Considerations towards ethical leadership: The Charter for Compassion

I have had a nagging question on my mind: Where is South Africa’s spiritual leadership? It is a question that invites more questions as people globally grapple with what leadership should look like in the world today.

Thankfully, we are seeing the emergence of a new leader prototype. We are recognising leaders who refuse to separate their politics from their spiritual beliefs because to do so would compromise their integrity, authenticity and intention. These three facets of leadership are critical in our response to a call for deepening leadership skills at every level. Young leaders need to be coached in a new style of leadership that allows heart and mind to work together – dictatorial, top-down, old-style leadership is not the way of the future so why are we still teaching it?

What we say and what we do should be informed at the deepest level by intention aligned with the greater good, inclusive of diversity in all its forms. For humans that means gender, race, age, economic and educational status, politics and of course, religion. We need to celebrate our diversity and recognise it as our superpower. In our differences, we are a beautiful, creative garden, different flowers blossoming abundantly under the courageous and unprejudiced sun, sharing the same soil, drinking the same rain.

Religion cannot be our point of commonality because we all believe differently. However, our religions point us towards our values. Common values are reflected in the Charter for Compassion, making it an excellent starting point of universal appeal. The internationally acclaimed Charter for Compassion was created in 2009 by a group of religious scholars led by former nun Karen Armstrong. It identifies compassion as the common value in all religions - the one ingredient that combats separation and fear, and fulfills the universal human desires to be loved, to belong, to be safe, to be free, to be at peace, to be happy. We have learned that anything that separates is not love and therefore is not in alignment with the greater good. Spiritually, separation is fear based and anti-life.

The Charter identifies common values drawn from every religion, but not defined by any religion. In other words, these values are secular and inclusive. Everybody has to win, otherwise it is not inclusive. Politics, business, minority groups – no one gets left behind.

In our workplaces, respect and compassion are often in short supply. Top-down leadership styles may be dictatorial and hierarchical, seeing kindness as weakness. Yet, studies have shown that people subjected to sarcasm, belittling talk and other kinds of inter-relational stress in the workplace made more mistakes and were unable to function optimally. People treated with respect, spoken to kindly and made to feel valued, were motivated to up their game. Their performance was significantly
better in terms of clear thinking, decision-making and productivity. Compassion pays, even in business!

We see models of compassionate leadership emerging in the political arena in people like Jacinda Ardern (Prime Minister of New Zealand) and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. In business, there is a groundswell of leaders of international companies, such as Emmanuel Faber, CEO of Danone, who have closed the gender pay gap, established equal maternity and paternity leave and set benchmark standards taking compassionate inclusivity to a new level.

The City of Cape Town signed the Charter for Compassion in 2014. Now it is time to own our position as a City of Compassion. Every citizen can and should play a role. Every kindness, every act of compassion, matters. We invite our leaders to show the way.

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