

# Strong leadership: critical to building South Africa's competitiveness

 By [Miller Matola](#)

20 Oct 2014

South Africa is a country rich in diversity with an array of cultures and communities, each with their own stories and history. Each of these communities have produced sometimes world-renowned leaders, but always local leaders, who have contributed to improving the lives of South Africans; they have made a mark on history and by playing their part, they have made South Africa the country we know today.

Democracy in 1994 brought a host of nation building and social cohesion challenges yet, South Africa succeeded in building a democratic society. South Africa's policies were focused on nation building and equalising levels of development and access to resources.

In theory, once nation building and a common national identity is achieved and citizens' basic needs such as education, housing, health care and water and sanitation are met, then a country should be in a position to compete with other nations on a global scale.

Being able to compete on a global scale and to achieve a competitive advantage is a challenge that leaders in South Africa have to respond to with urgency.

## Role of leadership

In South Africa, the role of leadership is crucial because it forms the back bone of the fabric of our societies and is a major source of inspiration for millions of citizens to do things differently to achieve excellence.

We must recognise that leaders do not exist only in government but in all other spheres of our society. Leaders can have formal or informal power and ironically those with informal power are sometimes able to motivate people better than those with formal power. If leaders actively work towards improving and growing their spaces to build other leaders who can take decisive action and implement decisions that will see us growing our country, this will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to our global competitiveness.

Leadership in South Africa that ensures the implementation of policies is critically important.

As a country, we must collectively move with haste to implement the policies that exist to ensure that South Africa gains a competitive advantage over its counterparts, and in this way addresses some of our pressing socio-economic challenges. There is no doubt that in many respects we have progressive and impressive policies, whose implementation is at times

hampered by people charged with implementing them. As we focus on the implementation of the development plan, we must constantly remind ourselves of Madiba's view that we need to move urgently from rhetoric to implementation. This requires our collective effort and contribution and strong leadership in whatever sphere of society we may be involved.

In contemporary business theory, it is believed that if organisations gain competitive advantage in the market place, they move to a place of brand recognition and increasing brand equity.

## National brand

While South Africa is not a corporate entity, perhaps it is time to consider implementing a hybrid model where our nation building efforts recognise that we do have a product we want citizens of our country - and the broader world - to buy, our nation brand! We want citizens to buy into South Africa. With this comes pride, patriotism and a solid sense of national identity.

In the aggressive business world, especially in today's global economy, every incremental achievement counts towards positioning your business as an industry leader.

Similarly, South Africa needs to focus on key sectors to gain competitive advantage in the global community of nations. Gaining a competitive advantage takes strategic planning, extensive research and strong leadership. To achieve this, leaders in South Africa, must form constructive partnerships with a range of stakeholders in the pursuit of competitiveness and prosperity by creating an environment that supports productivity. This necessarily involves the courage to do things differently - we may sometimes have to join the most unexpected partners to get the best, most creative and effective results. As Kofi Anan once said, "you shake hands with the devil to make peace".

This is not new to us in South Africa - this is our story, this is the bedrock on which our very democracy rests.

## South African Competitiveness Forum

As part of its mandate to build South Africa's brand reputation and contribute towards the country's global competitiveness by developing symbiotic partnerships with stakeholders who can build our country's competitiveness, Brand South Africa will host the second annual South African Competitiveness Forum in Johannesburg on 4 and 5 November 2014 under the theme "Active Citizenship and its role in changing the South African brand reality".

In an attempt to bring together a range of diverse voices, Brand South Africa will this year, in addition to discussions on youth and innovation, foreign direct investment, the labour market, expansion into the rest of Africa and active citizenship, include a virtual discussion with Global South Africans about their views on South Africa. Many South Africans remain very positive about our country although they may live abroad. They are a critical part of our nation brand.

The 2014 Forum will also see a discussion with all relevant stakeholders on South Africa's multipronged "going-out strategy". This will focus on business expansion strategy into African markets, and the role perceptions and reputation plays when entering peer markets elsewhere on the continent.

## ABOUT MILLER MATOLA

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