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Purposeful Leadership

A Tribute to Ko i Annan

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The recent death of Kofi Annan gives me pause to think about the nature of leadership – and especially what makes one leader stand out, as Annan clearly did. After all, there would not be any SDGs if it were not for Annan’s leadership on setting up the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) that preceded them.

So what makes a leader good, or inspiring, rather than simply effective?

I heard Annan speak at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 – the so-called Rio+10 conference. Beyond this, I cannot claim to have known him, or even to have studied or reflected deeply on his leadership.

And yet he affected me. In fact, I believe he affected all of us – and for the better. We are all under the influence of leadership. Our lives are constantly touched by political leaders, business leaders, community leaders, religious leaders and thought leaders.

But Annan represents a special brand of leadership. He was what we might call a purposeful leader – someone who has the ability to inspire others to act for the common good, to serve some greater cause, to pursue a larger goal, to believe in a higher ideal.

In our age of celebrity worship and social media hype, it is tempting to think of leadership in terms of charisma. We can all think of celebrated leaders who exude a certain dynamic quality, whose combination of enthusiasm and confidence is infectious.

It is almost as if we are drawn to these leaders because their positive energy rubs off on us. There is a halo effect that leaves us feeling uplifted, optimistic, buoyant. We believe in them because they so clearly believe in themselves.

I’m not sure this is what made Annan stand out. Rather, some leaders secure our loyalty because we believe in the cause which they represent, and we can see that they are dedicated to serving that cause – whether that be peace, or justice or sustainability.

As Secretary General, besides being a symbol of global unity and conflict resolution, Annan was instrumental in setting up the Millennium Development Goals, as previously mentioned, and also the Global Compact, both of which inspired others to tackle human development.

Leaders like this don’t need to convince us of their greatness, merely to persuade us of their effectiveness. We are not looking so much for them to be superstars as fellow believers; people in power who share our passion for making a difference in this life.

By being a champion of human rights and environmental responsibility, Annan became a symbol for putting wrongs right in the world. We believe in leaders like him because they believe in our cause. They embody our common humanity.

There is also a quiet, unassuming kind of leadership which is built on earned respect. Here too, I believe Annan shone brightly. He was a leader who led by personal example. He represented human qualities that we all – in our best moments – would want to emulate.

Annan was given the Nobel Peace Prize for his commitment to the struggle to contain the spreading of the HIV virus in Africa and his declared opposition to international terrorism. We believe in someone like this because they reflect our ideals. They are our role models.

Like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan was a servant leader – one of those rare individuals who put aside their personal ambitions in order to facilitate the development of others. We believe in them because they believe in us.

It is no surprise that Annan was invited to be part of the Global Elders, a group of wise leaders who are dedicated to using their status, influence and credibility to bring about positive change in the world; to be a voice for the voiceless.

We are inspired by leaders like the Elders. Such leaders enable us to achieve together what would have been impossible alone – for leadership is the art of synergy. Wise leaders allow us to see possibilities that were not on our horizon – for leadership is the gift of visioning.

The best leaders encourage us to stretch to reach our potential – for leadership is the practice of empowerment. Good leaders dedicate themselves to fulfilling the needs of their followers – for leadership is the calling of service.

We are all leaders and followers in different spheres of our lives. As parents, we lead our children. As teachers, we lead our students. As managers, we lead our staff. As captains, we lead our teams. As volunteers, we lead our communities.

Yet to be good leaders, we must be good followers also. For leadership is founded on empathy. And for every situation in which we rise as natural leaders, there is another in which others are better placed to lead.

A true leader is humble, for they know that the mantle of leadership is a privilege bestowed on them by their followers. At the same time, a leader who hides their talent from the world serves no one.

As a child of Africa – born in Zimbabwe and growing up and living for many years in South Africa – I will always be grateful to Annan for being a beacon of good African leadership, in a continent too often blighted by corrupt and selfish leaders.

Now it is up for us – whether in Africa or elsewhere, in business or government, in communities or universities, to take up the mantle. So where do your leadership abilities lie? In what way can you serve and inspire others today?

Annan said: *To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there.* Now it's up to you to take your stand. Today. Simply take a deep breath and take the lead.

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