

THE SERVANT LEADER

by Michael Appel

Asked to write down one word that describes what leadership is all about, Eduloan CEO Totsie Memela-Khambula wrote humility.

Embodying the spirit of humility is a 24-hour job. Despite the title of CEO, she believes in treating those under her, from the chief financial officer to the tea lady and cleaner, with a blanket approach of respect. One of nine children born to a domestic worker mother and a gardener father, growing up in Soweto opportunity was slim and money tight.

Despite financial challenges her parents wanted her to enjoy better schooling than was the norm under Bantu education. Memela-Khambula says, "My mother always told us that the only thing that could lift us out of poverty was education, so they sent me to a Roman Catholic school. She attended Diepkloof Junior Secondary School (now called Bopasenotle) where she was elected by her fellow students to represent them in the Soweto Students Representative Council in 1976. Education in Afrikaans for 50% of our subjects had just become compulsory. It was at this time that I became more politically aware and eventually politically active."

Leaving the country in 1977 she headed to Swaziland to finish high school and start her

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tertiary education, studying for a BA Social Sciences degree. During her time in Swaziland she joined the underground movement of the African National Congress. It was her commander in the underground that instilled in her the notion that no matter what she was doing, whether it was for the liberation movement or academically, that she do it properly and with her whole heart. What she was asked to do for the movement included risking her life by transporting letters and documents, people, and even arms between South Africa and Swaziland.

It was during this period that the importance of coaching and mentoring, vital to any leader, became apparent to her. "That is why I believe in the importance of coaching and mentoring and in creating a network around yourself that guides you. It is sad that in South Africa today so many youths do not have this support growing up. Mentoring young women and supporting them is one of my passions."

Memela-Khambula believes we have an unfortunate habit of

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TOTSIE MEMELA-KHAMBULA
EDULOAN CEO

putting leaders in boxes, whether in politics or business. In essence, South Africans have stopped understanding that leaders can come from all environments. It is not the authority given to you at a particular time that defines whether you are a true leader. If a person does not espouse the values of leadership, such as enabling and empowering people, then they are not leaders. This is not to say that they cannot learn such values because, Memela-Khambula believes, leaders are made, not born.

SOUTH AFRICANS HAVE STOPPED UNDERSTANDING THAT LEADERS CAN COME FROM ALL ENVIRONMENTS

“We have a habit of looking at people that head large organisations and believing that their authority makes them leaders, which is not necessarily the case. It is important for people to understand the expectations and responsibilities placed on them by followers who are keen to emulate them.”

The media spotlight that falls on many politicians, actors and musicians, makes such celebrities leaders by default. Memela-Khambula warns that celebrities are held in a different light by the public, especially the youth. This is a burden and responsibility, requiring these people to become role models in terms of what they say and how they behave.

The concept of leadership and who our role models are has changed since Memela-Khambula's teenage days. Where the bling-wearing, sports car-driving, affluent members of society are today held in high regard, in her days it was the black professionals making a difference in their communities, such as teachers, nurses and lawyers, whom she regarded as leaders.

The values attached to leadership have changed over the years, with social status and acquiring houses and cars having replaced actually making a difference in communities and families. Asked how she defines truly South African, Memela-Khambula says, “Leaders are people who share and give of themselves. They realise they cannot exist in isolation and realise they are who they are because of who we are. Leaders are most importantly contributors rather than takers.”

Working together and pooling their knowledge and collective experience, leaders in this country can achieve more. Leaders in politics and business should be meeting with civic leaders and sharing ideas to help create a more unified, informed and educated South Africa. **S**

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MEMELA-KHAMBULA'S TIPS TO ASPIRING LEADERS:

- Being self aware and able to self manage. This includes knowing what you do not know. People can sense when you are trying to fake your way through a situation.
- Not trying to be a leader in isolation. Surround yourself with competent people that do not look, sound or speak like you do and who have different skills sets. This ensures true diversity.
- Creating an environment in which sustainable development within the company and your community becomes the norm. Enabling your team to understand that social responsibility is as important as the bottom line and inculcate it as a company value.
- Aiming high and expecting the same from your employees. Stretch your staff and demand the best from them. Be sure to respect employees and their abilities whilst creating an enabling environment for them to succeed.
- Being humble as well as authentic in everything that you do. Humility is respecting the people that clean the office and realising that they are important cogs in the company wheel.
- Encouraging the personal development and growth of your staff by allowing them space to be creative.
- Never settling for mediocrity. •