

CASE STUDY

Nelson Mandela's use of adaptive leadership – the emergence of democracy in South Africa

With a thorough understanding of adaptive leadership and the Five Components of Leadership Model as our guide, this next section turns to a leader who overcame incredible personal, social and political challenges and united a nation. Adaptive leadership does more than try to explain or describe how leadership works. Instead, adaptive leadership prescribes how leaders should lead and provides a specialized way to solve the most difficult challenges of organizations and society. The case of Nelson Mandela and the emergence of a fully inclusive democracy in South Africa is not only an incredible story of a leader's courage and determination, but it is also a compelling example of how a change of thinking, actions and goals can solve a seemingly intractable and complex problem and transform a nation. In his book on the South African National Peace Accord, Peter Gastrow describes South Africa's change and transition as a 'negotiated revolution.'¹⁰³ While negotiation might occur following a revolution, or a breakdown in negotiations might precede a revolution, those two things are not ordinarily viewed together. However, the world we live in is growing increasingly complex and adaptive challenges like negotiated revolutions are more likely to occur.

CASE STUDY (continued)

Nelson Mandela's election as President of South Africa in 1994 is one of the most unlikely, yet significant, political and moral triumphs of the modern world, and it cast Mandela forever as one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, if not all time. However, Mandela attributed none of the amazing achievement to himself, to fate, or even to divine intervention. Instead, he described the African concept of *ubuntu*, a relational mindset which means 'we are human only through the humanity of others.'¹⁰⁴ It is through this mindset of *ubuntu* that Mandela suggested, 'If we are to accomplish anything in this world, it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others.'¹⁰⁵ The core value of *ubuntu*, or relationship and humanity, provides a foundation on which to view Mandela's work as an adaptive leader. But to fully understand Mandela's role in the transformation of South Africa, you must first know some of the violent history of the nation and how it shaped Mandela as a leader.

History

The nation of South Africa formed in 1910 following a struggle for control between European settlers and British colonial rulers, punctuated by the Boer War of 1899–1902. After establishment, the post-colonial state continued a system of domination, looking inward to continue White minority rule over the majority African population.¹⁰⁶ The Dutch-Afrikaner National Party gained political control in the period following the Second World War and formalized the cultural system of implicit oppression into a national policy of racial discrimination and segregation called apartheid.

Resistance movements like the African National Congress (ANC) became more actively opposed to the government's racial policies and harsh treatment of the majority African population. Around the same time, a young Nelson Mandela moved from a rural region of South Africa to the city to begin training as a lawyer. There in Johannesburg he experienced, first-hand, the extent of apartheid's social and political discrimination.¹⁰⁷ As a result, Mandela joined the ANC and became part of the organized opposition, but he believed the group's strict policy of non-violence was ineffective. As an increasingly strident voice for action and change in the ANC, he led the formation of the ANC Youth League, which advocated a path of increasing violence to counter the government's growing injustice and suppression of African rights.¹⁰⁸ The cycle of violence and repression in South Africa continued with such events as the Sharpeville Massacre in which the White South African police force opened fire on a crowd of Black South African protesters. In response to the increase in violence against Black South Africans, Mandela was appointed head of the *uMkhonto we Sizwe*, meaning 'The Spear of the Nation' and abbreviated as MK. The MK was an opposition military organization that sought to disrupt and damage government facilities through violence.¹⁰⁹ The situation in South Africa worsened, the violence grew, and the prospects for change seemed unlikely when in 1962 Mandela and others were convicted and jailed for treason and sentenced to life in prison on additional charges in 1964.

CASE STUDY (continued)

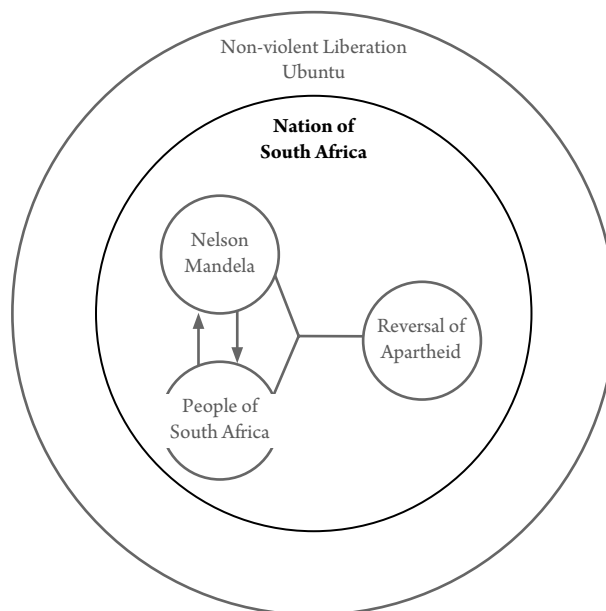
Mandela eventually ended up in the infamous Robben Island Prison, an isolated island off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. The prison was later ironically called ‘The University,’ for it was during Mandela’s 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island and in other prisons that he grew as an adaptive leader and transformed into a thoughtful and pragmatic peacemaker.¹¹⁰ By the 1980s, South Africa’s system of apartheid and internal strife left the nation isolated internationally and criticized globally.¹¹¹ The South African government and opposition leaders were deadlocked in an armed social and political struggle with no foreseeable solution. What happened next many considered a miracle. In 1990, the government freed Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners from prison and, a mere four years later, a racially united South Africa elected Mandela as its first democratically elected President. The extraordinary success of this political and social revolution is due to many factors, but key among them was Nelson Mandela’s exercise of adaptive leadership.

Five component analysis

Let’s look at Mandela’s work as an adaptive leader through the lens of the Five Components of Leadership Model.

Nelson Mandela became a national figure through his activist role and imprisonment for opposing the South African government’s policy of apartheid. So it seems odd that his

Figure 16.3 The Five Components of Leadership Model applied to Nelson Mandela’s leadership of South Africa case study



CASE STUDY (continued)

growth and development as an adaptive leader would occur while in prison, but that is exactly what happened. In many respects, Mandela's move to Robben Island prison prefaced his move to the balcony as an adaptive leader. By the 1960s, Mandela was an established leader of the opposition movement, but the shift to prison placed him apart from both the formal leadership structure of the ANC and the center of tension in the South African cities and townships. In prison, Mandela was removed from all of this and had nothing but his interactions and relationships with his fellow prisoners and the prison staff, many of whom were abusive and violent to Mandela and the other prisoners. From the balcony, Mandela could see and begin to understand the effects of individual interactions among prisoners, warders and even the effect of his own relationships. During this period of separation, Mandela saw, understood and diagnosed the systemic complexity of prejudice brought on by the policy of apartheid. While apartheid was evil, Mandela came to believe that everyone on Robben Island, prisoner and warder alike, was subject to the cycle of power, domination and harm brought about by apartheid. Mandela determined that changing the cycle of apartheid was the adaptive challenge every South African faced.¹¹² Mandela moved often between the balcony and the dance floor, seeking ways to treat prisoners and warders with respect and kindness. From this experience, he learned that, even in the darkest of places and across race and role, *ubuntu* could free people from hatred and prejudice.¹¹³ It was at this 'University' that Mandela learned the first lesson of adaptive leadership, the system of *ubuntu* was not broken.

By the late 1980s, Nelson Mandela had been in prison for more than twenty years, but he was now more influential than ever. He held no official role, carried no formal title in the ANC, and had no authority to act, but his face led a protest that crossed the globe in opposition to South Africa's apartheid policy. Here, we see people doing the work for change while the leader was not in a position to do the work directly. This exponential example of giving the work back to the people shows how the story of Nelson Mandela stirred the world to turn against an oppressive regime.

Adaptive leaders do more than just encourage and inspire others, they actively create and sustain a holding environment where the adaptive work takes place. Sometimes they provide structure and protection so conflicting values can be addressed, but Mandela expanded the holding space for adaptive work by secretly writing a letter to the President of South Africa. A man imprisoned with no authority sought a conversation with his sworn enemy and that conversation ultimately ended apartheid. The end of apartheid did not come about because of savvy negotiating skills or special leverage. They achieved the impossible by focusing on the precious values desired by all South Africans while considering both majority and minority perspectives.

In 1990 Mandela was released from prison, and in 1994 became the first democratically elected President for all South Africans achieving the goal of ending apartheid and transforming the government. However, as is often the case, reaching goals does not signal the end of an adaptive challenge, just a new cycle of observation, interpretation and intervention.¹¹⁴ For the new President, reconciliation and partnership between Black and

CASE STUDY *(continued)*

White South Africans continued as a long-term obstacle to lasting justice and freedom. But if 27 years in prison teaches anything about leadership, it is that adaptive work operates on a different principle of time and needs continual effort.¹¹⁵

As President, Mandela's mission became 'binding the wounds of the country, of engendering trust and confidence.'¹¹⁶ While he sought unity, Mandela recognized that many South Africans were troubled by the change and feared what the future of South Africa might bring. Adaptive leaders understand the need to regulate the anxiety of followers to ensure the learning and change of adaptive work happens. Mandela was quick to say 'the liberation struggle was not a battle against one group or color, but a fight against a system of repression.'¹¹⁷ One very symbolic and powerful way Mandela helped calm people's fears was by inviting the very jailers who imprisoned him to sit among important guests at his Presidential inauguration.¹¹⁸ The image of Mandela welcoming his captors and treating them as equals set the norms for respect and forgiveness for all South Africans.

But examples alone still may not close the gap in adaptive work and leaders must be willing to improvise and test new alternatives to succeed. Despite strict norms and obligations agreed to in the National Peace Accord of 1991, when the government allowed political activity and the return of exiled opposition groups, an unanticipated increase in violence emerged between the main opposition parties of the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).¹¹⁹ Relationships and trust among the government, the ANC and the IFP plummeted and progress and negotiations broke down several times. Tests do not always go as planned, but adaptive leaders continue the process of experimentation to overcome the challenge. In the end, it was not Nelson Mandela, but one of his Robben Island comrades who drafted a controversial but innovative proposal for a five-year transitional national unity government, which bridged the gap to majority rule democracy and helped end the era of South African apartheid.¹²⁰

The separation and isolation of Robben Island forced Mandela to consider the situation between the government and opposition parties from a different perspective. Imprisoned on the balcony, as he was, Mandela watched both sides of the conflict pursue paths of continued violence that offered no hope of resolution. The government held onto an unjust policy, but had overwhelming power, while the opposition held the moral high ground, but was intent on making the country 'ungovernable.'¹²¹ Both sides approached the situation as a technical problem and used traditional solutions of violence and separation that led to stalemate. From the balcony, Mandela scanned the environment and saw the gap between the ANC's current capability and plans and their ultimate goal to end apartheid. Mandela realized that achieving the goal to end apartheid and bring peace to South Africa would not happen unless they reconciled with the enemy and partnered in the transition to full democracy.¹²² From his vantage point, Mandela could see that the adaptive challenge of negotiated revolution demanded that each side abandon its position and take a different path toward a new end-state. Mandela knew what must change, but he was incapable of such change on his own from where he was. He needed to engage others, even his enemies, to solve this intractable problem.

CASE STUDY *(continued)*

We solve adaptive challenges when people open their eyes to what is precious and essential and learn what must change in order to survive and thrive. Although criticized by others, Mandela showed forgiveness and even kindness to his jailers, because he saw them as victims of the same system that reinforced and rewarded hatred and violence toward Africans.¹²³ Mandela often spoke of his vision for all of South Africa that ‘the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness.’¹²⁴ Mandela offered a vision for all South African voices, equally precious and valued. By focusing on the value of *ubuntu* – a cherished African virtue – Mandela helped everyone see that reconciliation and partnership was the adaptive challenge on the path to freedom and peace for South Africa.