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Ethical Leadership: Remembering Mandela as we navigate COVID-19

“A real leader uses every issue, no matter how serious and sensitive, to ensure that at the end of the debate we should emerge stronger and more united than ever before.” ~ Nelson Mandela.

The 18th of July 2020 marks the day when we will once again celebrate not only a great man, but an exceptional leader. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela would have been 102 years old this year. As the economic and social fallout from the COVID-19 Pandemic continue to ravage many countries across the world, it is easy to wonder what wise words the “Father of the Nation” might have offered us if he were still alive today.

Nelson Mandela was a global icon of democracy and social justice and while we may not have his presence, we have his legacy to guide us. As the epitome of an ethical leader, what can we learn from Madiba as we rebuild our economies and societies?

COVID-19 has presented the world with unprecedented personal and financial calamity. Even in organisations that have managed to stay afloat and where jobs are not at risk, there has still been massive upheaval.

With the current deluge of changes that are being thrown at companies, successfully navigating this uncertain COVID world requires organisations to demonstrate responsibility, accountability, fairness, agility and transparency in their behaviour. This in turn requires careful assessment in order to ascertain what actions are appropriate. In the words of Peter Drucker: “We can't manage what we can't measure.” Furthermore, the recovery process will be long and complex, requiring bold leadership and courageous choices. In short, the need for ethical leadership has never been greater.

The imperative for ethical leadership is central to the **National Business Initiative's (NBI)** mandate and work. The NBI endeavours to make South Africa's economy more equal, inclusive, equitable, competitive and sustainable. We do this by creating leadership platforms for our members to influence socio-economic transitions.

The NBI's Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption Programme facilitates dialogue on ethics and corruption in the private sector, with the aim of developing rigorous and practically relevant insights on these issues. So how do companies demonstrate ethical leadership in the COVID-19 context?

Segmenting the COVID-19 context into response and recovery phases, during the response phase leaders should be transparent, building trust and being open about their decisions. Withholding information or not communicating clearly and effectively in a timely fashion can lead to reputational damage and amplify misconceptions.

During the recovery phase, ethical leadership will require bold vision and values, examining what systems and practices need to be improved, not just as corporates but also in terms of companies' contributions to wider society. We need to be acutely aware of the fact that we are all part of a wider value chain and that the decisions made by both businesses and individuals affect all stakeholders either directly or indirectly. Thus, leaders must be conscious of their actions as they fundamentally impact lives.

While there are difficult times ahead, organisations that demonstrate a strong ethical leadership approach in navigating through the COVID-19 Pandemic ensure a transparent, accountable and socially responsible way of conducting business. In the words of Nelson Mandela, let us use this crisis as an opportunity to **“emerge stronger and more united than ever before.”**

For more information on the NBI's Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption Programme, please contact Thuthula Ndunge: ThuthulaN@nbi.org.za



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The National Business Initiative (NBI) is an independent and voluntary coalition of South African and multinational businesses launched in 1995 by the then President, Nelson Mandela

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