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Insights from Young Leadership - Ethical Leaders are Key to South Africa's Success

"It is so easy to break down and destroy. The heroes are those who make peace and build."

~Nelson Mandela

As part of the **National Business Initiative's (NBI)** work on youth and leadership over recent months, we asked a sample of young leaders from our member companies to share their thoughts on how young leaders can drive ethical and bold social transformation in South Africa. Their answers were both insightful and inspirational. These insights come at a time where South Africa faces numerous and unprecedented challenges requiring us to activate leadership at all levels.

Our economy and society have been shaken by the events of July 2021 that saw the combination of an attempted insurrection, criminality and extreme desperation due to systemic poverty and inequality, result in massive destruction to economic infrastructure, loss of life and livelihoods. It has also highlighted that as we rebuild South Africa from the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to address the systemic issues of poor planning, lack of adequate skills and unethical leadership, to build trust and accountability.

We therefore have highlighted **four key themes** that emerged from the answers our young leaders provided on how ethical leadership can achieve bold social transformation. We would like to thank our young leaders profiled in this article for their contributions.

Inequality and Corruption are Root Causes of Economic Exclusion

South Africa's history of social and economic exclusion continues to create social injustices which are exacerbated by ongoing corruption, says **Siphilile Shange**, Sustainability Specialist at **African Bank**. This includes increasing inequality, poverty, youth unemployment, unequal access to quality education and basic human needs.

South African youth face numerous challenges, not least of all, the current unemployment rate. The latest unemployment figures amongst youth aged 15-24 years and 25-34 years showed the highest unemployment rates of 64,4% and 42,9% respectively in Quarter 2 of 2021 (Stats SA, 2021). These numbers depict a bleak state of affairs for the youth of South Africa. **Noni Qoboshiyana** (Public Policy and Regulatory Specialist at **South African Breweries**) explains: “In South Africa, youth are at the forefront of dissatisfaction – income inequality, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty and corruption.”

Sikhulekile (Khule) Duma, a Socio-economic Development Specialist at **Anglo American**, explains how the recent turmoil we have witnessed is in part the unfortunate consequence of living in a divided and unequal society, but there is reason for hope:

“While much of what we have witnessed has filled us with fear and hopelessness, there have been many instances in the chaos that have shown the humanity and resilience of our people. For every community that was ripped apart, many more have stood united through the turmoil. Across the country we have seen inspiring examples of people coming together to resolve the crisis, a true testament of what it truly means to be South African.”

Siphilile agrees: “We have seen the damaging impacts of an aggrieved society. It is therefore more critical than ever before, for us as young leaders, to be intentional about using our skills to impact not only our respective spaces, but the broader society.”

Blain van Wyk (Sustainability, Corporate Affairs at **Distell**) believes that we are at a point in our country’s history where we need to turn to our young leaders for effective and ethical leadership to drive real social transformation.

How do we address inequality and exclusion?

The Youth Must be Included in Strategic Decision Making

Notwithstanding the wealth of historical evidence of young people’s contribution towards driving change in political systems, the youth remain one of the most underrepresented groups in key strategic positions in this country. **Tumelo Tire** (Strategy & Business Design Consultant at **Deloitte**) points out that while South Africa is a youthful nation – 35% of the total population is aged between 15 to 34 years – the youth continue to be excluded from key strategic decisions. This is counterintuitive considering this new generation is considered the most informed, most educated, and most connected generation in human history.

“The youth of South Africa have always been innovative, resilient, and bold in creating dynamic solutions for the variety of socio-economic challenges they face,” explains **Tumelo**. “And in instances where they are not afforded the room to be heard – they create these spaces for themselves.” **Blain** agrees that history continues to show that young people in South Africa are at the forefront of social change, but in order to do so, he asks for a seat at the table and to be given the opportunity to form a key part of decision-making processes.

Tumelo highlights how this generation is “geared to achieve some of the most impactful social change required to create a better world, through more effective, more ethical and more inclusive leadership.”

How can ethical young leaders drive transformation?

Ethical Young Leaders are able to Tackle Corruption thereby Driving Transformation

“South Africa is in need of bold social transformation” says **Khule**. This requires us to reflect on what transformation really is: “Transformation in my view is not a destination but rather a way of doing things that delivers real equity and inclusion.”

Noni believes we need a new level of thinking for our democracy to work and a broader choice of leadership options: “South Africa needs a generation of change makers – young, ethical, value driven and accountable leaders who are able to change the current situation.” **Noni** describes her vision of the type of leadership required:

“Leaders who do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons and put their ethics before the bottom line. Leaders that play an active role in the social change and development in their communities. Leaders who volunteer and show empathy towards their surroundings.”

Blain emphasises how ethical young leaders are tired of corruption and are actively contributing towards building institutions that are rooted in accountability, transparency and strong governance:

“Young leaders are bold, innovative, socially conscious, and rely on out-of-the-box solutions to intricate problems. We, as young leaders, understand that in order to achieve social transformation, disruptive interventions are necessary because real social transformation can only be achieved when we tackle issues at a systemic and root-cause level.”

Blain adds that ethical leadership is guided by a moral compass that doing what is right is the right thing to do.

Tumelo summarises this sentiment: “Young leaders serve as an important reminder that we need to stand firm and truthful in our convictions even if it’s the road less travelled. We must continue to strive for what is right and just for us to achieve social transformation in South Africa.”

What will bold social transformation achieve?

Bold Social Transformation Promotes Enhanced Economic Inclusion

Siphilile believes the answer to social transformation lies in standing up against unethical and discriminatory practices to change the status quo and bring about innovative solutions for our country with youth at the forefront:

“It requires us taking bold steps by critically interrogating existing systems governing issues pertaining to our current education system; access to quality healthcare, basic needs such as water, sanitation, food, shelter, electricity; the promotion of sustainable employment as well as entrepreneurship skills, issues of racial and gender inequalities, and holding those in authority accountable to deliver.”

“Bold social transformation is about having empathy for each other again”, says **Khule**. He continues: “It requires new and innovative thinking and most importantly it requires us to always place people at the centre of our business decisions. Bold social transformation is about solidarity in the home, in the workplace and in society.”

For **Siphilile**, social transformation means taking hold of the baton from those before us: “It means utilising our abilities, as well as our available resources and the opportunities we have at our disposal in our various areas of influence, to enable sustainable development, thus investing in our nation’s future.

The NBI’s Intergenerational Leadership Dialogues

The innovative energy and leadership vision of young people is an important contributing factor in driving transformation and equity in the workplace. Young leaders play a critical role in translating aspirations for inclusive and sustainable economies into practical actions.

The NBI has developed the **Intergenerational Leadership Dialogues** as a platform to critically explore how different workplaces engage different generations as an important component of transformation and equity. These discussions are intended to elevate the voices of young people at work, facilitating innovative thinking and reimagining leadership.

The first event in this series explored **Solidarity in the Workplace**, specifically how enhanced solidarity creates more inclusive work cultures and therefore more cohesive workplaces. The second dialogue, which will take place on 8 September 2021, focusses on **Cultivating Bold Young Leadership for the Future** through an exploration of leadership approaches across industries.

Through these dialogues, we hope to continue to engage bold young leaders in working towards a future that is gender transformative, reskilled for new economies and environmentally sustainable.

For more information on the NBI's Social Transformation work, please contact Gugu McLaren-Ushewokunze (Head: Social Transformation & Social Cohesion): GuguM@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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