Beyond the Leadership Vacuum: What South Africa Can Build Without Waiting for a Saviour

South Africa does not lack leadership models. It has a rich indigenous philosophy, three decades of democratic experimentation, and plenty of hard lessons from both success and failure. What it lacks is follow-through: a gap between the ideal of ethical, people-centred leadership and the lived reality of patronage, short-termism and weak delivery.

That tension ran through a recent Radio Suid-Afrika conversation with AJ Mouton, in which Sid argued for consistency, compassion, hope and stability, and for trustworthy networks that do not depend solely on the state. This article builds on those themes.

Ubuntu: the foundational model

Ubuntu, “I am because we are”, is the indigenous leadership philosophy most often cited in South Africa. It stresses communal relationships and mutual recognition; dignity, compassion and collective responsibility; participative decision-making over pure hierarchy; and leadership as moral stewardship rather than positional power.

Recent research (2024–2026) treats Ubuntu as a practical complement, or alternative, to Western models in both the public sector and business, linking it to adaptive, servant and humane-oriented leadership. Studies suggest that effective South African leaders, across race, tend to blend Ubuntu’s relational qualities with transformational traits such as vision and charisma. A growing number of thinkers argue that purely individualistic or bureaucratic models have contributed to the moral and performance crises in governance.

Five presidents, five styles

South Africa’s democratic presidents all came from the same liberation movement, yet led very differently.

Nelson Mandela was moral, reconciliatory and servant-like. He embodied Ubuntu and gave the new nation its legitimacy, though his later years were largely ceremonial and produced limited institutional reform.

Thabo Mbeki was intellectual, technocratic and centralising. His tenure brought economic growth, fiscal discipline and stronger state capacity, but also AIDS denialism and a cadre-deployment approach that blurred party and state.

Kgalema Motlanthe was a stabiliser. He brought short-term calm after a crisis, with limited lasting impact.

Jacob Zuma led as a populist in a patronage, "chief"-style mould. He mobilised popular support, but the legacy is state capture, weakened institutions and personalised power.

Cyril Ramaphosa is a consensus-builder: process-oriented and cautious. He has begun institutional repair after capture and navigated coalition politics, but is criticised for slow decision-making, over-consultation and a perception of avoidance.

The pattern is clear. The liberation-movement culture of loyalty and cadre deployment gradually fused with patronage networks, eroding the line between party and state. The result has been a recurring leadership vacuum, an identity crisis and falling public trust.

The reality in 2025–2026

Today's leaders operate in a fragmented, coalition-era environment, with a Government of National Unity and local elections approaching. The challenges are familiar: declining trust in political elites and institutions, factionalism within the ANC, the rise of populist alternatives, and service-delivery failures that persist despite rhetorical commitments. Business and civil society are increasingly forced to build their own parallel systems of reliability.

Voters share responsibility too. Long-term electoral majorities bred a sense of entitlement and eased the pressure for accountability. As Sid observed, blaming "the government" has often replaced the harder work of building alternative leaders and networks.

Hybrid models for a hard moment

Several approaches look better suited to South Africa's context:

- **Ubuntu-centric adaptive leadership:** relational and value-based, mobilising people to solve complex problems rather than relying only on hierarchy or technical fixes.
- **Networked, trust-circle leadership:** the practical model Sid advocated, in which business communities and citizens build reliable circles of mutual support and commerce that reduce dependence on a dysfunctional state.
- **Servant, transformational and humane leadership combined:** moral example, clear vision and genuine care for people.
- **Institutional rather than personalised leadership:** systems in which competence and accountability matter more than loyalty or charisma.

The way forward

The practical conclusion is to stop waiting for perfect national leaders and start building the smaller circles of trust, consistency and mutual responsibility that can eventually scale. It is both an Ubuntu instinct and a hard-headed response to the current leadership deficit. Trust rebuilt locally, one reliable relationship at a time, may prove the most durable foundation for the leadership the country still hopes to see.