

# How experiential learning can create the (socially- and self-aware) leaders that SA needs

By [Carrie Pratt](#), issued by [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#)

14 Nov 2022

In life and in leadership, it's crucial to understand that there is always a bigger picture than the one we see; and the best way to expand our understanding is to engage with diverse perspectives. To illustrate this, I like to tell a parable from Southeast Asia. It's about five blind men coming across an elephant for the first time and how each describes the creature from a different side: the man holding the tail says 'an elephant is like a rope'. The one touching the legs says 'it's like a tree'. Another one, holding the trunk, likens it to a snake, and so on. Each of their perspectives is correct in some way, but it is only by combining them that they can better understand the 'whole' of the elephant.



## Contextual awareness

This story is relevant to South Africa in that good leadership requires the wisdom to continuously seek out a bigger picture, and the capacity to engage with diverse perspectives in order to do so. The more complete your understanding of the context – of your team, your organisation, the community and the country – the more effective your decisions and solutions will be. This is especially true for leaders who long to make a difference in addressing the core challenges of poverty, inequality and climate change. Experiential learning – learning by doing – can significantly facilitate this process. GIBS's Nexus Leadership Programme, for example, uses participatory learning, experiential immersions, and reflective practice to develop leaders who are self-aware, contextually aware and well-equipped to make a positive difference in addressing the complex challenges facing the country.

Experiential learning plays an important role in the programme's transformative learning process. It invites participants to engage with people whose life experiences and perspectives are different from their own. The reality is that many of us live very prescribed lives: we take the same route to and from work, spend time with the same people, and frequent the same places. As a result, it can become tempting to assume that our world is an accurate reflection of the world. Immersive learning journeys surface – and challenge – many of these (often unconscious) assumptions. They support participants to see a more complex and nuanced picture of South Africa while equipping them with the skills to engage effectively with diverse and perspectives generally.

### **Past, present and future**

On these immersions, participants engage with South Africa's past, present and future. They are exposed to people who were involved in the struggle to end apartheid, visit people and organisations working to address the many challenges of the present, and engage with inspiring people with innovative ideas and initiatives to create a better future. These experiences often lead to mindset shifts. It becomes clear that leaders are not necessarily those holding particular positions, but anyone, anywhere, striving to make a positive difference in the world. Participants begin to see – and to enact – their own agency to effect change. They start to challenge the 'charity' mindset that often prevails in CSI initiatives and instead seek to build meaningful partnerships that recognise the experience, capacity and wisdom of people and communities working to effect change.

As relationships are at the core of leadership, participants learn through practical activities how to develop and deepen their capacity to build and strengthen relationships of trust with others. Through action and reflection, they test new behaviours, reflect on their experience, draw lessons and insights and then put those lessons into practice in their personal and professional lives.

### **Journey of self-discovery**

"The experiences were eye-opening and heart-wrenching at times, and the conversations difficult," says a Nexus alumnus about the course. "But I would relive every one of them if I could. I learnt to listen better, and I learnt the power of dialogue." Another mentions the sensory aspect of the immersions, how being able to see, feel, hear, smell and touch triggered a deeper, more impactful learning experience than previous classroom-based leadership courses. As a result, she says, "I've become a better, more authentic leader." A third alumnus called the course "a journey of self-discovery, of truly confronting yourself and what it means to be a leader of the future." He added, "It will challenge you in ways you can't even imagine."

At its heart, leadership is about how we show up in the world – to ourselves and with others. Experiential learning helps develop the leaders that we so desperately need to move into a better future: courageous, continuous learners who challenge their own assumptions and seek to widen the lens they look through to bring new perspectives to old challenges.

### **About the [Nexus Leadership Programme](#)**

This transformative leadership programme is designed to equip leaders in business, civil society and government with both the self- and the social-awareness to lead effectively in this complex and rapidly changing world. Nexus aims to transform the ways leaders make meaning of the world around them, enabling them to be more adaptable, more collaborative, and more skilful in engaging with complexity in their personal and professional lives. In the process, leaders' perspectives broaden from more individual concerns to a focus on the needs and concerns of society as a whole.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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