

A reflection on leadership in troubling times

Stan Hardman: The Leadership Dialogue. 10 November 2016

As I think with many other South Africans I am feeling a deep disquiet at present. It is being expressed in many different ways but for me I have come to the realisation that my frustration relates directly to what my professional life is about. As a practitioner in systemic approaches to leadership my basic premise is that leaders' desire improvement for the groups they are part of. It's a simple starting point. Leadership is about improvement in whichever way you contextualise it. For many great leaders the vision of improvement has been grand and often inclusive. Think of our great leaders in all spheres of life – faith, human rights, peace, the lives of women, and the lives of children, the future of planet earth, the disempowered in one way or another.

But to work for improvement requires a deep commitment to **work** for improvement. It implies a self-effacing, outward perspective where we are convinced about the well-being of the group, the team; the citizens. It sets inclusive boundaries and seeks sustainable solutions. It requires an enabling frame of reference where people naturally seek to be the change they want to see. They are prepared to put in the hard yards and meet the challenges because they have a vision of a future more desirable than the present reality. They advocate, they trial, they learn, they commit. And when they make mistakes, there is an openness to learn and grow from them.

Moreover we see the earnest efforts made to provide the enabling environment for improvement through governance structures designed to facilitate positive change.

I contrast the desire for improvement with the desire for accumulation. Here the perspective is inward, it's about me. It selfishly looks to protection of the self through building a closed network of loyalty through incorporation into the accumulation agenda. It seems to me when this view of leadership dominates it really stymies the space for leadership as improvement. What happens is that instead of individual and organisational energy being focussed on inclusive growth, development, improvement in the human condition, energy enters a protectionist, defensive mode where combative action precludes creating the space for improvement. Energy is diverted from the "improvers" into a fight for their perceptions of social justice and survival for their world-view.

In South Africa we have come to use the word “captive” in a new way which suggests that a broad network exists within which a leadership of accumulation has flourished. It is not a new concept, but we have named it and many in our country are now fighting to shame it. Those resisting being “shamed” use the opposing forces of protectionism, reflected in obfuscation and building walls of defence and provocation to divert and confuse the broader public in order to maintain their gains.

Many would see the whole concept of colonisation as an insidious form of “capture”. Colonialization had what many now see as a duplicitous face. It claimed to be a civilising process bringing enlightenment to those outside of the mother state. It was also, and many would say predominantly, an avenue for rent and resource extraction from the colonised to the colonial power. The same argument can be made of the apartheid state. I use this illustration to suggest how the concept of “improvement” needs to be critiqued and not used as a smokescreen for accumulation. Just because historic archetypes manifest in emergent ways doesn’t mean that we cannot learn from their past manifestations.

I am under no illusion that the times we live in are any more contested between improvement and accumulation is different from any other time. Nor do I think that people are any more or any less conflicted about this duality in their own being. But what is clear is that we live at a time where the chickens are coming home to roost in relation to the predominance of accumulation as a world culture. Never before have we had the technology we have today in relation to the availability of information, nor ever before have we had the manifest power exhibited through control of the media be it through the media moguls or through ubiquitous social media.

To return to my starting point which was the expression of my frustration of working in a field where my focus is on working with people who desire to be part of the improvement agenda – be it in higher education, social development or service-delivery. My challenge is how one can promote an agenda and build capacity for improvement in various communities grappling with the systemic consequences of the contestations evident in contemporary society.

I guess this conversation can be summed up as follows. The true test of our humanity, individually and collectively, is whether you live off everyone, or whether you live for everyone. I guess it’s a balancing act.