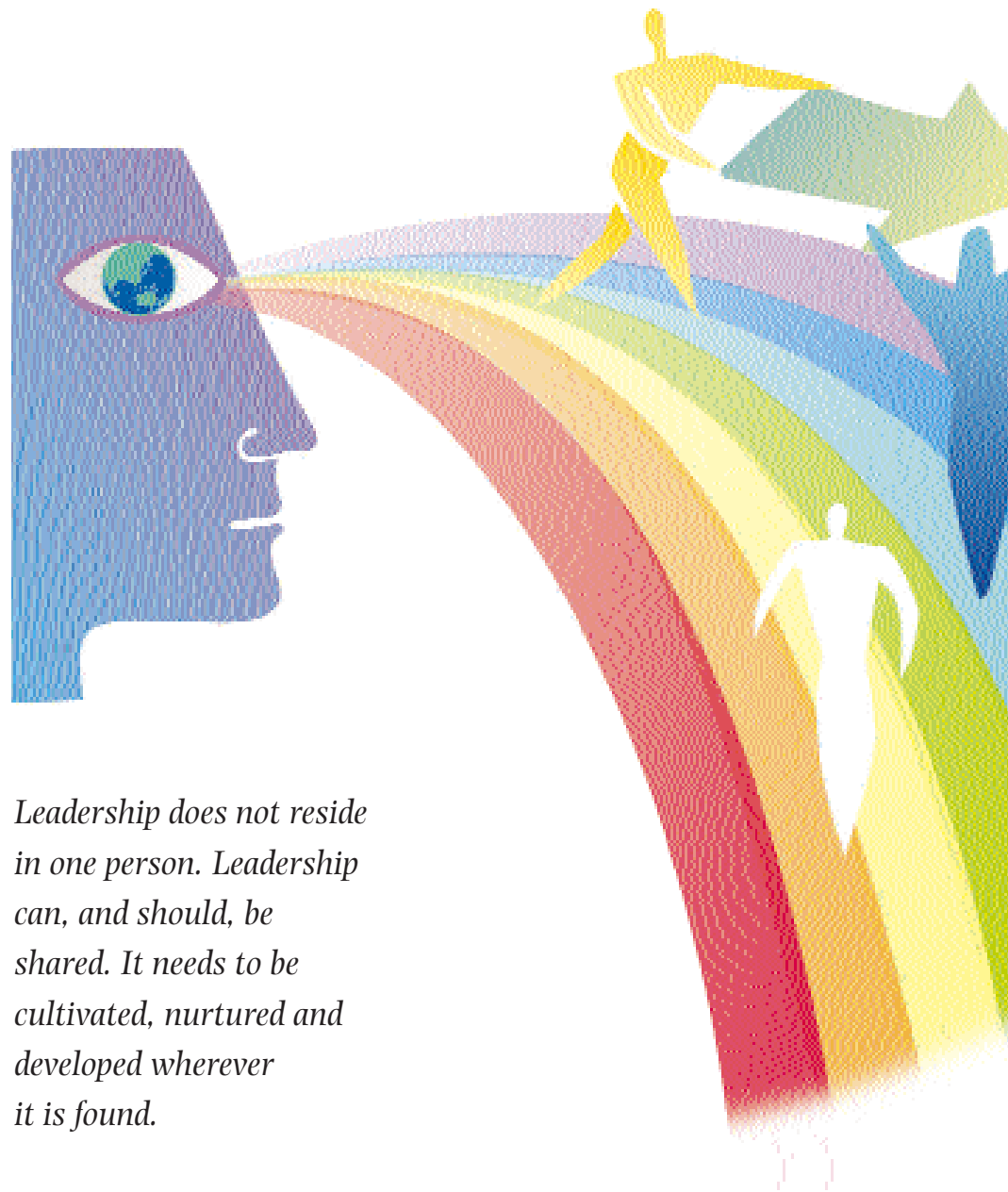


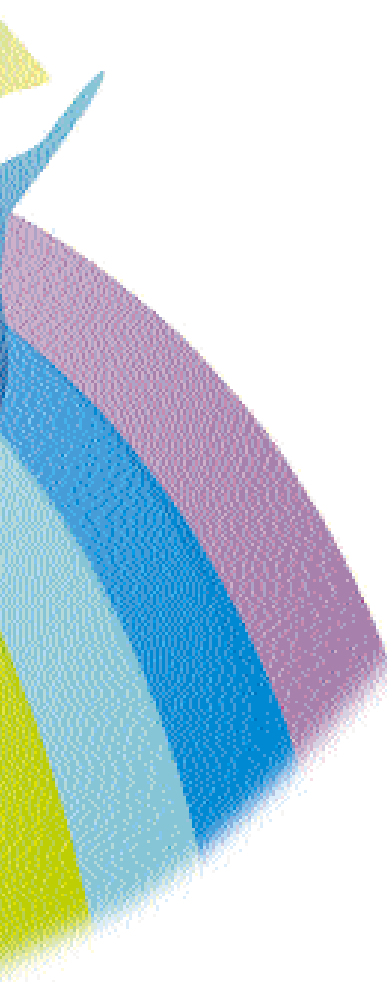
B.M. GOURLEY



Out of Africa



Leadership does not reside in one person. Leadership can, and should, be shared. It needs to be cultivated, nurtured and developed wherever it is found.



WE live in a complex, diverse, fast changing and deeply fractured society. If we do not consciously believe we need to try and learn to understand that society then we are consigning ourselves and our communities (big or small) to an ongoing struggle, a struggle essentially between the peoples of the world, most of whom show themselves increasingly unwilling to accept the awful disparities between the rich and the poor. We all must surely know the long-term outlook for that ignorance. As one placard in the Genoa demonstrations read, "You are G8, we are 6 million." Never has the need for education and learning been more, and never has the need for leadership been more crucial.

I have spent most of my life in South Africa and, needless to say, have been deeply influenced by that country and its people, not the least its leadership. By most definitions, over a crucial time of its history, I believe it was truly a learning society. I shall try to derive some lessons from that recent history and hope that it provides you with some insights into good leadership.

South Africa is indeed a unique place. It has been the only country in the history of the world where power has been ceded from one group to another without civil war on a major scale. Almost overnight, it seemed it moved from being one of the most reviled nations on earth to become one of the most admired. Few living through these times would have imagined that not only would South Africans devise for themselves one of the most sophisticated democratic constitutions in the world, but would negotiate a most unusual Government of National Unity where there was a partnership, or compact, between members of different political parties. How did a nation 'learn' to be something so different? Are there

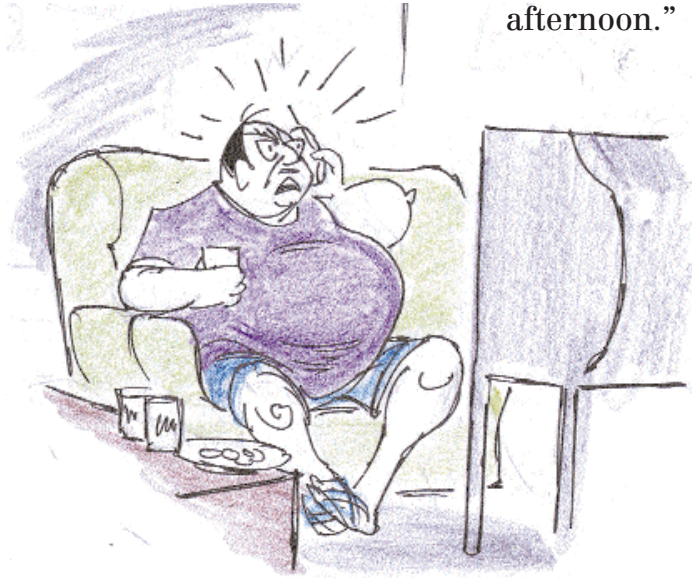
lessons that we can all learn if we aspire to be learning communities? Are there lessons for us as we strive to be better leaders?

First, I do not believe that there can be any collective that can act effectively without good leadership and that is why an examination of leadership as a concept is so important. South Africa in the early part of this decade and in the first few years of its new democracy had an extraordinary brand of leaders. These were people who had sacrificed many, if not most of their personal freedoms, for a higher ideal - freedom from the shackles of apartheid; they were people who were jailed, tortured, exiled, banned; they were people of high personal integrity; they were people who had truly suffered for what they believed in. It is not given to most countries to have such people as their political leaders. Indeed, politicians in most democracies are not people who are held in high personal regard by the people they purport to represent and we must ask ourselves how this has come to be and how it can be changed.

The leadership in South Africa at that time also distinguished itself in another important way which is relevant to our reflections here. Throughout their life sentences and other deprivations, they committed themselves, under the most appalling and challenging of conditions, to learning and teaching, to education and its highest ideals. In the way in which this was done they demonstrated their instinctive grasp of the five learning disciplines that Peter Senge described in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (and it seems to me that those five disciplines are essential to one's understanding of leadership - team building, building shared vision, being an active learner oneself, being capable of true dialogue and being open to new and different mental models and finally, being

etc.
RAVIKANTH

“No I don’t want to motivate you guys. No leader motivates his guys on a Sunday afternoon.”



able to see the large picture or thinking systematically).

To take just one of these and return to a South African example on Robben Island (South Africa’s infamous prison) Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and others committed themselves to academic and political (teaching and) learning, and committed not just themselves, but all inmates.

In a unique book, aptly titled, *Learning from Robben Island*, we are given an idea of how severely restricted in communication and interaction these prisoners were. There were shortages of books and writing materials and prisoners were constantly under the baleful eye of the harshest of warders. And yet they still managed to write essays on a multiplicity of topics, to copy these tracts out on to the smallest bits of paper in the tiniest of writing and to smuggle them from prisoner-to-prisoner. They taught and learnt mental and manual tasks and managed to create an environment that conveyed a deep

sense of community and solidarity, and more important, a deep sense of aspiration beyond themselves.

The very real example of the struggle to learn on Robben Island demonstrates not only what can be done when people wish to learn, want to learn, but also, what kind of leadership emerges from such an environment – leaders with a disciplined and ethical foundation, with a clear emphasis on solidarity and an acute sense of a broader view; an aspiration to a better life, some day, not just for themselves, but for their people (Mbeki: 1991).

This leads onto another description of the term ‘leader’: the leader as a servant. Robert Greenleaf calls it ‘servant-leadership’: a concept which abandons the traditional and autocratic modes and defines true leadership as being primarily motivated by a desire to help others, to build a sense of community and shared decision-making and to take a more holistic approach to working and living. The founder of the Ramakrishna Mission also talked about servant leadership and described it as including a purity of purpose, a perseverance of effort and a passion for service. Mandela and his colleagues demonstrated this in their struggle for freedom and Mandela always emphasised his own subservience to the structures of the ANC (African National Congress) and its goals.

What other lessons can we take from the South African model? I have no doubt that people learn or change their mental models (as Senge would say) only if they are persuaded that it is in their interest to do so. Why should people embrace education, embrace diversity and community, become model citizens, embark on a journey to find common purpose? We know that they mostly do not, in fact, readily do so.

In the struggle for freedom in South Africa, to take an example, it is easy to imagine building shared

vision and even teams among black people. The vision was not something they found difficult to identify with and it had great moral force, but how to extend that shared vision was another matter altogether.

It is a matter of record that South Africans in the late 1980s and early 1990s were staring into a yawning abyss of civil war, economic deterioration and a rising tide of unemployment. Even then the cushioned elite might well have retreated further into their 'laagers' if a massive campaign had not been waged, not only by people outside the country (a campaign which culminated in academic boycotts, sports boycotts and economic sanctions) but also inside the country. One of these campaigns was one which took a scenario planning exercise originally conducted by one of the largest companies (Anglo American) and turned it into a very persuasive 'road show' – a show which reached somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 people in all walks of life - a show which marked a unique time of reflection and conversation, a unique opportunity for people not only to change their mental models, but indeed come to understand that the whole foundation of their privileged life in South Africa had to change - a shared vision. The road show also did something else on the way. It helped build partnerships, and big social projects need collaborative efforts – partnerships.

So there was reflection and conversation and in South Africa it went far beyond the kind of road show that I described. It included, and indeed still includes, a variety of very painful exercises in self-examination and reflection that clearly demonstrated a need for change.

One of these exercises was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where people from every quarter were given the

opportunity to tell their stories of pain and loss and humiliation. The process was motivated by an understanding that moving into a new democracy was not enough. People – all people – had to understand what had happened during those horror years and there had to be apology and forgiveness. There had to be what Catholics call 'a firm purpose of amendment'. Archbishop Tutu called his book about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission *No Future without Forgiveness*, and his leadership and leadership philosophy also contributed to the South African miracle. If we have aspirations to leadership we would do well to reflect on the meaning of this phrase. Mandela is also on record as saying "No one is born hating. People must learn to hate... And if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love..." Such a statement evoked real possibilities and it behoves us all, to ponder those possibilities. South Africa was also blessed with a leader who was a living embodiment of reconciliation, of love, a man who led the way forward – Nelson Mandela – a marvellous leader.

We also learnt in South Africa however, and there are many examples all over the world, that leadership does not reside in one person. Indeed it is dangerous if it does. Leadership can, and should, be shared. It needs to be cultivated and nurtured and developed wherever it is found. Building a culture of leadership, encouraging enterprise and being tolerant of mistakes are all necessary where people are given room to grow. Highly structured and hierarchical organisations do not encourage such leadership, do not distribute decision-making and will certainly not build common purpose.

Of course, South Africa still has many miles to go and many lessons to learn. Democracy as we all know, is not an event. Rather it is a

process. But I give all these examples of a nation reflecting upon itself, building shared vision and shared leadership, because it seems to me that it is a precondition to meaningful social change that such reflection take place.

To sum up, it seems that the essential skills and capabilities of learning communities (such as there are) include:

- The capacity for education to take place
- The need for communities to aspire to be something different (shared vision)
- Reflection and conversation in those communities and a willingness to engage in ways that may mean that assumptions and beliefs may well change (change mental models)
- Some capacity to see larger systems and forces at work
- The ability and willingness to work collaboratively, in partnerships (team building and working)
- Most crucially - a special kind of leadership.

I have given a tangible example of a country, South Africa, where all these elements were at work and where deep and profound change and learning has taken place. The question that needs to be answered is whether or not this is anything more than an interesting episode in history and whether or not it can be transported as a learning experience to any other place in any other time. I believe there are lessons. But they are not easy lessons. Indeed, in the context of the highly technological solutions to which we are aspiring in so many of our educational and other so-called endeavours, in the context of the forces of globalisation and its consequences, they are anything but easy. But I ask you to reflect on the alternative. ■

(The author is the Vice-Chancellor of The Open University in Milton Keynes in the UK.)