

Paul Robeson: The template for an amazing Black man

Written by Dr. Artika Tyner

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The foundation of leadership is courage.

Civil rights pioneer, Paul Robeson, exercised courage by leveraging his moral strength to challenge racism and promote racial equity. Despite his fervent efforts of fighting for justice, for far too many Paul Robeson is unknown. However, we each are direct beneficiaries of Robeson's unwavering commitment to the realization of freedom and justice. He fought tirelessly so all of humanity would live free from the chains of oppression. This is the type of commitment that should inform our understanding of the essence of leadership. Following in Robeson's footsteps, we are challenged to exercise leadership by taking a stand for what we believe in and challenging others to do the same.

An exploration of Robeson's leadership legacy is conspicuously missing from the chapters of our history books. I had only heard of Paul Robeson in passing and he was simply described as a singer. During a recent visit to the library, I checked out a copy of "Paul Robeson: A Watched Man." I saw the photo of a man who stood larger than life while surrounded by a massive crowd. I was drawn into his eyes since courage and strength illuminated from them. There was great depth in this image, an untold story. I soon found myself enthralled in Paul Robeson's leadership narrative. He embodied the leadership qualities of influence, determination and perseverance, which in sum equal courage.

I discovered that leadership was at the core of Robeson's vocation and legacy. Despite my initial knowledge of the man, he was more than a singer but a world renowned vocalist, change agent and transformational leader. His voice drew together the masses as they lifted their voices in unison to sing the songs of freedom. He once proclaimed, "I am singing at the top of my voice for my people's freedom." He is credited to singing these songs in over 25 different languages to connect to the rich cultural heritage of the diversity of his audience. He was able to transform lives through the power of the song. These songs empowered others to join in the fight for freedom and justice. This is evidence of his leadership.

What can we learn from Paul Robeson's leadership journey?

On Leadership: Leaders exercise the power of influence. Robeson recognized that music could be used as a tool for not only influencing others, but transforming the world in which we live. This would begin with an appreciation for the arts and culture, and then lead to strengthening a sense of shared humanity.

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"Through my singing and acting and speaking, I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people's hearts better than I can their minds, with the common struggle of the common man," said Robeson.

On Unity: Followers see their reflection in the leader. They envision a leader as one who shares their values and collective vision for the future. Robeson created this connection with the people whether he was singing a Yiddish resistance song from the Warsaw ghetto ("Zog Nit Keynmo") or recollecting on the despair of slavery ("Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child").

On Courage: Leaders must courageously declare truth. This is the process of speaking truth to power. For Robeson, this truth was that freedom is a fundamental right for all to enjoy. With unwavering strength, he advocated for freedom and rejected any notion that resembled slavery. This act of resistance led to his passport renewal being barred in 1950 and his name being added to the blacklist. His advocacy represented a direct challenge of the status quo since he refused to accept how things were (reality of racial discrimination) and developed a moral vision for how things ought to be (realization of justice and equality). Despite these barriers, he had the courage to stand for freedom.

On Mentorship: Leaders empower others to lead. They see potential in others and seek to unveil their greatness. This is the foundation for mentorship that is characterized as a process of elevating someone else to the next level through practical guidance and support. Robeson served as Harry Belafonte's mentor. He challenged Belafonte to exercise his moral imagination by using his talents to promote social change. In essence, he was asking Belafonte, "What is in your hands to make a difference in the world?" This is the persisting leadership challenge.

In his 1997 speech, Belafonte's describes their mentorship relationship by saying, "And it was from Paul that I learned that the purpose of art is not just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be. And that if art were put into the service of the human family, it could only enhance their betterment.

"Paul said to me, he said, 'Harry, get them to sing your song, and they will want to know who you are. And if they want to know who you are, you've gained the first step in bringing truth and bringing insight that might help people get through this rather difficult world.'"

We can learn many great lessons from Paul Robeson's leadership legacy. The most important lesson is courage is an essential leadership attribute. It is taking an unwavering stand for what you believe in. This may not be easy but leadership requires a commitment to your core values. For Robeson the stakes were high. His passport was banned and as a result his livelihood was restricted. Despite these roadblocks on his leadership journey, Robeson's courage could not be shaken. He was determined to advance his vision of a more just world. Through this stand, he advanced his vision of, "building a world where we can all walk in full equality and full human dignity." What is your vision? Do you have the courage to pursue it?