

Leaders needed to ‘step into this chaos’

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According to GSB senior lecturer Athol Williams, Western Cape Premier, Alan Winde, has demonstrated the kind of leadership that is necessary during the pandemic and for life thereafter. Photo Larissa Venter.

Throughout history, crises have called for particular types of leaders, attributes and actions – and the COVID-19 pandemic is no different. Leadership is certainly needed during this time as we approach life in the ‘new normal’.

What are the qualities and values these leaders should embody? What actions are necessary? Are there any examples worth following? And what is the responsibility of so-called followers?

While there are no silver bullets for leading during this unprecedented time, **University of Cape Town (UCT) academic Athol Williams** (<https://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/athol-williams>), a senior lecturer specialising in corporate responsibility and ethical

leadership at the Graduate School of Business (GSB), shares his thoughts on what kind of leadership is necessary during the pandemic and for life post-COVID-19.

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“The virus has shaken us as a society and shaken us as individuals.”

A consequence of the pandemic, he explained, is that many professionals are questioning fundamental aspects of their lives: career versus family, wealth versus leisure, power versus peace of mind, and so on. On the other hand, the vulnerable sectors of our society are questioning whether the government really serves them, whether maintaining order is in their best interest and whether peace comes at the expense of their livelihoods.

“A lot is being questioned because the lockdown and virus exposed the fragility of our livelihoods and the fractured nature of our society,” said Williams. “We’re now more confused than ever and, in some quarters, [angrier].”

Step into this chaos

“With all this chaos swirling around, we need leaders who can step into this chaos – not avoid it – and offer clarity,” said the GSB senior lecturer.

Business leaders will need to rethink many of their leadership styles. They’ll need to meet people where they are and find new ways of inspiring and motivating them. And political leaders, said Williams, will need to sell a vision of a future which currently does not exist.

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“Those aching will need to be convinced that something better lies ahead, otherwise they will descend into hopelessness, which will be destructive to our society,” he said.

This new post-COVID-19 society will need new leaders. According to Williams, these leaders will need to be courageous, clear-minded and visionary, but, importantly, must be able to listen to and hear people. They must be able to draw from their followers’ passions through empathy and compassion and craft new paths.

“Leaders are going to need to develop abilities to connect with people like they’ve never needed [to] before,” said Williams.

Compensation rethink

Some of the commendable leadership moments during the pandemic have been the pay cuts that many leaders have taken in support of lower-income staff members.

But what this has done, said Williams, is once again highlight the massive income differentials in South Africa. He said that even if we are to believe executives who claim that their pay is justified, there is no meaningful justification for the amount paid at the lowest end of the workforce.

Therefore, Williams is also calling for ethical leaders who will “stand at the forefront of a move to rethink how we are paid”, and this must include what essential workers are paid. He added that at the core of this compensation rethink, there needs to be an ethical rethink in which leaders ask, ‘Can I really accept what I’m being paid when my fellow human is being paid what she is being paid? What is fair? What is ethical?’ ”

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“Our future compensation philosophy should be developed around focus on solidarity rather than personal enrichment.”

For life post-COVID-19, Williams advised that leaders use the same logic as they did during the lockdown when taking pay cuts.

“Our future compensation philosophy should be developed around focus on solidarity rather than personal enrichment,” he said. “We need to carry through the ‘in this together’ ethos and lead our organisations in ways that bring everyone along.”

Servant leaders

What will happen if the leaders that this historic moment calls for do not emerge or evolve? What are the costs and consequences?

According to Williams, because South Africa has always been a fragmented society, part of the job of a good public leader is to build bridges across these fragments and, ultimately, to help the nation heal these fragmentations. He fears that in the absence of leaders who are in touch with the current fears and aspirations of their followers, society will suffer even greater fragmentation.

“This will not only lead to greater suffering but civil unrest as well. In such circumstances, we all lose,” he said.

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“They’re servant leaders and ... endeavouring to pull citizens closer together.”

Fortunately, Williams has already witnessed leaders coming to the fore who embody attributes he mentioned as necessary for navigating the pandemic and life thereafter. As he is not close enough to observe business or public leaders outside the Western Cape where he resides, he mentioned two admirable leaders based in the province: Premier Alan Winde and the leader of the opposition (African National Congress), Cameron Dugmore.



Cameron Dugmore is another example of admirable leadership during the pandemic. He is pictured (third from right) alongside leaders of the Bangladeshi business community who donated over 700 food parcels in Athlone. Photo Cameron Dugmore/Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/cameron.dugmore/>).

According to Williams, both Winde and Dugmore have been hands-on in engaging with their stakeholders during the lockdown, which ranges from the homeless to struggling families, as well as business leaders and other decision makers.

“I observe them both listening to people but also expressing their firm views,” said Williams. “They’re servant leaders, and I believe, despite their political differences, endeavouring to pull citizens closer together by seeking to create conditions where we all can prosper.”

One instance that impressed Williams in particular was when Dugmore visited the Strandfontein temporary emergency shelter. There, the leader of the opposition called passionately but sensibly for improved conditions.

“There’s no grandstanding – just humble engagement with an emphasis on listening,” explained Williams.

Thoughtful actors

For there to be leaders, there needs to be an electorate, citizens, employees, followers, and so on. They – we – also have a responsibility for making our way through this pandemic, Williams said.

It is seemingly harder to be a follower than a leader these days because citizens find it difficult to know who to trust and what to believe, he said. Citizens have been disappointed so many times that a strong cynicism is growing. But the citizen’s role, according to Williams, is to “keep being questioning followers”.

“We need to exercise our democratic responsibility to be active citizens by taking action, but also to be thoughtful about which actions we take and which paths we follow.”

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