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Learning to lead and leading to learn

The successes, vices, virtues and failings of those in positions of leadership have been a source of intrigue since time immemorial. This vexed question continues to be the subject of debate: is a leader born or made, and what makes them great? These questions have naturally piqued my interest in navigating the first year of a leadership role in the Johannesburg office of Baker McKenzie.

The role of leading law firms has typically been the domain of the firm's rainmakers. The world over, law firms have failed to resist the temptation of automatically equating successful rainmakers with natural leaders, charging them with the task of leading teams towards desired strategic outcomes. Yet, this approach typically burdens the busiest lawyers with an indisputably time-intensive task - the management of people - diluting the time at their disposal to do what they do best.

It also equates a set of skills applied for a unique task (achieving legal solutions for complex business problems) to a separate set of skills required for a different task, which primarily involves the management of people in a manner that enables and empowers them to succeed. Those skill sets may well fall within the repertoire of the same person, but it

does not follow that this is automatically and naturally the case.

Mine was an unconventional appointment in the context of the leadership trends of big law, and as such, the role gave me an opportunity to refute the fallacy that the most experienced and senior lawyer in a law firm represented its most natural and obvious leader. In my case, the firm elected to appoint a vocal proponent of the thesis that it is people-centricity that is indispensable to a business' forward-looking success. To support this approach, one would need to avoid a disproportionate imbalance towards short-term gains as opposed to more sustainable, long-term strategies that place people at the heart of their efforts. This would require a focus on executing deliberate talent management strategies (in relation to both recruitment and retention), enabling equitable access to learning and development opportunities, fostering an inclusive workplace environment and ensuring accountability to a set of values that are not just espoused but lived.

Ensuring lived values, at a leadership level, requires deliberate focus; what is critical is to establish an unambiguous tone from the top and to cultivate genuine buy-in so that every person aspires to exemplify the values (not because they are imposed but because it feels right!). It is also important to co-create an environment of true belonging and embed inclusion practices into the day-to-day rather than as a tick-box exercise. The approach is

to really look behind how things optically appear, to ensure meaningful transformation.

The other hallmark of a leadership style that resonates with me is to inspire authenticity. Lauryn Hill poetically articulated the point through a set of lyrics in her most renowned album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*: "Every time I tried to be, what someone else thought of me, so caught up, I wasn't able to achieve." For me, the invitation to show up and the act of doing so (because it must surely be a two-way street) unlock the potential for a level of success that will always be inaccessible when leaders conversely foster a homogenous environment that encourages its people to fit in. A culture that requires fitting in must surely require that people are expected to leave parts of themselves behind. And what then of diversity and its benefits? Is diversity purely a quantitative project, without more? And in the project of achieving meaningful inclusion and belonging, is authenticity not a core ingredient? How can one belong or feel truly included when parts of oneself are left at the door?

The leadership journey is an ongoing one. What I have learned so far is that it requires service, demands people-centricity, necessitates clear tone-setting around the issues that count and is optimised by inclusive and authentic cultures that foster belonging, achieve equity and enable others to stand in their own light. I am on the journey towards unlearning certain things too: internalised

self-biases, "tried and tested" ways of doing things that no longer make sense, the need to project a certain permutation of strength when vulnerability is courageous too. I have elected to share a point in time reflection on the continuous process of learning and unlearning, of trial and error, of engagement and introspection, and of processes of elimination. Because, in my view, leaders may well be born as such, but they can just as intuitively be made. If humble enough, if willing enough to be in service of others, if open to learning and vulnerably unlearning, if people-focused as opposed to exclusively outcomes-based, there may well be a generation of existing and future diverse leaders that can impactfully rise to the challenge.

PROFILE

Lerisha was appointed Managing Partner of Baker McKenzie South Africa in July 2022, officially its youngest Managing Partner in Baker McKenzie's 74-office network.

Lerisha practices across the spectrum of antitrust law, taking on mandates for key clients in Africa. She led the team in the firm's representation of Unilever, in relation to pending antitrust litigation before the Competition Tribunal, involving precedent-setting legal issues. She also led the competition process in the transaction involving GMB Liquidity Corporate Proprietary Limited (a private investment company), which sought to acquire sole control of JSE-listed Grand Parade Investments Limited through the acquisition of a majority of the issued shares. She was part of the team that advised the buyer consortium on the exit by Rockwood Private Equity of EnviroServ to SUEZ SA, Royal Bafokeng Holdings and African Infrastructure Investment Managers – one of 2022's largest SA private equity exits. She also advised on one of the first-ever SPAC deals on the continent, from an antitrust perspective, and was part of the antitrust team that advised Blantyre Capital and local private debt manager, Greenpoint Capital, on their acquisition of Ster-Kinekor's assets during its business rescue, which was nominated for DealMakers' "Business Rescue Transaction of the Year".

Baker McKenzie.

Diverse Perspectives Solve Complex Challenges

Inclusion, diversity and equity underpin our Firm's culture and values. Our sustained focus on ID&E across our business benefits our people, our clients and our industry, and creates a space where everybody can succeed, bringing diverse perspectives to solve our clients' most complex challenges.

Seventy per cent of our Corporate/M&A team in Johannesburg are women, with a diverse bench strength that is considered to be one of the strongest in the local market. Across our Johannesburg office, 60% of our lawyers are women. In M&A, incorporating ID&E into every phase of the deal demonstrates the Firm's lived values, which translates into the way in which we engage with clients, nurture talent and achieve sustainable success.

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