



We Must Invest in Leadership

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In 1829, David Walker was already advocating a multi-faceted struggle for Black empowerment. Walker is credited with the early introduction of the concept of a holistic battle to be waged on all political fronts, using any means in the interest of Black people, including limited strategic alliances, the mobilization of resources (including time, people-skills and technology, as well as money), and the mobilization of public opinion.

Today, the science of social change and social movements has documented all of the above as conditions favourable for the success of oppressed and subordinate minority communities in the pursuit of opposition goals. In other words, what was later discovered by happenstance, David Walker had already envisioned and formulated as a foundational social philosophy.

David Walker had an almost all-consuming interest in Black community liberation and advancement, and his entire life-works revolved around the promotion of what has come to be called pan-Africanism – or the unity among people of African descent around the world by instilling pride of race, to acquire economic power. Yet, as an early proponent of systematic community actuation processes, he would have no doubt vicariously admired a recent initiative launched in Hamilton, Ontario by the Canadian Jewish community and the Jewish Leadership Development Program called the Genesis Project.

The Genesis Project

The Genesis Project is a three-pronged approach to Jewish youth leadership development with the goals of personal growth, organizational commitment and effectiveness, and the appreciation of Jewish values – all of which endeavors to prepare the ground for the next generation of Jewish leadership by helping young people to see their own brilliance.

For example, one of the exercises in the orientation session is designed to make young people examine their own thinking. A large pie-shaped circle is drawn on the floor, inside each wedge is a word describing an approach to leadership. Participants are required to walk around the circle, then step into a wedge that they considered best describes their leadership style. The next step in the exercise is to repeat the process, this time stepping into a wedge that least describes their leadership style.

Participants are then asked to consider why they identified with the descriptive word in the first wedge. Then they are asked to consider how they could change their leadership approach so they would be the type of leader described in the second wedge.

Provocative Exercise

This is a provocative exercise in which many of the young participants feel completely exposed and uncomfortable because it dares them to struggle with some implicit as well as explicit lessons.

Young people are first exposed to a sense of the contingency of leadership (i.e., it is a learning strategy that teaches how leadership strategies, tactics and approaches are always conditional, and so, could be otherwise).

The exercise also invokes and promotes a contemporary framework for leadership as creative problem-solving (i.e., as a dynamic and interactive enterprise and not conducive to a reliance on stock-and-trade or taken-for-granted answers to contemporary social problems).

The youth participants are also provoked by the necessity of leadership that has a reflective relationship to its own community (i.e., requiring a community-affirming and results-oriented and multi-tasking skill-set; and not conducive to dogmatic decrees, or arbitrary decision-making, or bully dictates, or self-aggrandized “summiteering”).

But perhaps the most uncomfortable lesson of all is that effective leadership invariably requires you to go beyond your comfort zone – it’s about traversing boundaries in the search for a new sense of self-identity and collective pride.

Black leadership in the diaspora is not normally treated as a quality controlled mission (as above), where preparation meets opportunity. More often than not, circumstances of history have conspired to compel prospective leaders to take on roles that elaborate and promote progressive social change. Drawing on their own life-experience and exigencies, many have been more or less obliged to rise to the occasion, or fall on their own sword.

In their greatest good, they help shape the collective and historical struggle of Black people into a coherent social philosophy – they provide the community with explanation for problems and solutions, they work out strategy and tactics of confrontation, and they articulate political goals and programs. However, their greatest good has not always been actively cultivated and nourished by the community. Instead, Black leadership has primarily been a calling rather than a vocation; and so, typically, those who set the pace for the community are born and not made.

As a consequence, Black leaders and pace-makers, to the present day, have been highly susceptible to a vortex of outside social forces – such as, co-optation by mainstream inducements; the elevation of Black “puppet regimes” for mainstream management purposes; the inflation of “palatable community spokespersons,” and the vilification of the “radical cranks;” the condemnation of change-provoking social action by intrepid “trailblazers,” and the glorification of avuncular “figure-heads” who steer clear of any and all provocation.

One might suspect, if David Walker were still around, his on-going and multi-faceted struggle for Black empowerment would highlight the fact that the best investment that the Black community can make in itself at this time in history is to invest in future leaders.