Management after Magic

A discussion and comparison between the leadership styles of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki

By Cornelia Stols
Towards the end of the 20th century, massive changes occurred in the global political configuration. The Berlin Wall fell, signalling the end of the Cold War, and in South Africa the process of chipping away at the racial divide commenced as Apartheid came to an end. Both of these events can be seen as watershed events in contemporary politics. Just as the end of the Cold War served to divide politics within the global arena into a pre and post-Cold War era, the 1994-elections divided South African politics into two distinct eras as well.

The term post-Cold War era is a loaded concept, which refers to a changed global environment after 1989 and the ripple effect it had on the realities of politics even in South Africa. Similarly, the post-Apartheid era also encapsulates a myriad of changes in perceptions, leaders and policy. In both these eras concepts such as democracy, good governance, rule of law and neoliberal economic theory have become important.

The transitional period after the Cold War as well as after Apartheid has demanded strong leadership and management and Nelson Mandela has had the responsibility of leading South Africa through this fragile period of transition. Since 1999 Thabo Mbeki has been the man tasked with leading and managing a still fragile democracy in which expectations were growing and all eyes were on him to deliver. Seen against this backdrop both Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki are very important figures in South African politics and it is the logical result to focus on and compare their leadership styles.

Leadership styles
Heywood defines leadership styles as "the strategies and behavioural patterns through which a leader seeks to achieve his/her goals". The goals referred to can vary from aiming to sustain economic stability to establishing a good relationship with the media or even holding onto a position of power. But how does one go about identifying leadership styles? Lewis formulated four questions that can prove helpful in the identification process. These questions emphasise the ways in which personality, focus of attention, the handling of information and preferences when making decisions, are able to have a bearing on leadership styles.

Determining where the leader likes to focus his/her attention can give an indication of the goals he/she is working towards. The style of decision-making provides a crucial hint towards identifying a leadership style because it often reveals strategies or emphasises behavioural patterns. The most important question in my mind, however, pertains to the leader's way of thinking. Is the leader a visionary with a holistic picture of the world and a premonition of his country's place therein or is he/she concerned...
more with the day-to-day issues within the country? In answering each of these questions the personality of the leader must be considered because it provides the lens through which the leader perceives his/her environment as well as his/her leadership role within that environment.

Only after clues are gathered while answering Lewis’s questions can one attempt to categorise a leadership style. The three categories of leadership styles identified by Heywood are laissez-faire leadership, which refers to a “hands off” approach; transactional leadership which in contrast involves a “hands on” approach and finally, transformational leaders who are often perceived as visionaries and inspirers.5

The person(alities) who lead

The political environment in which leaders grew up, as well as their past experiences, play an enormous role in shaping their personalities and in turn their leadership style. Hermann emphasises this by stating that leaders are both “products of their environment and their times”.4

Nelson Mandela, the first president of a democratic South Africa, was one of the principal figures in the liberation struggle and spent 27 years in jail after being found guilty of high treason in the Rivonia trial. When Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964 he uttered the famous cri de coeur from the dock, which confirms that he aims to devote his life to “the ideal of a democratic and free society in which persons live together in harmony and with equal rights”.4

Besides defining his principal goal in life and shaping his personality, Mandela’s liberation struggle background as well as the time he spent in jail made an enormous contribution to the way in which this leader is perceived. Wilhelm argues that Mandela’s “imprisonment of 27 years made him both a stranger and an icon”.6 The perceptions that exist about Mandela did not always come about as a natural result of his role. Winnie Madikizela Mandela, for instance, recollects “a deliberate decision was taken by the ANC to use him as a symbol of resistance”.7

Mandela’s devotion to the liberation struggle and the perceptions that exist about him point one in the direction of classifying his leadership style as charismatic in nature. The charismatic-revolutionary type of leadership is described by Geldenhuys as one of three salient types of leadership identified according to Kissinger’s leadership typology.8 Kissinger used “leaders of the new nations” as an example of this leadership type and highlights that their personal experiences in the struggle for independence have provided the impetus for these leaders.

In Mandela’s case it has been his personal experience in the liberation struggle that has provided this moving force. Thabo Mbeki, on the other hand, lacks a “heroic bibliography”: “His relative youth and modest family background are factors that could inhibit the development of charismatic leadership attributes”.9

Apart from his background and what he believes to be his calling, Mandela also qualifies as a charismatic leader when measured against Max Weber’s understanding of the term ‘charisma’, which emphasises the contribution that perceptions make to leadership style. Weber states that “the term ‘charisma’ can be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman and at least as having specifically exceptional powers and qualities”.10

Mandela undoubtedly possesses some exceptional personal characteristics, which have filtered through in his leadership style. One of these characteristics is his ability to “reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable”. Mandela is the “turner of the other cheek” and the man who demanded that at the core of the transition was the need to “forgive and reconcile.” This conviction guided his focus within the domestic environment.

Nelson Mandela has been described as a “Mother Theresa-figure” and he is the embodiment of reconciliation and peace for many South Africans. Moreover, Mandela’s charismatic personality has not only cast its net over South Africa but extends into the international arena. As Sitole points out, “For the world community, Nelson Mandela is synonymous with South Africa’s democratic transition”.11

Although Mandela is perceived by so many as a symbol, icon or even a saint, this image seems to disquiet him. His diffident reaction to former British Labour MP, Brian Walden’s description of him as “incompetent, amateurish and feckless” substantiates this argument. Mandela responded by saying that such remarks “helped to dispel the idea that he was superhuman”.12 This is, however, one of the few instances when Mandela was criticised. This tendency might be linked to Mandela’s charisma and the subsequent reluctance to criticise someone who has in many circles acquired superhuman status.

In contrast, it has become almost fashionable to criticise Thabo Mbeki, Mandela’s successor. Nieuwoudt notes this tendency and refers to it as “Mbeki-bashing”.13 She did this in particular in reaction to Lester Venter’s severe criticism in his book In the shadow of the rainbow of Mbeki’s handling of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the Zimbabwean issue as well as his reluctance to meet with the Dalai Lama.

But does the fact that Mbeki has been the target of more criticism than Mandela mean that he has made more mistakes? This is not necessarily the case and the reason for the criticism might lie in the difficulties involved in following an icon and the fact that Mbeki is a mere mortal man.

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As with Mandela, Mbeki’s personality and approach to leadership has been shaped by aspects pertaining to both environment and time. Born the son of African National Congress and South African Communist Party stalwart Govan Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki joined the ANC at the age of 14.15 He is an economist who learned his diplomatic skills while under the wing of former ANC president Oliver Tambo. Mbeki’s background has equipped him with the necessary tools to be an excellent negotiator – which is validated by the key role he played in 1996 during the promotion of a peace initiative between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party.16

It was also Mbeki’s negotiating and diplomatic skills that enabled the ANC to lure General Constand Viljoen, Freedom Front Leader, “away from the dangerous rightwing to the coun-
In addition to the experience that Mbeki acquired before 1994, especially in exile, his experience gained as part of government has also become a determining factor in his leadership style. Two of the questions that Hermann poses in her discussion of background factors and their influence on leadership styles are: “What kind of experience has the political leader had in the position he now holds?” and “How similar is the present position to others he has held?”

She goes further by stating that the answers to these questions will provide the analyst with some idea about the “repertoire of behaviours the leader will have” as well as “how much the leader will have to learn on the job”. In this regard it is important to mention that Mandela was in a sense thrown into the deep end when it came to governing a country since he had no past experience within government, whereas Mbeki enjoyed the advantage of being Mandela’s “understudy” during his term in office.

It is often argued that leaders have been known to select advisors and staff with whom they feel comfortable and compatible. It can therefore be hypothesised that Mandela and Mbeki have similar leadership styles and Mandela was apt to select Mbeki to be his deputy president as a virtue of these similarities. One could even go further and explore the ways in which Mbeki’s leadership style has been influenced by Mandela’s style of leadership.

There is, however, evidence that some of the similarities that do exist between Mandela and Mbeki can be attributed to deliberate efforts to incorporate some “Madiba Magic” into Mbeki’s leadership style.

Despite the mutual aspects within their leadership styles, Mandela and Mbeki’s leadership styles are rather more complementary or “compatible” than similar. Mandela might even have selected Mbeki because he viewed Mbeki’s complementary leadership style as being advantageous to the presidency.

Mandela has made reconciliation his crusade; Mbeki, while not denying the need for South Africans to come together, talks more about transformation.
Mbeki’s primary concern remains the economic upliftment of the African majority who still largely represent a marginalised group at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Mbeki’s domestic policy focus also has to be viewed within the political context of the time: “Mbeki himself says the five years of the Mandela administration were about putting into place new governmental and social structures to move the country out of apartheid and into a better era for all its people. Now it is up to him to make the structures work and the improvements happen.”

Mbeki’s leadership produced an environment of “relative social stability and political peace” balanced “precariously on rising expectations”. Mandela’s ability to manage black expectations rested largely on the economy. There was a direct correlation between whether he was able to deliver and the way blacks perceived his contributions to peace, jobs, and welfare.

Mandela’s term in office is now something of the past but these expectations remain a reality that Mbeki has to focus his domestic policy on.

Mbeki is an economist, and it is only natural to assume that he will use economic routes to direct domestic policy towards promoting his African ideals as well as addressing the needs and expectations of people in the country.

Policies implemented under Mbeki’s leadership support the notion that “political stability and the building of a non-racial South Africa are inextricably tied to a transformation in the material circumstances of the black majority.”

Already in November 1994, Mbeki conveyed the conviction in a Strategy and Tactics Document that was later adopted as ANC policy that “reconciliation would have to be counter-balanced with delivery to the black – but particularly African – majority.”

Mbeki is also the principal architect of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution macro-economic strategy (GEAR), which was unveiled in June 1996. In 1998, Mbeki put forward the Employment Equity Bill, which seeks to deliver black empowerment. This Bill aims to do so by creating workplaces which more accurately reflect the racial composition of South Africa.

The ANC under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki is also debating the merits of a basic income grant for the desperately poor, and affirmative action and “Africanisation” have become realities under Mbeki. During his term in office, then, government policies have become part of a deliberate effort towards seeking accelerated delivery to the black masses and to advance them economically.

These policies, however, touch on the raw nerves of the racial question in South Africa as “competition for scarce resources such as top positions in the private sector heats up”. In this context it could be argued that there is a contradiction in focus between Mandela and Mbeki.

To an extent Mbeki has burnt some of the bridges that Mandela built in an attempt to overcome the racial divides that are so deeply entrenched in South African society. Mbeki’s aim with his economic policies is undoubtedly not giving rise to a “racial Armageddon” because “he understands too well that it will not be in the country’s interest for such a conflict to take place”.

Mbeki’s primary concern, rather, remains the economic upliftment of the African majority who still largely represent a marginalised group at the bottom of the economic ladder.
Managing a vision

From the beginning of his rule, Mandela was relatively unengaged and started to distance himself from the daily political brawl; shifting his focus to the fulfillment of the ceremonial aspects of his duties. Schrire remarked that Mandela became satisfied with “leading from behind” and over time came to rarely chair even Cabinet meetings. In so doing, he enabled Mbeki to adopt the role of de facto Prime Minister.

The rationale behind this move was twofold: it created a controlled environment in which Mbeki could learn the ropes of the presidency and it served to counteract some fears surrounding a post-Mandela era. Mbeki’s election as ANC president at the organisation’s 50th national conference in December 1997 in reality marked the beginning of the post-Mandela era and reassured the people by guaranteeing some form of continuity.

It is worth emphasising that despite the laissez-faire leadership style that Mandela adopted he did not become an “insubstantial figurehead” as a result of this leadership style. He remained politically astute in areas such as choice of key personnel and policies of reconciliation. At the same time it is a reality that Nelson Mandela was ignorant of many details of policy and had an apparent shortcoming in managing many aspects of government. His exceptional gift for influencing and convincing people, however, overshadowed this shortcoming and Mbeki aided where Mandela fell short.

After 1999, Mbeki continued to display the characteristics of a transactional leader by organising his staff in such a way that he can “oversee policy and direct the implementation of initiatives in economics, security and foreign affairs”. He became known for adopting the roles of both manager and leader. This is a vague political philosophy, borrowed from Tony Blair, through which governing a country is seen as a business. Mbeki extended his role Mbeki adopted policies that include scaling down the government, an increasing focus on the free-market principle, as well as moving the focus away from local government such as the municipalities and towards the metropolitan areas that are in line with these business principles.

The fact that Mbeki seems to be having adopted both these roles raises the question of whether these two roles are mutually exclusive or not. Cook explains leadership as being about “giving direction and energy” whereas management is about “being efficient and going through the steps of getting there”. If the definitions are used as a foundation one could argue that these two roles could in fact complement each other but may be mutually exclusive in some cases as well. It should be noted that personality, leadership style, human capabilities and time impose limitations on the simultaneous fulfilment of both these roles by any one person.

A president can, however, provide leadership by giving direction through the formulation of a vision and by motivating and convincing the constituency of the value of striving towards that goal. At the same time the president can also be of assistance along the road heading towards the goal, and in doing so, the president may then take on a role of a manager.

There is a goal in Mbeki’s ideal future, which is encapsulated in the African Renaissance and by providing the direction towards this goal he is becoming both South Africa’s and Africa’s leader. Due to his commitment towards the achievement of this goal he is intensely involved in building a path towards his goal. With every step of the path that is completed, he is managing South Africa. The path starts in South Africa’s domestic political arena, it winds from the Cape to Cairo, and will eventually link Africa to the world.

It started with Mbeki’s famous “I am an African” speech, with his efforts to give the country’s domestic policy a more overtly African complexion, and is extended by policies such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development.

The roles of leader and manager were, however, mutually exclusive in Mandela’s case. At the core of Mandela’s ideal transition was the need to forgive and reconcile. He was the “animal” of the ideas of nation-building, of the new South Africa and of the Rainbow nation”. He argued that justice had to be measured in terms of socio-economic equality as well as by emancipation from poverty. These goals were very honourable as animating visions and left creative popular respondents “speechless”, but Mandela failed to achieve all three during his term in office. He provided the direction and energy but was not there to guide the process every step of the way.

Taking a step back

The direct impact that the leadership of Mandela and Mbeki has had on South Africa is most noticeable, but taking a step back to view the broader influence of their leadership adds a whole new dimension to the analysis. The era of “Madiba Magic” represents the reconciliation of racial antagonisms, healing of deep wounds and the securing of a brighter future.

This, however, merely represented the first few steps of a long walk towards a more democratic, equal and fair South Africa. It also has to be borne in mind that at this stage it is easier to take steps backwards, and that the real challenge lies in keeping the process on track. Mandela indeed left Mbeki with a valuable legacy — political peace — but this legacy is just as vulnerable as it is valuable and in that sense “we stand or fall with the Mbeki presidency”.

Fears have already been expressed that Mbeki will “run the South African government in a manner that resembles that of other African leaders”. Warnings have been given by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and played up by opposition parties. These include Mbeki’s “ruthless streak” (i.e. the belief that he has sidelined or forced people like Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale out of government) and his subsequent “maneuvering” of his most trusted Congress loyalists into key government positions.

The biggest fear, however, is that “Mbeki will start off a democrat and finish an autocrat”. The ANC’s campaign for a two-thirds majority in the 1999 elections fuelled this fear. Increased power does not however represent the real threat; rather the threat lies in the irresponsible handling and use of that power. Given the problems facing Mbeki and rising expectations of changing the character of the country, it can be argued that “a little autocracy can go a long way” in managing the post-Madiba Magic era.

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Esterhuysen underlines this by highlighting the need for a transformational leader who can govern.
the country in a strategic manner. This type of leadership style necessitates involvement in almost everything precisely because strategic policy formulation is linked to almost every aspect of the environment. In some circles there is, however, not a deep understanding of this.

If we now take a step back and distance ourselves from the domestic criticism that accompanied the post-Apartheid era it becomes evident that the positive spin-offs of Mandela and Mbeki’s leadership have extended far beyond South Africa’s borders. Mandela and Mbeki together brought South Africa through a time that could have been horrifyingly different.

During those dangerous years of transition, there could have been civil unrest followed by racial wars - in addition to social and economic collapse. Instead, with the help of all races, they managed to preserve South Africa’s stability and potential wealth and create new institutions.

The mostly peaceful strides that the integration of South African society has made since 1990, sets a powerful precedent in African society which will become evident that the positive spin-offs of Mandela and Mbeki’s leadership role on the continent, can make a difference in a continent that some have already written off.

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Notes & references

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15 Ibid., p 36.
18 Hermann 1986, p 178.
19 Ibid., p 175.
24 Hawthorne 1999, p 52.
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32 Hermann 1998, p 175.
34 Hamill 1999, p 23.
36 Ibid., p 43.
37 ‘Can he deliver?’, Financial Mail, September 1993, p 27.
38 Hamill 1999, p 23.
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44 Schrire in Hawthorne 1996, p 45.
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47 Nelan 1999, p 40.
49 Gumede 2000, p 57.
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54 Ibid., p 40; Nelan 1999, p 42.
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58 Nelan 1999, p 50.
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61 Hawthorne 1999, p 52.