



The Emperor has no Clothes on: Leadership & Reality

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"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality." Max DePree.

Max DePree's quote really struck home for me with the rioting and looting that took place in South Africa a few weeks ago. Something about the lack of preparedness on the part of various government departments, together with the faltering, ineffective first steps taken to quell the violence, suggested the leaders in government were out of touch with reality. They simply did not understand what the people were really thinking and feeling. And when the violence started, they misled themselves as to the seriousness of it. The consequence was that for a week many people were stranded, without food and basic essentials, and major transport routes were blocked. Another consequence was the large number of businesses, schools, and pharmaceutical storage facilities that were looted and/or went up in smoke. Something the country can ill afford. The government may have come from the people, but they seemed to be very out of touch with the reality of people's lives on the ground.

.....we all perceive with personal biases

On the surface it seems fairly obvious that a leader needs to define reality and get it right. How else can you possibly lead if you don't know what the "as-is" is. You may also be thinking that defining reality is not too difficult a job. After all, most of us think we have a good grasp on reality. Except that is not the case. We all perceive the world around us with personal biases. Our history, our experiences, our culture, our socialisation, our values, our beliefs, and our attitudes, determine what we perceive. As a simple example: imagine two people describing a motor vehicle accident scene. They will give a different version because each person will perceive and interpret the situation slightly differently. In the same way, we interpret what is happening around us differently based on our personal biases. And then

there is an added complication in that some things we do not want to see. Apart from our own perceptual biases, when a situation is uncomfortable or difficult, it is particularly easy to not want to see it as it really is.

You can see this in leaders in government, you can see this in leaders in companies, you can see this in leaders of communities, and you can see this when you lead your own life. You, yourself, can only see one side of the story. History is full of corporate leaders who did not get a true grasp on reality and as a result made poor decisions, which ultimately led to the demise of the organisation. Leaders in communities make poor decisions which lead to hardship for their communities because of their personal biases and particular interpretations of the world. Even in our own lives, we may fail to lead a good life because we misconstrue reality. We have blind spots, misinterpret the reality of a situation, and get ourselves into trouble because we don't read the situation exactly as it is.

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Now if this is the case, if almost no one can see reality as it truly is, then how do we lead? To start with, you lead with a team. A team of people, that are able and allowed to be open and honest, can provide a better picture of reality than a single person. A diverse team with different views and opinions, where people are able and allowed to say exactly what they think is even better at helping to notice any blind spots that have been missed. So many people think great leadership is about a great person. Great leadership requires surrounding yourself with a great team. And a great team is one where people are allowed to put uncomfortable views on the table and they get debated. Consultation is critical for leadership. No one person can know everything. No one person has considered every angle. No one person has a complete handle on a situation. The input and discussion of others is critical for making the right decisions and taking the right action. And because leadership requires courage, leaders also need to take advice from those whose views they don't like. It's not easy to talk to and surround yourself with people you may see as critics. But it does make you a better leader. If you only surround yourself with cheerleaders, those similar to you, those too scared to challenge you, those far removed from the people affected by your decisions, you are not going to take the right actions.

Defining reality correctly means being prepared to talk to people everywhere, including those in situations very unlike the one you may be in. It means being prepared to hear what you may not want to hear and refusing to shut it out because you don't like the message. I once

worked at a large corporate where the branches were closing more accounts than opening them. This message never got through to the leaders who thought the company was doing a fantastic job. As reported financials tend to be lag indicators, the financials also looked quite good, until it was too late and they started looking bad. Consequently a year later they were almost bought out by a competitor.

If you want to lead, and you want to lead well, you need to read the landscape correctly. This applies if you want to lead a country, a multinational corporate, a community organisation, your own family, or even yourself. You need to welcome feedback and information from diverse sources and give it serious attention. You need to be aware that you do have personal biases and be prepared to consider information that pains you and you would rather not think about. You need to be prepared to consider that your understanding may be totally wrong. You also need to consult widely with the appropriate people and groups. To form a comprehensive understanding of reality you need diverse views.

A lot of us don't do this. It takes courage and integrity to admit we may be out of touch with reality. This is why so few truly great leaders exist.