

# Lessons from Nelson Mandela

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In the mid-1990s, then South African president Nelson Mandela successfully bridged a seemingly impossible divide between his country's ethnic groups using the power of sport.

Now, in the wake of the U.S. credit downgrade, and with the political wrangling, finger-pointing and partisan politics that threaten to crush the U.S. economic recovery, we see a strong parallel between the challenges of U.S. President Barack Obama and those of the former South African president. Both will stand forever in history for being the first black presidents of their countries. Mandela dealt with a deeply divided nation in the aftermath of apartheid. Obama must unite a country that's torn on how to escape the throes of a debt crisis. The question is can Obama create his own Mandela moment to unite Democrats and Republicans in saving the battered U.S. economy?

Mandela's struggle and strategy for unity is portrayed in the 2009 film, *Invictus*, and John Carlin's book, *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Changed a Nation*. It bears important lessons for next-generation leaders - political, business or social - now more than ever.

Although there are many qualities to admire about Mandela's leadership, we can sum it up in three words: competency, character and commitment.

First, Mandela was a competent leader. He had the ability to see the big picture, which meant building his nation setting each brick of the foundation with careful and thorough precision. He recognized that a key brick was the white population, represented in sports by the largely white Springbok rugby team. His black supporters, recovering from almost 50 years of apartheid, wanted to abolish the Springboks. Instead, Mandela showed uninhibited support for the Springboks, eventually helping to draw blacks and whites together. He overcame popular anti-white sentiment and he was reluctant to engage in petty revenge.

Second, people were drawn to Mandela's character, particularly his conviction, courage, empathy, compassion and deep humility. It was these elements of character that enabled him to forgive his enemies and focus on a vision for all people of Africa. He said that forgiveness liberates the soul and that it removes fear. He also had the courage to stand up to his supporters and tell them they were wrong about the Springboks, even though he risked losing his leadership in doing so. That speaks volumes of his humility - his ability to put his country before himself and even risk failure for the cause.

Third, he was committed. He never gave up, working himself to the point that he collapsed from exhaustion. He faced skepticism from both blacks and whites, and even his own family. Good leadership is not without cost! But Mandela was willing to make personal sacrifices to preserve

his commitment to leadership, acknowledging that, as leader, his family consisted of 43 million South Africans.

Mandela's type of leadership is needed more than ever, particularly as we grapple with the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis and the threat of a double-dip recession.

Shortly after the crisis, I worked with colleagues at the Richard Ivey School of Business on a report titled Leadership On Trial, which examined the role leadership played before, during and after the economic crisis. In addition to finding that many leaders failed us throughout the crisis, we unveiled guiding principles for organizational leadership anchored on the very three pillars Mandela illustrated: character, competencies and a renewed commitment to do the hard work of leadership.

The latest U.S. debacle over its credit rating screams for such principles.

Beyond just a reflection of the U.S.'s financial state, the credit downgrade is a commentary on poor leadership - the kind of short-sighted leadership that contributed to the economic crisis. Standard & Poor pointed to Washington's inability to overcome political obstacles and enact aggressive fiscal reforms as being at the heart of its decision.

Additionally, Americans are starting to see the failings of their leaders. For the first time, a recent U.S. poll showed the majority of Americans don't believe their own members of Congress deserve re-election. Likewise, Obama's approval ratings were dealt a hefty blow and his re-election may be unlikely if the U.S. economy doesn't turn around by next summer.

Although Obama has urged people to put politics aside and focus on the crisis at hand, his calls for unity have fallen on deaf ears. The Standard & Poor scolding merely added fuel to the fire as it caused the ongoing blame game to escalate. Did we not learn any leadership lessons from the economic crisis then?

Clearly a different leadership strategy is in order.

Mandela showed us that leadership has the power to unite and that commitment to such leadership, no matter what the costs, can make the impossible possible.

Let's hope the Democratic and Republican leaders can follow Mandela's example.

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