

Does leadership matter in nation brand building?



By [Manusha Pillai](#)

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It may not be immediately apparent about why, and indeed whether, leadership matters in brand building. After all, at first glance, it may seem that a successful brand can be built through the technical application of principles of brand building and management.

However, when we look at iconic brands and their global appeal, it is clear that they are inseparable from their visionary leaders. Apple, Virgin, Google, Samsung are just a few that come to mind.

Not only can a visionary leader bring an idea or concept to life, he or she can bring together a group of sometimes diverse people, who can move the idea or concept from paper to reality and drive this vision with unrelenting focus and commitment. Thus, a competitive advantage, which enjoys the favour and loyalty of consumers, can be built.



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When looking at building a nation brand, leadership is equally crucial for success. While the literature on nation brand building emphasises the importance of cohesion between the national identity, the message and policies, it draws special attention to the ability of leaders – at all spheres, government, business and civil society – to act in a manner that gives expression to the message and identity, and inspire citizens to act in support of this message.

This cohesion between all elements of the nation brand brings pride and patriotism in the nation, active citizens who work to uphold the brand, tourists, investors, critical skills, and mostly, a strong and positive reputation for the country.

The South African nation brand has had nothing short of a tumultuous few days, and if the newspaper headlines and analyses are anything to go by, this is just the beginning.

What can be done in such times to strengthen the nation brand?

Charles Duhigg, in his book *The Power of Habit*, reflects on a range of leaders who were able to use crises advantageously. In fact, he goes as far as to say that transformatory and visionary leaders sometimes even prolong challenging periods to change an otherwise resistant corporate culture and put in place the building blocs for success when the tide eventually turns.

When looking at a nation brand, leadership at times of upheaval is more important than at any other time. Being able to reassure citizens that the country will come first is crucial. Citizens must be convinced that those who run their country are strong, capable, humane, ethical and visionary. However, as with most things related to building a brand, the message must be supported by the corresponding reality.

In times of crisis, this may be easier said than done. It is therefore crucial that leaders do as they say, and walk the talk, rather than just talk. Corrective action must be taken where necessary to ensure that the country is able to do things differently once the upheaval has passed.

Importantly, leaders must be able to inspire citizens to remain resilient, creative and innovative in dealing with the challenges that the crisis presents. Human beings are incredibly resourceful, and challenges are very powerful forces for change.

Leadership is now more important than ever and as we have done many times before, the South African nation brand can once again inspire the change that we need as a country and create the conditions for leaders to be nurtured and developed.

It is a common cliché that adversity is the mother of invention. Citizens must be encouraged to collectively embrace this spirit. We will endure and we will overcome.

In the meantime, the next cohort of visionary—and perhaps revolutionary—leaders in the spirit of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe and a host of others will emerge from this period of turmoil. Times of upheaval are the important building blocks for the development of leaders and leadership for the nation brand.

ABOUT MANUSHA PILLAI

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