



Inequality: A critical leadership development challenge in SA

Perspective provided by Freda Brock

TCC Alumni

Board Member for TCC Ubuntu Coaching Foundation™

Conventional definitions of HRD generally tend to focus solely on strategies that are aimed at using skills development and supply to promote economic growth. While the promotion of economic growth is a pre-eminent objective for HRD in South Africa, it certainly does not constitute the sole objective of our development agenda. The history of South Africa and the persistence of residual prejudices and inequalities compel us to always be vigilant of issues related to values, good citizenship and an explicit commitment to wider development objectives (Human Resource Development for South Africa 2010-2030).

Policy reform over more than two decades has played an important part in drawing attention to inequality. The transformation challenge remains extremely difficult particularly given inadequate resourcing for supporting change at institutional and personal levels. Changes are often brought in without clarity and shared understanding about what is meant by inequality, where change would be meaningful and appropriate and what the implications might be for leadership.

Cosmetic changes in structure are relatively easy to bring about. The greater leadership challenge lies in surfacing and confronting the invisible effects on organisational life of historical inequality in access to education and economic advancement opportunities. Of people feeling invisible, demeaned or socially excluded. Of people across the structure feeling entitled to privilege, unduly judged, labeled, blamed, victimised or voiceless.

Across public, corporate and NPO sectors we see organisations overwhelmed by the need to comply with regulatory standards and at the same time survive in hard economic times with incoherent, poorly supported leadership, understaffing and people feeling unsupported, undervalued and insecure. Resulting poor delivery impacts on sustainability, job security and the quality of services - which often is felt worst in poor communities and further compounds inequality.

As coaches our challenge is to create space in the midst of such adversity for people to connect, talk, listen, appreciate, face reality and innovate. Our spaces can open deep interrogation and understanding of sensitive issues to better support leadership development. We have the opportunity to heighten critical awareness and sensitivity to individuals' perceptions and experience of inequality, prejudice and discrimination which still manifest widely in all kinds of organisations and block perception, clarity, vision, communication, empathy and learning. We have the advantage of being able to see the elephant in the room and how it perpetuates dysfunction and poor alignment at all levels.

As a profession we cannot afford to not give prominence to developing our knowledge, skills and confidence in the area of promoting justice, equity, inclusion and multiculturalism, and we need to be creative and purposeful in building partnerships for support and cross-learning. This assumes a commitment to co-operative ways of working and openness to adapting familiar approaches. At the same time it calls for continued commitment to quality and rigour – so that quality of services is maintained, and our work has appeal and is sustainable.

Many interesting questions arise in thinking about how we might see ourselves with greater awareness of our activist role. For instance, questions around boundaries, contracting and accountability, and how to make our intention explicit in ways that do not close down trust (or close doors).

And what might open up if we were to focus light on the hard issues? Imagine. At the very least we would strengthen hope, balance, resilience and integrity as individuals and as a profession. At best we would see evidence of deeper human connection and greater commitment to justice and equality in the communities we serve.