership. The fluidity and qualitative nature of the subject has also invited charlatans as commentators, since there are virtually no barriers to entry into the field of so-called Leadership consulting. The result has been that Leadership itself has been diluted as a field of study. It appears that, as the literature on the subject of Leadership burgeons with reckless abandon, paradoxically its definition is growing ever more vague, or (read positively) at least more encompassing. While we have recognised from the argument above that a robust intellect may be a key dimension of high-quality leadership, it is by no means the only determinant of desirable leadership. It is what may be described as a critical but not sufficient criterion. Below appears a framework (in this sense, literally 'a set of frames'), offered as a means of sense-making in this field of growing complexity.

Known as the Eleven Lenses Framework, it aims to present a landscape of leadership perspectives common in current leadership discourse. It is not offered as a definitive set of requisite competencies for leaders, but rather as an environmental scan of pervasive interpretations of Leadership, which also act as preferences, in turn inspired by the needs presented by the multiple systemic containing systems in which both leaders and followers reside.

As with all fields of study, the perception of Leadership depends on the dominant paradigms of the time and unique geopolitical context. In our time, referred to in a **previous article** as 'The Era of MORE', it is difficult to ignore the ever-increasing levels of complexity. This has exacerbated the difficulty of making decisions and resolving problems that appear to recur with stubborn 'stickability'. The eleven lenses include Leadership as –

1. **Emotionally mature**. This is quite possibly the most dominant current perspective on Leadership, and has been so since the early 1990s. Leaders are encouraged to be emotionally intelligent as a crucial adjunct to their intellectual prowess. They are expected to possess critical self-awareness and to demonstrate humility and ego-subjugation. This dimension further expects leaders to be aware of the needs (emotional and otherwise) of others and to respect the diversity presented by a host of stakeholders. Many who espouse this view as their main vantage point for the study of Leadership argue that this is an essential precursor to any further development for leaders. This last view is proving to be limiting, as many organisations are finding themselves emotionally stable, yet making significantly flawed decisions and suffering strategic disengagement.

2. **Behaviourally determined**. This is what is meant when most people say, "We now need leadership." It is a call for those in positions of power to take charge of a situation verging on chaos. Such leaders are expected to demonstrate courage, despite the potential risk involved. It is often the case in this perspective that an error of omission presents a greater risk than positive intervention.

3. **Ethically substantial**. This lens represents the axiological paradigm. It is set on a bipolar continuum of deontologism (a sense of duty for morally correct behaviour) to consequentialism (the view that the end justifies the means). With political and business leadership globally and locally seen by many as being in crisis, this is a perspective often hoped for and seldom fulfilled. It is the mantra of most leaders who wish to gain power as they court voters or sponsorship mentors, and sadly also the trap that leads to the downfall of many leaders once viewed as 'the answer'. Viewed through this lens, leaders are expected to take a stand based on values. This lens includes approaches to Leadership such as –

   - Authentic leadership – ethical for its realness

   - Servant leadership – ethical for its contribution to others

   - Responsible leadership – ethical for its enactment of an assumed higher order mandate

- Leading by example – ethical for demonstrating what is admirable

- Leader as coach – ethical for its altruistic investment

- Sustainable leadership – ethical for its emphasis on legacy and future orientation

4. **Technically excellent**. This means that leaders are expected to present competence beyond the average in a field that serves core business. There is a dichotomous character to this perspective, as Leadership is sometimes viewed as a competence quite separate from 'core business', but this requirement is often called upon when organisations begin to suffer owing to the lack of technical ability in those at the top.

5. **Visionary**. This is possibly one of the oldest perspectives on Leadership, and has existed since the time of original religious texts. This perspective becomes particularly relevant when the status quo proves itself desperately lacking and a new, albeit uncertain, future is demanded. Viewed through this lens, leaders are called upon to create a compelling view of the future for, with and through others, including Transformational Leadership.

6. **Accidentally and circumstantially significant**. Not all those in roles of Leadership have set out to become leaders. More often (especially at middle and senior management levels in organisations) these leaders have filled the shoes of a predecessor following the departure of the previous incumbent through retirement, dismissal or redeployment. Such leaders have gained prominence by default rather than by design, and this community typically includes the reluctant leader. Senior technical specialists also frequently resort in such a group.

7. **Title, role or position and group of people**. The signature phrases for this perspective include, "We, the leadership, …" and "In my leadership role …" This perspective is often described as positional, and attributes leadership status externally, as opposed to intrinsically.

8. **Wealthy and powerful**. There is an ever-increasing trend of leaders requiring access to wealth and other resources as a prerequisite to even participating in the leadership race. Viewed through this lens, leadership is the domain of the wealthy and only those with resources can decide and make policy. New democracies philosophically oppose this view, while older democracies, such as the USA, appear to have accepted that billions of dollars are required to become president. This view is also paradoxically adopted as a sense of entitlement by new leaders ex post facto, i.e. leaders who win the race develop a new ethics of service, mainly aimed at service to themselves and their supporters.

9. **Ubiquitous mindset**. In this perspective, all people, everywhere and at all levels, are viewed as leaders. Leadership is not a role, but an attitude to life. Popular psychology and self-help literature have fed on the need of erstwhile 'outsiders' to feel like leaders, and this is advanced by the popularity of concepts of individual uniqueness, confidence, positive self-image and related human potential terminology. In this perspective, leadership is something

to be taken for oneself. Everyone should simply take responsibility for him- or herself, and search out and grasp the opportunities of influence as they present themselves.

10. **Benevolent emergence**. Leadership is not viewed as a competence here, but as the intangible quality that is produced when the right connections are made between the right parts, in the right way, in the interest of the right containing system. It is a perspective popular among systems thinkers and complexity theorists.

11. **Intellectually influential**. Given the lenses above, one can now re-examine the role of the intellectual in leadership. Most frequently, this perspective demands from leaders to demonstrate thought leadership, which typically takes the form of new ideas and insights that are adopted by others at a rapid rate and on large scale. Such leaders influence the level and content of thinking of others as a means of resolving and dissolving complex challenges.

With such a wide spectrum of vantage points on Leadership, it may reasonably be asked whether the role of the intellectual leader is indeed valued in our current dispensation of structures and ambitions. One test that we may employ to evaluate the extent to which we value the intellect is to examine the degree of impact in relation to an increase in level of the leader for each lens.

In other words, we could investigate whether there is a direct correlation between level and impact. It seems disturbing that while the correlation is positive for the first ten lenses, it may not be so for the intellect. Leaders who advance in the other lenses almost automatically extend their impact on their environment, but this is not intuitive, it seems, for the intellect. It appears that not all those who advance intellectually automatically advance in level of influence.

Returning to set theory, the reader may therefore question the nature of his or her own environment: Is there evidence of any of these two inverted opposite trends that undermines the role of the intellectual in leadership –

- that several who lack intellectual brilliance appear to be in positions of leadership?

- that many with an advanced intellect appear to have limited influence?

The response to these deceptively simple questions may itself require advanced intellect for fruitful insights that do not fall prey to recurring and self-reinforcing but destructive thought patterns. The requisite intellectual investment may be great, but the rewards outshine the effort, and the social tax of ill consideration may prove simply too costly.