

The Leadership Lessons of Nelson Mandela By [Nicholas Pearce](#) 12/12/ 2013 - BusinessWeek

As the world celebrates the life and legacy of former South African president and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Nelson Mandela, we in the business community should take a moment to consider three powerful lessons we can distill from his leadership that are relevant for leaders at every level, particularly those young people who currently populate our business schools, who aspire to lead well and create lasting value in the world.

Leadership is behavioral, not positional

Though he only served as South Africa's president for five years, Nelson Mandela is a classic case study of how one can lead without formal authority. Over the 27 years he was imprisoned, he exerted influence. Over his five-year presidency, he exerted influence. In the decade and a half following his retirement from politics, Mandela's influence grew as a global humanitarian and philanthropist. Admittedly, his influence was enlarged by virtue of the presidency, but positions and titles don't define great leaders, great leaders define and leverage the power of their positions to have a positive impact.

The capacity to integrate, motivate, and mobilize others to bring a common aspiration to life is what leadership is all about, not holding positions of formal authority. This simple truth gives hope to the up-and-coming millennial generation that leadership isn't an activity relegated to the seemingly distant c-suite; good can be done at every stage of one's career. It can serve to reignite the passion of the mid-career professional – somebody is watching, learning from, and emulating your example, regardless of who recognizes (or ignores) your contributions. At the same time, Mandela's example also gives renewed purpose to the well-seasoned senior executive that retirement is nothing to be afraid of. There is unique purpose and meaning in every season of one's life – embrace each season and lead where you are.

Choose collaboration over retaliation

It has been said that in the face of danger, people instinctively respond with "fight or flight." Similarly, in the face of conflict, many leaders in organizations develop an almost instinctive default response – they choose to either collaborate or retaliate. No doubt, retaliating against one's opponents can be a gratifying primal reaction, but in the increasingly networked global marketplace, it is a short-sighted, losing strategy. Alienating potential partners hampers collective progress. Retaliation deepens divides; collaboration heals them. Retaliation perpetuates ignorance; collaboration promotes learning and progress. The instinct to collaborate is a hallmark of effective 21st century leadership; it is an instinct with which Mandela operated.

Mandela honed his collaborative instinct before becoming South Africa's first black president, assembling a multiracial, mixed-gendered leadership team to combat apartheid as head of the African National Congress. Like most great leaders, Mandela knew how to listen and leverage the insights of others. He also understood the power of courageously choosing to forgive those

who have wronged you and humbly seeking reconciliation with those you (and your organization) have wronged. Research and experience show that the collaboration instinct changes nations, revolutionizes markets, enhances organizations, and ultimately enriches lives.

Never give up on seemingly impossible ideals

Was a South Africa free of apartheid impossible or an aspiration worthy of one's commitment? Mandela is widely quoted as saying that **"it always seems impossible until it's done."** His perseverance in the face of inhumane persecution shows us that the seemingly impossible will remain impossible if men and women of purpose fail to summon the courage to do what's right.

In our own organizations are seemingly impossible aspirations discounted as unrealistic and naive? Accomplishing anything worth talking about or remembering will involve opposition and setback, which is why big ideas die in organizations every day.

Cultivating an organization that stands for and embodies grand ideals is worth fighting for. Growing a team that does the right thing when nobody is watching is worth fighting for. Let's be truthful, the mundane realities of every-day organizational leadership can dull the hunger for the grand aspirations that can motivate breakthrough innovations that transform sectors and societies. But if Mandela teaches us anything, it's to commit our lives and our practice of leadership to pushing for the seemingly impossible.

Business school equips managers to have the right strategies, frameworks, tactics, and tools. But far too many leave b-school thinking that leadership is about a title and a corner office instead of the daily practice of catalyzing good. Still too many lack the courage to fight for what's right when met with personal inconvenience. If President Mandela's memorial service was any indication, **the greatness of your leadership will be measured not in dollars and cents, but in lives impacted for good.** Mandela created lasting value; so must we.