

Interview Fred de Vries with Eric Mafuna

Google the word 'leadership', and you'll get over 171 million hits. Add the words 'South Africa', and you'll still end up with a staggering 13,6 million. From the Afrikaner battle cry for a new De la Rey to the glossy Leadership magazine and the ANC presidential succession saga, there's an obvious need to grapple with the leadership issue.

That's what business mogul Eric Mafuna has been preaching for some thirty years now. In his Woodmead office he bangs the table with a flat hand as he says:

'Ninety per cent of South Africa's problems are the result of poor leadership, bad leadership or lack of leadership. And until you sort out leadership, South Africa will remain a basketcase.'

Leadership is about setting examples and moving people forward.

Sound leadership motivates and structurally changes our environment in every aspect, from the psychological and the social to the physical and the economical. 'Apartheid was very good at destroying black leadership at community level,' continues Mafuna. 'You'll be hard pressed in the black areas to find a community that functions to the same extent as the Jewish or Indian ones. And if you don't have communities that function, can you have families that function...?'

Eric Mafuna, who is regularly cited by President Thabo Mbeki, is a 'leadership guru'. In 1976 he founded the Black Management Forum (BMF), which developed from a social group for black graduates into a powerful institution that would devise Black Economic Empowerment and affirmative action. In 1995 he established the think tank, Africa Now. And last year President Mbeki officially launched Mafuna's twin project of the African Leadership Development Trust and the African Leadership Group, which has the basic aim of helping South Africa to develop proper leadership on every level.

Talk to Mafuna and you'll meet a 60+ man still on a mission, his thinking a curious blend of black nationalism and pragmatism, a man who thinks affirmative action has run its course, and who wants to throw the Mandela style of leadership in the mix with Indian, Jewish and black American success stories to create something uniquely South African, which he calls 'constellational leadership'.

His biography reads like a metaphor for the attempts of the apartheid government to thwart black efforts to rise above. A residue of bitterness still lurks in his throat as he recounts how in the late sixties he was denied the opportunity to study 'group dynamics' at the American Stanford University, even though he had been admitted.

But the rector of the University College of the North sabotaged his dream, citing bureaucratic reasons. To understand why, because by the third year I was a student president and had lot of scrimmages with him. I was really at the forefront of campus activism,' says Mafuna.

Despite the head of the department finding the subject too political, a stubborn Mafuna did manage to do an Honours in 'group dynamics' and was subsequently snatched by the Joburg branch of the American advertising company J. Walter Thompson, which greedily tapped into his knowledge of black consumer behaviour. They rewarded him with overseas trips, and enabled him to get a management diploma from Tufts University in Boston.

Mafuna loved the States. In the late seventies he travelled from New York to Texas, Alabama, Chicago and Detroit, feted by representatives of the flourishing black civil rights movement who drove him around in a long green Cadillac. He was amazed to hear that in America there was an organisation with an African name that had been in existence for over 150 years. A black organisation that old! Older than the ANC! So by the time I got back, my message to the BMF was very different.

It shifted from black study group to something with a political, an economic and a communal mission. I began to understand why it is we cannot develop far-sighted leadership. It's because we didn't have organisations to support that leadership.'

Deeper and deeper he dug into the leadership issues, asking himself why, for example, the Jewish, Indian and Afrikaner communities got it right, while black South Africans didn't. Which raised other questions around the issue of 'what constitutes a South African?'. Where are the commonalities? And how to bridge the labyrinth gap between a tightly knit community and a floundering sense of nationhood in a country composed of minorities?

During our conversation he identifies two major problems. Firstly, there's a serious lack of black organisations on community level, which partly explains the culture of greed

and corruption that has emerged over the last years. 'You find greed and corruption in any human society everywhere,' corrects Mafuna. 'But in our particular situation we are fast tracking people without the nets to capture them when they fall out, without the mechanism to provide the discipline, without the moderating structures.

So the person feels no responsibility to the family or the community. There are no organisations that tie them to the community, no structures that force them to go back to the extended families.'

Secondly there's a severe lack of nationhood. While the US has put a lot of effort into creating a melting pot, South Africa is still in the stage of potjiekos (literally, 'food in a little pot', South African food cooked in a three-legged pot) with lots of hard-to-digest bits and pieces. 'One of the few times you were able to feel and see and taste its real common context and texture was when we won the world rugby cup. Sports help us to articulate our newness.'

But at the same time the country does have a perfect case of successful leadership - in the person of Nelson Mandela. 'Mandela's secret of success is the issue of paradox, how to manage the paradox,' says Mafuna.

After studying the Mandela machinations, Mafuna's organisation coined the phrase 'constellational leadership': something which from a distance looks like one bright star, but in reality is an interplay of many stars. In the case of Mandela, there were the smaller stars of the ANC delegates who decided Mbeki would make a better deputy than Cyril Ramaphosa, even though Madiba preferred Ramaphosa. Subsequently Mbeki became the less visible star who did a lot of difficult organisational legwork, while Mandela reflected moral leadership.

'This is a binary leadership model. In essence it works within this constellation of leadership.'

Given the fact that this is essentially an inclusive model, it's not surprising that Mafuna sees little future for an exclusive policy like affirmative action. 'BEE still has legs to go, but affirmative action has run its course. It has been relatively successful in putting black people into organisations and positions where they previously were not.'

'The problem we have is that when these people arrived in organised life they were not able to connect to professional or workplace networks which the whites had before. So a lot of affirmative action people today are battling because they cannot find connection to the informal networks that normally run business and have been lobbied in restaurants or clubs.'

The country now needs something new, something that goes well beyond colour or race. And that, he stresses, is not the responsibility of the government. 'The BMF and their fellow travellers need to come up with a post-affirmative action policy. They'll have to target young South Africans, regardless of social, racial or economic background. You cannot continue to say to young graduates that they were advantaged by apartheid structures.'

After two hours I've heard complex analyses and sound theories, but it still lacks something tangible. It feels like the discussions on climate change: you can ponder forever, but if no one does anything, nothing will change. Mafuna nods. Okay, the practice is simple, he says.

His organisation will do research, acquire the rights to concepts from places like Harvard and the London School of Economics, choose case studies, work with world-class academics, leaders and educators and eventually devise unifying models and programmes for young South Africans of all races. The country should no longer be satisfied with getting the odd fish from foreign donors as a stop-gap to structural problems.

So when will we see this rise of new leaders? 'We're still in the tooling phase,' he admits. 'That's why I go to Europe to raise money. Let us acquire the skills to fashion the fishing rod so we can fish ourselves.'