

WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?: LITMUS TEST OF GREAT LEADERSHIP

Speech given by Prof. David N. Abdulai at the Leadership in Practice Awards 2011, Held at Emperor's Palace, Kempton Park, South Africa, on 17th November 2011.

The Programme Director, SBL Board Members, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, our award recipient, Representatives of sponsoring companies: Mr Lloyd Thompson, CEO of Knowledge Dimension, Mr. S'bu Zondi, Business Manager: Sub-Saharan Africa – Emerald Group Publishing, CEOs of partnering companies present, Mr. Banthu Holomisa, Major General (Retired) and President of the United Democratic Movement, other SBL stakeholders, members of the media fraternity, distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this year's Leadership in Practice Award dinner. We are here today to honour a great leader and a great African woman (Dr. Mamphela Ramphele), and if I may say so, my sister from another mother. It is therefore appropriate then to ask the question:

Why are great leaders great? I will contend that, great leaders are great because they stand up for what they believe in. Great leaders refuse to sit on the fence and they always stand up so that they can be counted. This characteristic of great leaders is the defining quality of their greatness. The late Robert F. Kennedy, brother of John F. Kennedy, 35th American President in a speech at the University of Cape Town in 1966 said, **“each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, it sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of and daring, these ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”**

The great Nelson Mandela (Madiba), made it clear what he stood for during the Rivonia Trial of 1964 when he said, "***I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realised. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.***"

Listen to another great leader, Martin Luther King Jnr., the African-American Civil Rights Leader, "**the ultimate measure of a man or woman is not where he or she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand in time of challenge and controversy** (modifications mine)." King adds, "**if you have not found something that you're willing to die for, you're not fit to live anyway.**"

Ladies and gentlemen, as leaders if we hope to be great, then we have to stand up for something or we will fall for anything. Indeed as leaders, if we do not stand for anything that will make a difference in the lives of people we lead, we would according to the late Henry Parks, the great African-American entrepreneur; we will one day "**wind up like majority of people who never ventured into the unknown, who stumbled through their allotted years with hopes and dreams eventually fading from memory, whose lives never made a difference.**"

So tonight, let me ask the question, what do you stand for as a leader? What kind of man's inhumanity to man keeps you awake at night? Indeed, what kind of injustice keeps you from sleeping at night? What **isms** and **schisms** make your heart palpitate? When you have found out what this is, then I urge you to take a

stand and be counted. Get up and stand up! *Listen to the whispers, and do something about these whispers. Because when you listen to the whispers and you get up and do something about the whispers, you will not have to put up with the screams.* So says a Cherokee Indian proverb.

Ladies and gentlemen, why are great leaders great? It is because they can get people to compromise and work together for a common good or purpose. But when need be, they can take a stand. In such cases, it is where principles are involved. Therefore, wherever there are principles involved, don't compromise, consequence notwithstanding, right is going to win in the end. Great leaders understand this too well.

Ladies and gentlemen, by urging you to take a stand and be counted on the issues that matter, by urging you to stand up for your ideals, values and what you believe in are no mean feat. Taking a stand requires courage and courage is based on principles, not perceptions. One cannot be an effective and indeed a great leader when you don't have the courage to stand up for justice and what you believe in and the conviction to implement your ideals. You cannot be a great leader if you flip-flop, and your stand changes with the time of the day and weather. According to John Maxell, a leadership expert, **"your dedication to potential must remain stronger than your desire to appease others."** The refusal to appease others, even *"the powers that be"* when they are wrong requires a strong will.

Benjamin Disraeli, a former British Prime Minister, commenting on the human will once said, **"nothing can withstand the power of the human will if it is willing to stake its very existence to the extent of its purpose."** The question then is asked, what is your purpose as a leader? What do you stand for?

Are you willing to stand for what is right and just, come what may? I WILL IGNORANTLY PRESUME THE ANSWER IS YES.

Then ladies and gentlemen, "let us stop trying to herd cats." Let us from now on refuse to chase two rabbits at the same time. And definitely, lets refuse to live for other's opinions.

When all is said and done, we should remember that great men and women must be tested in the laboratory of adversity, because they never shied away from speaking the truth and standing for what they believe in. **At the end of the day, at the end of it all, greatness rest easily at the pinnacle of the mount of achievement where others dare to rise.**

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much and welcome to this years' LIP award dinner.

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