

**Zwelinzima Vavi**

We had a fascinating leadership conversation with Zwelinzima Vavi this Monday, 16 June on CliffCentral Leadership Platform.

I have met many leaders from different spheres of society. Surprisingly few of them have presence, or gravitas. Vavi has this, with his tall physique and authentic confidence to back it up. From the moment he walked into the CliffCentral studios he greeted every single person with a pleasantness that obviously comes naturally. Even my son and Ellis Mnyandu’s young boys received a handshake and brief interaction.

This is a man that without doubt was destined for greater things, even beyond being Secretary General of COSATU. He somehow embodied integrity, honesty and courage of speaking truth to power, which in large measure seem to be disappearing from our leadership culture as a nation and in fact across the globe.

Some time back I had a conversation with a real capitalist who confidently believed we should back Vavi for President. I was gobsmacked, because clearly Vavi would not necessarily promote policies that a capitalist would appreciate. But this was the status and respect that Vavi commanded from all quarters of society. It seems that the value of integrity and honesty weighed, and perhaps still weighs heavier than economic and political doctrines. Leaders of real integrity and stature, of course like a Mandela, are unfortunately few and far between these days.

This is why Vavi hurt himself and perhaps his future so severely. This is why so many were and are still disappointed in what happened. But, can he recover; has this been a mere bump in the road, or detour on his road to destiny? Can he again become that man so many admired, respected; can he gain momentum once again?

I suggested to Vavi that we bed this traumatic scandal down by him telling us what he learned, so that other leaders can learn from him, avoid unnecessary pain that follows not only for the leader but those closest to him and in some cases millions that depend on him for leadership.

The central learning for him was that “you can do something behind closed doors, but nothing that was done behind these doors remains there forever. When you do things hoping no one would ever know about it you must know you are risking and at some point those things will come out and hurt you and your family badly.” Vavi commented his family and everyone that believed in him and his leadership, what he represented, were badly hurt. He has learnt that “nothing is irreversible.” The man is sincere about what he refers to as a “terrible mistake”, which of course he apologised for “a million times over,” he says. He adds: “Sometimes it is not the words that convince people but the actions there after.” The truth is that one “stupid incident”, as he refers to it, can destroy the credibility of a person, and he accepts that some may never support him again. The counter view is also true that many realise he made a mistake and that the challenges SA faces are more important than focusing on Vavi.

I have written some clinical and even hard comments on Vavi, following this particular incident, but even before that and since have tried hard to meet with him to ascertain first-hand what my views of him as a leader are. Our actual interview this past Monday touches on the man. The interaction in studio was a worthwhile experience, but the personal interaction before and after said more about him, his deep seated values and his sincerity.

When a leader moves into a space where he becomes a real threat to those that are currently in power, certain influences enter that same space. These influences are not understood by us ordinary human beings that pose no threat at all. Leaders like Vavi and even Julius Malema can attest to this truth with authenticity. It is therefore all the more crucial that someone like Vavi remains true to his own moral compass, a lesson he has now learnt with pain.

Remaining true to his moral compass will still not ensure an easy journey, because part of that influence that we don’t understand, except through the romantic eyes of watching movies, is the use of structures and resources that are able to either fabricate falsities or uncover human mistakes, then blow it up disproportionate to the attention it actually deserves.

More often than not, in the political domain the most authentic and qualified leaders don’t survive that treacherous climb to the top. Yet, what society needs most is for someone like a Vavi to learn from his mistakes, change authentically and then continue ascending the steep mountain towards his destiny, whatever that may be.

Of course one is hesitant to proclaim him as possessing the makings of becoming our number one citizen, because the correct political and economic policies for our country surely has to be somewhere between what he currently advocates and what a party like the DA stands for. However, a leader worth his salt (again Mandela comes to mind) - ,when that mantle of President falls, and he realises his responsibility now transcends all boundaries and touches all citizens - he allows his mind-set to elevate to that of a statesman, and then senses the need for more balanced policies and strategies. Vavi could be such a man.

His immediate leadership challenge however is COSATU. Vavi admitted their organisation is currently “completely paralysed because of leadership divisions that exist.” He explained quickly that this has nothing to do with his scandal. It existed before, and some even argue there are class divisions within the organisation. The contention “is about how the federation should position itself in a democracy when it is in alliance with the ruling party. It is about how to relate to cabinet; how to relate to demonstrators in the streets. We are calling for improved accountability and service delivery. This is the nature of the divisions.”

Vavi hopes they will succeed, because the alternative is a continued paralysis. They need unity in COSATU. Their disunity results in people finding solutions outside their organisation, and this takes them on a road to becoming obsolete, irrelevant. We see this happening all around, especially on the platinum belt.

Vavi believes their solution is to unite behind important principles and not an important name. He says: “People relate to the realities of today, and not to something that happened long ago. I think that’s the lesson we must all learn as we try to find the unity within the federation.” The tip to Vavi as a leader is that before that unity will kick in, courageous, tough decisions and actions are more often than not necessary, which will be risky. When an organisation has descended so low a leader may believe endless engagement is the only way, but sometimes this too results in a dead end and then only tough action can bring it back on the path of unity.

The inspirational thought at the end of our show, by Greta Goosen from the MiWay Executive team was very relevant to Vavi’s comments on unity. Peter Drucker said this: “Leaders that work most effectively never say “I”; they do not think “I”; they do not think “we”; they think “team”. They understand their job is to make the team function; they accept responsibility and don’t side step it; “we” always get the credit. This is what creates trust.”

COSATU is everything but a team. Currently it is all about the different “I’s” and perhaps even “we’s” in the organisation. It will take remarkable leadership to bring back a ‘one united team’. Is this a final leadership test for Vavi before his summit to the peak?

(Our interview also touched on 16 June 1976 and the state of education, youth and the country since then, and following the recent elections. He commented on etolls, encouraging all to continue resisting. To listen to the full interview that was held on Leadership Platform show on Cliffcentral.com visit [www.leadershipplatform.com](http://www.leadershipplatform.com) or CliffCentral.com)

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