

Why Leadership Matters

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There's a dilemma at the heart of what it means to be a good leader or a good philanthropist. We all strive to have an impact on the people, issues and systems that matter most to us. Naturally, when you are investing your own time, energy and resources in something, you want to be able to measure the results – and rightly so. But deep down, we also know that when it comes to some of the most important things in life, there are no metrics that apply. And there's a danger that, in our rush to quantify everything, the most important outcomes – some of which may not come to fruition until years down the line – will be ignored and neglected.

Fourteen years ago, I founded a social enterprise called *Leaders' Quest*. We work with leaders from all walks of life to build a more inclusive and sustainable future for our planet. We do this primarily by designing and facilitating experiential learning journeys ('Quests') that bring together leaders and influencers from different sectors and continents to explore tough questions that affect us all. A Quest is an opportunity to step away from the familiar and explore new perspectives on life, leadership and our role in the world. Alongside this, through our 'Quest Fellowship' programme, we nurture talented grassroots leaders, empowering them to generate creative solutions to big issues in their own communities.

What all of our activities at Leaders' Quest have in common is a focus on personal leadership. Whether we're working with senior executives at a multinational company, or poor women from slum communities, the starting point is the same. We enable people to explore who they are and what matters most to them. Our work is about purpose, values, and deepening awareness of self and of how we relate to others.

The reason for this approach is simple: people drive change. Strategies, systems, structures and funding all help, but unless you have the right leadership, no project, however well-intentioned and well-planned, will succeed. This doesn't just mean having people with the requisite skills and competencies to get the job done. It's about all those immeasurable attributes that make a leader truly effective – courage, passion, authenticity, and clarity of vision.

Leadership is a craft, and like any other craft, mastery of the technical skills involved is only a small part of what makes some individuals stand out from the rest. When we think about the leaders we most admire, it's easy to miss the hard work and suffering that typically went into the growth of that person. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison honing the compassion and wisdom that lent him the capacity to invite his former enemies to step up and help build a



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nation. Most of us, thankfully, don't pay that kind of price.

The qualities that make a leader effective are as infinitely variable as human life itself. There is no perfect recipe or gold standard. This makes it difficult to fully measure progress when it comes to individual leadership. What yardstick can you use? How do you quantify empathy, or authenticity, or resilience? But the impacts that flow from enhancing the leadership capabilities of individuals are plain to see.

Take a couple of contrasting examples from my own experience at Leaders' Quest.

A few years ago, the Managing Partner of the private equity firm Actis said to me: "We'd like to take some of our biggest investors to Nigeria, to see what it's like on the ground. We want to help them understand the social and political context, as well as the opportunities for business there."

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We put together a week-long programme of meetings with government ministers, journalists and leaders of businesses large and small. We discussed inflation, corruption, the legal system and social change. We spent time with senior executives from one of the major oil multinationals in the Niger Delta (and accused of environmental destruction and complicity with a corrupt government), and we met one of the NGOs that opposed them. We visited a business which manufactured foam mattresses for the domestic market. In a part of the world where most people had yet to sleep on a bed, the mattress business was a great one to be in.

We also spent a day in Makoko, a sprawling slum, built largely on rubbish, at the edge of Lagos lagoon. We visited a mobile healthcare unit treating patients as they came in off the street, and met women's groups developing micro-lending schemes to set themselves up as street vendors and thus support their families. We saw the efforts of people on society's fringes, eager to equip themselves with skills and build a better future for their children.

It wasn't immediately clear how these new perspectives would translate into business decisions. And indeed, the Nigeria Quest was one of several programmes we would deliver for Actis as part of their transformation journey. Key to it all however, was a recognition across the leadership team, that they are part of an inter-connected ecosystem, and that what they do and how they do it, has ripple effects on multiple stakeholders. More than five years on from the Nigeria Quest, the Chairman describes the impact on the business as follows: "Today, when

we're deciding whether to make an investment, the first item on the agenda is: what will be its social and environmental impact? This used to be our last consideration. You've helped us shift our priorities."

The consequences of this shift in mindset are far-reaching. The firm no longer invests in carbon power generation, for example, and it has massively increased its investment in education globally – both through its philanthropic foundation and through its core business.

At the other end of the spectrum, Mumtaz Shaikh is an alumna of our Quest Fellowship programme in India. Mumtaz grew up in a slum on the outskirts of Mumbai, was married at sixteen and became a victim of abuse in her own home. Whilst teaching in a nursery school in her own community, she came across CORO India – our partner organisation in designing and delivering the Fellowship programme – and went on to be selected as one of our first Quest Fellows.

Today, Mumtaz works with a federation of women's groups that is helping more than 10,000 women and girls combat violence, abuse and oppressive cultural attitudes. And, along with several other former Fellows, she is spearheading the Right to Pee campaign – drawing attention to the lack of free, safe public toilets for women in Mumbai. The campaign has garnered enthusiastic coverage from local and international media and has so far secured 10 million rupees (more than £100,000) of funding from the municipal government to address the issue. Last autumn, she received a prestigious Daughter of Maharashtra Award in recognition of the contribution she has made to social progress.

There are many skills – advocacy, knowledge of the law, campaign organisation – that Mumtaz learned during her fellowship year, which have equipped her to do this work. But the most significant shift was on the inside – Mumtaz moved from seeing herself as a victim to seeing herself as a change-maker, with the potential to serve her own community and beyond. This transformation in an individual's sense of self is what enables long-term, sustainable impact.

One of the most important questions for any leader or philanthropist to ask themselves is about legacy: what will I leave behind? For those who run institutions or enterprises, succession planning is of course a key part of the answer. In my experience, the same principles hold true in succession planning as do in any effort to ensure long-term impact: people are the key. Too often, we get bogged down in trying to codify an individual's vision, or developing resilient systems and processes, and overlook the vital ingredient: leadership. If you want to secure your legacy, my advice is this: recruit and empower a cadre of people who share your core values – and then trust them to do the rest.

Lindsay Levin is a social entrepreneur and philanthropist. In 2001 she founded Leaders' Quest as her 'last start-up'. She has since worked to connect leaders from all disciplines and sectors, to explore solutions to some of the big issues in the world today. Currently, much of her time is spent working with corporate CEOs and their leadership teams on the role and purpose of business, company values and culture change. Her first book, Invisible Giants: changing the world one step at a time, was published in 2013. She lives in New York.