Considerations towards Ethical Leadership: Women-centred approaches to Leadership

We are living in a time of disenchantment. Every day we are faced with news that makes us question how we got to where we are today. We question the quality of leaders we have and their ability to guide us and where they intend to take us. These questions are the reason we should be asking ourselves: Where are the seeds of the new, and how can we find the “re-enchantment”?

As a nation we need to ask ourselves ‘What are the conditions which are not of a leader’s making’? We can make beautiful lists of qualities that an ethical leader should possess, but if we do not apply our miserable intellects to our structural conditions then we are farting in the wind. We need a structural analysis of how hegemonic power works in our time. My pessimistic prognosis is that we ought to analyse the forms of power in the 21st century, beginning with the systemic and structural dimensions of power. This includes the global power hierarchies and the contending power struggles such as that between the USA and China.

Our focus, however, should also be on the masculinist accounts of history and patriarchal leadership. This is not simply about challenging male leadership but, more importantly, the dominant masculinist approach to leadership.

We need to interrogate the systems of patriarchal leadership we have replicated from colonial rule. Such patriarchal leadership is an extension of the systems and values of the white, European male. This kind of power not only oppressed indigenous ways of being in Africa but also broke down systems of African matriarchal leadership. The masculinist accounts of history ignore the womanist power and leadership from African women that we need to draw on to move forward today. This woman-centred approach envisages matriarchal leadership that functions as a mantle rather than a crown.

The accumulation of power is gendered: masculinist leadership emphasises the accumulation of power in peak positions and status such as the presidency or other important formal positions of leadership; womanist/matriarchal leadership is engaged in the dispersion of power throughout society in the pursuit of social justice or simply daily social cohesion. Women thus disperse their energies in ways that often serve society but do not accumulate power to themselves.

Woman-centred leadership needs to redress this imbalance: to generate nodes of counter-power in which matriarchal leadership can prevail over toxic masculinities (and toxic femininities). We need to figure out how we integrate ourselves into patriarchal systems of power in order to insinuate, impose and persuade these matriarchal forms of leadership into our spaces of work – both formal work and community work. This provides our political leaders today with the challenge of finding the intricate balance between these forms of leadership.
If we understand the importance of re-connection with and re-possession of the Earth, after a legacy of dispossession and its continuation through accumulation by dispossession then we want to revisit our attachment to Reason and Secular Rationalism as the only way of being; the only form of logic and the only ontology that we embrace. If we open our minds to the possibility of other levels and ways of knowing, we can bring not only religion but spirituality back into our lives as Africans, indigenous peoples, and citizens who understand that we have indigene potential, a way of being in the world that values and builds on local knowledge.

More importantly, we need new languages of social justice. These different and woman-centred approaches to leadership can help to build an ethical leadership that is equal to the challenges of our current conditions.

END

Dr Darlene Miller is a senior lecturer at the Wits School of Governance. This paper was presented at the Cornerstone Institute’s ‘Critical Dialogues towards Reclaiming Agency’. 