

# Nelson Mandela as a leader of his nation

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What kind of leader was Mandela? He once said, “ It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.” In many ways, Mandela was a mindful leader, having invested hugely in developing his self-awareness and managing his emotions The truly mindful leader gets their own life in order first before engaging in advising others to do the same.

Nelson Mandala was a beacon of hope, and like Gandhi before him, a shining example of what a leader can and should be. A man of great compassion and forgiveness and humility. He will be sorely missed, but as it has been said, “ When you live on the hearts of those you love, you will never die.”

Nelson Mandela was one of the most outstanding leaders of the 20th century. He led a non-violent movement that succeeded in completely undoing the unjust system of Apartheid in South Africa. His leadership was a lynchpin of the movement, even when he was in prison. Anyone who wants to develop their own leadership traits would do well to emulate him. In this article, we will outline eleven of Nelson Mandela’s most outstanding leadership traits.

Mandela had an incredible amount of endurance.

Nelson Mandela quite simply would not give up his fight to end Apartheid. Never. This was a man who went to prison in June of 1964 and was not released until February 1990. For nearly sixteen years of his life, he was kept behind bars and separated from his family. The lesson here is to never give

up because your goals are difficult to achieve or because you have run into resistance.

Mandela knew the power of forgiveness.

“ As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” (Nelson Mandela). It was this spirit of forgiveness and moving forward that led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison and became president he did not seek vengeance. Instead, he sought a way to heal the wounds Apartheid had inflicted on his country and bring it together. He led his country on a path of peace through forgiveness.

Mandela had a very strong vision of what he wanted to accomplish.

Mandela joined the African National Congress in 1944. Between 1944 and 1964, when he was imprisoned, he led a campaign of civil disobedience designed to end Apartheid. During that time, he developed a clear vision of what South Africa could be without Apartheid. When he was released from prison in 1990 and subsequently elected president he set about making that vision a reality. He succeeded because he had a clear vision of what needed to happen in order to unify both black and white people in South Africa and achieve peace.

Mandela was a humble man.

Like other icons of civil disobedience, such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi, Nelson Mandela was a humble man. He was not full of ego and he firmly believed that all great peacemakers had to be people of humility. He said, “ I am not a saint unless you think of saint a sinner who keeps on trying.” That humility allowed him to rise above his ego and make great personal sacrifices for his beliefs. It also made him a role model that other people would emulate and follow. Humility allows a leader to lead by example.

Mandela gave people hope.

The entire arc of his life showed that Mandela was a man who was full of hope. He never gave in to despair, even when he was in prison. This unflagging belief in what was right and in the possibility that justice would prevail was often infectious. Great leaders set a moral and positive tone that uplifts their followers and inspires hope. It is how he was able to lead South Africa to peace and unity after Apartheid rather than hatred and more violence.

Patience is a virtue that Mandela had a lot of.

“ We should not let an illusion of urgency force us to make decisions before we are ready.’ (Nelson Mandela). If anyone ever knows how to play the long game it was him. He spent decades dedicating himself to a cause that didn’t seem likely to succeed in the early years. The time he spent in prison taught him the value of patience. He waited for and worked toward the accomplishment of his goals during that time. Great leaders know that instant gratification is not the way to achieve big goals.

Mandela knew that a smile is an important weapon.

“Appearances matter – and remember to smile.” (Nelson Mandela). He was known for his good humor. A smile and pleasant demeanor is a powerful way to disarm tension and enmity. It can be a much more powerful tool in the face of hatred and opposition than raised voices and ugly words.

Mandela strived for things that were greater than himself.

“I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” (Nelson Mandela). Great leaders focus on what they want to achieve and not their own glorification. That does mean making sacrifices. You might not have to make the kind of sacrifices that Mandela made but achieving important goals does demand your time, energy, and focus.

Mandela knew the power of positive thinking.

“Courage is not the absence of fear — it is inspiring others to move beyond it.” (Nelson Mandela). He knew that negative thinking doesn't have the same power to affect change that positive thinking does. Mandela certainly knew that it would not be possible to transform South Africa with negativity. Great leaders know that destructive and hate-filled thoughts tear things down and positive thoughts are the way to build things up.

Mandela was the definition of true grit.

“ Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” (Nelson Mandela). He spent decades fighting oppression, being accused of treason, and struggling to overcome the ingrained racism in his country – and that was before he went to prison. Great leaders know that failure happens. They also know that how to react to failure is what helps you achieve success.

Mandela knew that peace allows for prosperity.

“ For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” (Nelson Mandela). This is one of the most important lessons of great leadership. One of the reasons that Mandela was able to unite South Africa was his determination to replace Apartheid with a system that allowed for the freedom and prosperity of all South Africans. Mandela realized that most people want peace and stability because that is how a society (and a business) prospers.

As today marks the anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s death, we reflect on the timeless lessons from his life story that will endure for years to come.

Mandela was a gifted visionary. He exercised a full range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral abilities to bring about a profound change in South Africa. All leaders who aspire to be more strategic can learn from Mandela’s six key behaviors that distinguish him as a true strategic leader.

1. He anticipated. Mandela looked ahead and could see that South Africa’s system of Apartheid would not survive into the future. From his prison cell, he strategically assessed his moves and anticipated

reactions. When offered freedom in exchange for renouncing opposition to the government, Mandela rebuked President Botha: “What freedom am I being offered while the organization of the people remains banned? ... What freedom am I being offered if I must ask permission to live in an urban area?” Mandela decided to serve out his sentence rather than exchange it for the political prison of apartheid. His vision was right. The outside world recoiled against South Africa, while local business leaders and young whites pushed for change domestically.

2. He challenged. Mandela stood out among prisoners and guards as a man of principle and dignity, willing to sacrifice his life for his beliefs. Despite harsh prison life, Mandela mustered energy to challenge his keepers. He was unwilling to accept the status quo and his presence on Robben Island held a mirror up to the face of apartheid’s leaders. Through word, deed and symbol, he challenged the system that denied him liberty. Eventually, Botha’s successor F. W. de Klerk called for democratic elections and in 1994, Mandela became president of South Africa in a very rare, peaceful, and orderly transition from the white minority to black-majority rule. Mandela and de Klerk shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 “for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa.”
3. He interpreted. Mandela studied the errors of Robert Mugabe in bordering Zimbabwe whose brutal dictatorship resulted in the country’s demise. He recognized that South Africa could follow in

Zimbabwe's footsteps, unless he practiced racial harmony. That meant forgiving without forgetting and sharing power. " We have to surprise [the white minority] with restraints and generosity," he said. A master of symbolism, Mandela invited his prison guards to the presidential swearing-in ceremony. Mandela's interpretation of history was spot on. South Africa could prosper as a multi-racial society only if leaders mutually forgave each other.

4. He decided. In 1993, a white man assassinated Chris Hani, a leader of the South African Communist Party, triggering a widespread demonstration against the de Klerk government. Mandela, recently out of prison, had the guts to call for peace when people wanted revenge. He also made a courageous decision to use sports as a means of healing, believing, " Sport...has the power to unite people in a way that little else does." When the ban was lifted on South Africa's participation in the 1992 Olympics, Mandela at first opposed but ultimately decided to support the mostly white athletes. " There is no doubt in my mind this is the correct decision," Mandela said. Of the 95-person delegation, only eight were black. " I would have liked [the team] to be a reflection of our population, but there has to be a starting point."
5. He aligned. After being elected South Africa's first black president, Mandela announced he would serve only one term, though two were permissible. He understood rallying the country and bridging diverse interests meant making room for others. Black supremacy was as depraved as white supremacy, in his view. Mandela knew that over a



billion people would watch his inaugural presidential address and used this speech—and key plural pronouns we, us, and our—to align a deeply divided nation around a common vision: “ We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom...none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must, therefore, act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation-building, for the birth of a new world.”

6. He learned. Mandela faced big questions after his release from prison: What to do with the faltering economy? For most of his life, Mandela was a socialist and even a Marxist. He was suspicious of free markets and private ownership, given the abuses he witnessed. He said, “ The nationalization of the mines, banks and monopoly industries is the policy of the ANC [African National Congress], and a change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable.” But then he came to learn what decades of socialism had done to the states of the former Soviet Union. His thinking took a sharp turn when he met leaders of the Communist Parties of China and Vietnam who were striving to privatize state enterprises. “ They changed my views altogether,” Mandela told a biographer.

Mandela exemplifies how a strategic leader adjusts strategy and execution amid complex social, political, legal, and economic forces without compromising deeply held values. Leadership is not just about motivating people and creating political support for a strategy, but also about maintaining broad support through successive adjustments to the plan.

## References

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