

Legacy Leadership vs. Community Leadership Illustrated by unlikely similarities between Adolph Hitler and Nelson Mandela

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The young man stood watching the mass of workers wind their way up the stone stairway from the canal to the road. There were thousands of angry men, some armed, waving red banners and flags, chanting loudly and angrily as they surged forward. It was a well-organized and coordinated mass movement. Earlier the organizers had harangued them shouting, pleading, whipping them up into a crescendo. The young man in the black shabby overcoat and black greasy derby watched them intently as they moved upwards and past him. Police stood by uneasily, clutching their weapons. It was cold. The young man's thin coat was turned up, his face unshaven. Long and unkempt hair curled over his collar, and was plastered down one side of his forehead. His eyes were alive, wide, staring intently at them. As one of his friends said, he looked "an apparition such as rarely occurs among Christians"ⁱ

He stood there for maybe two hours, his ever present hunger temporarily forgotten as he watched this human dragon wind past. *"In oppressed anxiety, I finally left the place and sauntered homeward"*. Once home, a hostel for unemployed and homeless men, he engaged in feverish study, trying to understand what political leaders of successful mass movements did, reflecting on their psychology, their political techniques and results, what worked and what did not. There, this penniless, unemployed, uneducated, but avid young man, (who did not finish school) scarcely twenty three formulating a conceptual abstract model of how he would structure his as yet unborn political party. His simple but profound plan consisted of three points: the need for and power of a mass movement, the importance and art of propaganda, and terrifying in its brutal simplicity, that physical and spiritual terror would achieve his aims with mathematical certainty. This was the most precise analysis of Nazi tactics ever written and these three guiding points would never be changed. That young man was Adolph Hitler. At the age of twenty three he had no party, no power and no prospects.

Around the world, another young man, about the same age, stood with a friend under a shelter as the rain bucketed down. They could see the train moving slowly into the station, its black and chrome snout snorting noisily as it edged alongside the platform, where the throngs of excited and anxious people waited to make the journey towards Johannesburg, the City of Gold. The young man was running away from an arranged marriage and turning his back on his royal obligations, the leadership of his tribe and a secure future. He had thought deep and hard, but intuitively he knew what he was doing was right, he knew there was a bigger purpose ahead. But he also knew that the way he was doing it was wrong: he was acting clandestinely, betraying the people who had supported, loved and cared for him. But he had to do it – he would make amends later.

When this young man was a youngster the Chief of his people, his guardian, had let him sit with the elders and visitors from afar, a very unusual occurrence. Maybe his guardian sensed this serious youngster was different. He listened avidly to stories from near and far and a whole new world opened up to him. It was during this time that he started learning about the history of the Bantu-speaking people, and an abiding interest in African History was ignited. Krune Mqhayi's speech about different nations, likening them to the Milky Way, made him understand that Africans of all tribes had to be connected, and that they



could stand their ground against the white man. His academic prowess, which he would later put down to dogged hard work and determination, saw him focused on getting a degree, not an easy matter in those days of growing oppression. It was while at university, under the arbitrary rule of a white colonial administrator that he sensed the strength of moral issues and began standing up to unjust systems, initially the colonial administrators at the university who had absolute authority over his future.

It was soon after arriving in the big city that this young man discarded his previously held beliefs and made a decision to fight for freedom: *“the freedom not to be obstructed in a lawful life...it was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when discovered as a young man that freedom had already been taken away from me, that I began to hunger for it”*. Freedom was initially centered on “I”, the freedom to be oneself, stay out at night, read and go where one chooses. But he realised then that it was not only about him, it was about everyone who looked like him. This young man would soon become one of a small group of lawyers serving the needs of millions of oppressed people and would lead a political party on a journey towards the emancipation of the human spirit. It was this fight for freedom that transformed *“a frightened young man into a bold one, drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal and turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home.”*

Two world leaders diametrically opposed in outcomes; one would be hailed as liberator and a custodian of human values, the other denounced as a dictator who wrought the greatest human misery and destruction ever experienced. One believed in all humanity being equal, the other in the racial purity of one group and the extermination or slavery of other groups. But both created legacies and provided value frameworks for shaping global values and behaviours. Both lifted humanity to a higher level of awareness and a new understanding of what constituted Right and Wrong. Both leaders emerged during times of crises: Germany was in a turmoil post World War I and South Africa was sliding under the control of what would emerge as Apartheid.

The key similarity is that both Hitler and Mandela were on the same cognitive growth curve. Human capability (or potential), based on Elliott Jaques’ⁱⁱ model of mental processing, has been a field of extensive researchⁱⁱⁱ. Capability is linked to our individual ability to handle ambiguity and uncertainty, and the way we like to process information and make sense of the world within which we live. Our capability changes at different rates with maturity. It is not determined by education, skills or personality. Nor does race, gender or cultural diversity seem to influence this human trait. As our cognitive ability changes with maturity (and it changes in predictable jumps) so our mental processing ability increases.

In the world of work, this change in cognitive processing power is translated into a need to handle greater “work” complexity. We actively start to search out bigger work challenges. For example, some people may be happy with a certain type of work challenge for most of their lives, but in their forties experience a need for a new work challenge. It may be to supervise, organise and generally take on more responsibility – in other words a different level of work complexity. This emergence of capability takes



place along a series of curves, referred to as Growth Curves or Modes. Some of the modes are flatter than others, meaning people will spend more time satisfied by the challenges of one's work. High potential individuals are on the steeper modes and thus require bigger challenges for finding actualization. In the example of the forty something, their mode (or particular growth curve) has transitioned from the cognitive ability to deal with one type of work complexity to another, for example from an ability to enjoy work that is defined by tangible and practical outcomes to a new work level that involves using experience and resources to organise others to achieve defined outcomes.

But Jaques' model of cognitive capability is just as valid without reference to the world of work. Many do not work in western work systems, but human capability continues to unfold, regardless of work context. Consider people who have no knowledge of work – Mandela's success as a leader was a function of his emergent cognitive capability as was Hitler's – Hitler never formally worked. As another example, consider an illiterate 56-year-old painter's assistant who was underutilised by three work levels. He used his capability to bring health care and education to his impoverished village by enlisting the support of the United Nations and the church. Another case involved criminal activity in the mining industry. Four employees with identified potential turned down accelerated development, even though they were working two full levels below their capability. Their refusal to participate in the program was initially puzzling, but three years later, when their sophisticated racket was discovered, it made perfect sense.

Research into this understanding of capability has shown that people on Mode V and above are high potential individuals who represent the first of the growth curves to reach a capability equivalent to an executive level of work complexity. Mode V people are often seen as exciting, different, Mode VI are seen as disturbing and challenging to peers, while Mode VIII, which may be 0,5% of a population, see themselves as different and this difference is salient to them *and others*.

Both Nelson Mandela and Adolph Hitler were highly unusual individuals in that they could process significant uncertainty and ambiguity to develop views on intangible, complex issues and create the relationships and frameworks within which they could shape and deliver outcomes, even in the face of the unknowable. In Jaques terms, both were at minimum, Mode IX individuals. Both driven by vision, they have also become icons and symbols, one inspiring dread and one inspiring pride, one calling forth darkness, the other light. Other great leaders, who have created legacies, shaped our history and thinking may also have been individuals on similar Modes. While a Jaquesian analysis and understanding can allow us to know an individual's mode and predict possible outcomes, it does not tell us if a person with such capability will use that power for good or evil.

If times of hardship produce leaders who emerge with the cognitive capacity to provide pathways of hope, then consider this. Paul Gilding, former CEO of Greenpeace International and now CEO of ECOS Corporation, in a letter about sustainability and our future as a species, wrote about his mental model which he calls SCREAM, CRASH, BOOM. In this open letter he feels we have failed to heed calls to stop the damage we are



doing to the environment and he believes it will now crash. *Fait accompli*. When I asked him about the consequence of crash he said it may cost billions of lives and result in a reconfiguration of life on the planet as we know it now. A sobering thought, but I think Paul is essentially correct. I recently previewed a book^{IV} written by Graham Harris, previously Chair of CSIRO (similar to the CSIR in South Africa) Flagship Projects and Chief of Land and Water and one of the few scientists who talks about and *is comfortable* with science at the higher work levels, Graham makes it very clear that we are not dealing with the complexity of the matters facing us. We are still searching for relatively simple answers that are not too unpalatable, when the whole level of the debate needs to be escalated and the real tough issues of managing multiple capitals (social, economic, physical, human and environmental) need to be faced head on. Not only this, but we need to do this in an environment where traditional science cannot provide answers to the issues we are facing. He argues for a post-modern multi-disciplinary view of what needs to be done. The problem is, as he puts it rather simply, we are now dealing with the “ghastly” complexity of the situations we have created and which can only be solved at a much higher level than we are achieving at present.

The bottom line is that we need leadership at a level we are not getting now. Current world leaders cannot do it: the complexity is beyond them and we appear committed to a course of action that will see us cutting down the last tree. We can of course, simply wait until the next exceptional human being arrives, another Mode IX or X or XI, to navigate us out of a shattered landscape. The problem with that approach is that we might well once again hear the sound of jackboots. Truly high capability as history has shown us need not be benign.

Or are there enough of us at all levels of developed and developing societies to act at community level to bring about the changes our leaders are incapable of implementing? This is the first time in human history that there is a critical mass of educated people at many modes, in many countries, who are capable of acting and who can sway things and most importantly, who through their empowerment can empower others.

Time will tell, and time is a commodity that is very short at the moment.

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Notes

ⁱ Konrad Heiden, Der Fuehrer, p 68.

ⁱⁱ Elliott Jaques first introduced his ideas in the 1940's and 50's Glacier Project in the United Kingdom, while a consultant for the Tavistock Institute. Jaques's models have been used for fifty plus years, extensively, in diverse organisational and business settings and across different cultures. It is also difficult to understand (Solaas, 2003) as there are a number of theories that he developed over time. His models of work complexity and human capability have been used in Australia and South Africa for more than thirty years.

ⁱⁱⁱ Craddock, K. (2002). Requisite Leadership Theory: An Annotated Research Bibliography on Elliott Jaques, Including: Requisite Organisation – The Glacier Project – Stratified Systems Theory – Levels of Mental Complexity – Complexity of Information Processing – The Quality of Labor – The Mid Life Crisis – and Psychoanalysis. (covering 1942 – 2002). Columbia University. Retrieved 25/02/04 from <http://www.canadiancentre.com>

^{iv} Harris, G. “Uncertain future: seeking sustainability in an age of complexity” (in review) Cambridge University Press.