

## Interview

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# David Hemson, DTS South Africa

*Interviewed by Basema Maki and Daniel Lee, The George Washington University*



David Hemson

*Dr. Hemson, currently a senior researcher at DTP, was interviewed in on April, 2012, by Basema Maki and Daniel Lee, students of the George Washington University's Certificate program who were taking the survey management (course 6238). The format of this chapter is modeled from the book Profiles of Courage, by John F. Kennedy. The purpose of this project is to find individuals that demonstrate leadership in their fields and specifically during a moment of "crisis" in their life.*

Dr. David Hemson grew up in a generation of change. Coincidentally, Dr. Hemson birthday is the same as the South African hero, Nelson Mandela. Growing up in privileged circumstances, he soon realized that others around him were not as lucky. He was determined to make a difference and bring equal-

ity into South Africa, so that his fellow men can experience the same rights as he has been fortunate to enjoy. Dr. Hemson's leadership was among the catalysts that helped South Africa bring Apartheid to an end. What links could this have to surveys? This question is explored below.

In South Africa, 1948, apartheid became government policy and rapidly turned into legislation for racial oppression that lasted until 1994. Apartheid brought forced removals to concentrate land in the hands of whites<sup>1</sup> and devastation to African families. This was not entirely new as racial segregation was present since the colonial times and the life of a non-white South African was one of subjugation. Similar to the civil rights movement in the United States, there were leaders that fought for the rights of others. Nelson Mandela was the outstanding fighter but while he was in prison many others worked to develop mass movements of resistance. Dr. David Hemson is one of them.

David Hemson, a white man was born into an upper-middle class family on July 18, 1945; three years before apartheid was forced on the people. Born in Durban, the major port of South Africa, as a British<sup>2</sup> and South African citizen, he talks of an ideal childhood. His family was well off and had all the necessities, but there was no indulgence. He grew up in areas which were rapidly changing from farmland to suburbs and rarely ventured to town, he was sheltered from the reality of what was really going on in his homeland. David grew up in a very strict Christian household. This helped shape his morals and ideals.

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<sup>1</sup>Hemson, David. "The Crime Which Went Away". *Mail and Guardian Online*. 5 Apr. 2012. Web. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-04-05-the-crime-which-went-away>>.

<sup>2</sup>David's father was a serviceman, and during that era service men and their children were given British citizenship.

*“When I grew up, I was quite oblivious to what was happening out there. This was in the late 1940’s and my main recollections were an ideal childhood growing up, in a benign environment, I didn’t go in to town very much. I spent time with friends playing in streams and exploring small forests. I had a retired (African) man mentor me.”*

David fondly remembers this elder African man who helped raise him. That man was gentle and caring and treated David as his own, teaching him to use a knife, climb trees and speak Zulu. David vividly recalls his mother telling him,

*“When I was playing with a dangerously sharp knife, he would point to a bird flying to the trees and would gently remove the knife from my hand. He knew marvelously how to handle a child. I don’t remember all the details, but I remember how good he was to me.”*

Although blacks in South Africa were under oppressive white rule, white families trusted them as caretakers of their children. Caretakers, both women and men, would raise the white children as their own, and never took out any bitterness on to white children: There never complaints of mistreatment of these children.

I ask David if his mentor helped shaped him into the man he is today and his response was “I learned from the enormous respect he showed for me”, and along with his strict Christian upbringing. David’s advice about life is that it is contradictory, such as that a retired man should have to care for a child. More on that later. When asked whether he ever imagined himself to be in a leadership role, he gave a answer “No, not at all, but when I found out the world was a nasty place, particularly for African people I realized something had to be done.” Initially he wanted to grow up to be a typesetter in a print shop like his neighbor who gave him lifts in to town. Good thing he did not or else this interview would never have taken place.

Army was an eye-opener to the real nature of white rule, as David found when he was drafted for military training. At that time all young white males were required to register, but he recalls being one of the few that was actually drafted from his class. The rookies were treated ruthlessly to treat others brutally, David pointed out it toughened him up and taught him many; not always pleasant, lessons. He took the bad and molded it into a learning experience. One night in the barracks there was a tropical storm which great thunder and brilliant lighting; the rookies became excited and

ran to the windows shouting “Oorlog, oorlog” (“War! War!!”) That was when David realized that there was something deeper going on in the country; whites were responding to independence movements in Africa and internal resistance by preparing to wage war against the black majority.

After the army, David was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to take part of a foreign exchange program in the United States, located in a small town of Minnesota. Before leaving the students were given intensive training in the history, economy and politics of South Africa to be ambassadors for their country. The students were taken down mines and witnessed the tough conditions for black workers in the sweltering heat of the deep level goldmines. Shortly before his flight to the U.S., a man named Dennis Goldberg was to give an a lecture on African art. On the day, however, it was announced that he would not be making an appearance. That evening the reason was clear in the newspaper headlines: he had been arrested for high treason with others for conducting secret meetings with Nelson Mandela to organize the armed resistance. The night in heading to the airport to fly to America,

*“...we were stopped by the police about three times. Torches were shone right in our eyes to see who we were. It was such a police state but the police were frightened as they thought was going to be a revolution to take over the country. That shook me up and confirmed that South Africa was entering into a deep crisis.”*

From his early youth David knew that deep down there was something wrong in the world he was living in. This started from his seeing the mistreatment of black people around him but eventually started finding out more and more. He would talk to the African workers and found out they were being paid very low wages. The experience of going to the United States in 1963–64 helped him reflect on the conditions in South Africa.

Living in the small town of Blue Earth in Minnesota really gave David a better sense of what was happening in his homeland. He could read books about South Africa and the African National Congress which were banned in his own country and he was able to see the problem from a distant and different perspective. By the time he returned, he had greater knowledge about his home country. David told me “I came to realize I was part of a generation that was going to change everything. I have to do that.”

David's activist career began as a student, starting as a student editor writing about apartheid and criticizing the government; and the university administration. Later he became a national official in the National Student Association of South Africa (NUSAS), an anti-apartheid group. This was a non-racial organization but tensions grew as black students sought a new strategy to break the chains of oppression. Steve Biko, then a medical student, and other black students broke away from NUSAS in 1969; the radical black and white opposition talked to each other but the split forced new thinking. During that time David finished his student career and lectured in African Studies. The white student movement had failed to cause a revolution although it had earned the hatred of the apartheid government. David came to foster another idea,

*"I looked back to what I learned as a boy, which was to approach ordinary black people. Instead of trying to mobilize a white opposition, which were a privileged group. I tried to mobilize black workers. I was influenced by black people coming to me and saying "Look at my wages how can I live on this?". I felt this closely and worked with others to do something about it."*

On the Durban University campus he approached by many black workers about the minuscule wages they were earning. One incident was when a cleaner in the building<sup>3</sup> approached him to find another job; the pay he was receiving was not enough to survive on. David felt this was grossly unfair; why should a well-funded liberal university not pay a living wage? He tried to turn request in another direction and said, "Let's see how we can work together and fight to see how we can make it a better job." David then worked with others to establish a Wages Commission to examine the wages and cost of living using social research and poverty studies to determine fair wages for the people to live off. In the end, the University gave out considerable wage increase to their black employees and a black staff association was formed in 1972.

When that succeeded, David was motivated and decided to take the movement off campus. Since black workers were the foundation of shipping, transport, and manufacturing industries in South Africa, David thought that if there were mass organized strikes, apartheid would weaken and falter. This would be the beginning of the end of apartheid. With that idea,

David and others started organizing a mass based friendly society as black workers feared retribution if a union was immediately formed. But within a year of its formation mass strikes spread throughout Durban and into the industrial heartland around Johannesburg. Although these strikes did not end apartheid, a core of non-racial industrial unions were formed which over time became the backbone of the internal resistance. Apartheid had to retreat and white rule was forced back and had to become more flexible, and blacks achieved more rights.

David's union activist career did not last long. After six months he received a banning order which involved house arrest. This order meant that he was not to teach or publish or meet with more than one person at a time, and he had to be home before 5 pm every day and at home weekends. All of this angered his mother who was a conservative Christian and initially unsure whether change would help bring peace. After experiencing the comradery from mothers and wives of fellow banned people who were black her eyes were opened. She joined women's organizations against apartheid and confronted Ministers who had ordered mass removals.

Life as a banned person was not easy; it was difficult to earn a living with the security police telling employers to get rid of him. When he turned to study the police would enter the libraries to see what he was reading. Even with the protection of librarians who would warn him of their coming, David felt that he needed a change. He left the country illegally as he was denied a passport and began to focus back on his academic career in Britain and received his doctorate in sociology at the University of Warwick.

Exile was a period of social activism in David's life. There was the opportunity of participating in the African National Congress youth wing with Thabo Mbeki (later president), Paulo Jordan (later minister) and Ronnie Kasrile (later minister). He fought for the unions he had left behind by mobilizing workers in the companies in Britain that were invested in South Africa. With others he supported direct links to support the internal resistance but this was controversial: the boycott movement wanted to stop every link to South Africa, even with the oppressed. Solidarity with the rising union movement internally was rejected and British workers were not able to give direct support because they should boycott everything and everybody in South Africa. He argued,

*"... you are boycotting the people not the regime, That caused an uproar in the exile movement. They*

<sup>3</sup>David was also a substitute lecturer within the University.

*felt I was an upstart and too young to understand; if black unions survived under apartheid they must be collaborators. But I felt I was right. I was used to being a minority in South Africa, and now I was a minority for the workers resistance in exile. I was part of the ANC but not in the mainstream. ."*

Although the government of South Africa attacked people like David there were also many people that agreed with him. This generation felt part of an international movement against war and for democracy and freedom. I asked David whether he took drew inspiration from that the civil rights movement in America.

*"Yes. The US embassy in the 1960s distributed a vinyl of the Martin Luther King "I have a dream" speech and I remember listening to that many times, and at university we used to get groups of people together and listen . . . So people all knew the civil rights movement was a high benchmark in mass opposition to racism."*

The civil rights movement in America was influential to the movement in South Africa, but at the same time they were moving ahead of South Africa because there were changes in civil rights in America. Another source of inspiration to the anti-apartheid movement was the labor movement in Britain. I asked him how that was influential. David explained that,

*"... ordinary people inside a big union were represented by their own factory leadership, the shop stewards. That was a new idea because it meant you could have democratic forms of organizations that wouldn't become bureaucratic. That was our dream to live up too, to have more decentralized democracy."*

The influence of the civil rights movement and the labor party helped David fight for a better South Africa.

There were two ways of fighting apartheid in South Africa; one was internal resistance which was emerging in the 1970s and externally which the ANC (African National Congress) which had international recognition. There was intense debate in exile about how to organize mass internal resistance; this became polarized around mass mobilization or guerrilla warfare. Those arguing for a guerilla strategy argued that this would force the apartheid government to negotiate. However, David did not see the latter option as appropriate. David saw the potential for internal resistance to really change South African society rather than lead to an elite transition.

Throughout the 1980s, there were many popular uprisings and internal resistance, but the government always tried to shut it down and banned, and killed the anti-apartheid leaders such as Steve Biko. As more uprisings started, the government became more repressive and fought back with violence.

*"We looked toward mass mobilization from the unions and community mobilizations and it took place about 15 years after the unions emerged . . . When mass strikes and mobilization took off in 1986 it was really only four years before apartheid fell to its knees. . . So it crumbled from within, which the original idea."*

When he was prohibited from organizing and teaching David escaped into exile in Britain but did not stay there the entire time of his exile. He taught history at the University of Dar Es Salaam and then taught in a high school in Zimbabwe. The decision to go to Zimbabwe was political as he wanted to be in touch easier with South Africa, developing contacts and relations with the internal resistance there.

This turned out to be very life changing for David; the links to South African resistance and participation in the union movement in Zimbabwe was not welcomed. He was detained for three months to a maximum security prison for helping organize a democratic opposition. The interrogators threatened to send him back to South Africa— he thought this would be a great idea if it showed the collaboration between autocratic black rule and apartheid.

*"a way being in Chikurubi Maximum Security prison was quite a privilege because I met some really marvelous people there from the opposition party. Unfortunately the leaders of this party did not provide books, pens and paper for their members. I am pleased to say that I've just heard that the prison school I started there in March 1985 is still functioning."*

Even though David was placed in a bad situation, he managed to see the light at the end of the tunnel. To him, helping his fellow man was important. Seeing how there was no education or anything for the inmates, starting a school that is still running today is a big accomplishment.

While it was important fight for his beliefs and career is important, David gave us some advice,

*"Commitment to change can lead to strain and distress to your family. I didn't understand because I was a rebel and young. Imprisonment puts an enor-*

*mous strain on your family generally, like personal relations with your wife and even your children. To me imprisonment was normal but you can't live like that once you have children. You have to think twice going in and out of prison."*

I would not say he sounded regretful of his decisions that landed him in prison, but now looking back on it he tells us that if you are committed to change you should be aware and be aware and considerate of your family. Taking risks is a characteristic of a leader, something that Basema asked him, and he replied, "Yes, as a young man I was an impulsive risk taker early on but a more careful and considered risk taker now."

When in a responsible position in social research in South Africa David had cause to reflect on the need to take considered risks. He published articles based on surveys showing that although democratic change had taken the black majority was still living in conditions of poverty and unemployment. These were not welcomed by the post-apartheid government but there were benefits of taking risk as David explains further,

*"None of us understand risk. I was told that writing critically would mean you're never going to have a future, you're never going to have a job. But oddly enough by being more critical, intelligently critical, you actually get opposition but also respect from the people you criticize. So risk doesn't work in a common sense way."*

When not taking the necessary risks you can fail as a leader,

*"by compromising and saying everything is great when it's not, you are actually selling yourself short, social science short and selling the people short. So you are not helping anybody and you're actually ending up as a rather unfortunate creature as you get older."*

To me that is valuable advice from an expert. Sometimes in life you have to take a risk, it may lead you to greater fortunes. However, there are times when if you know a risk will lead you to a bad decision you would forgo that risk.

*"Be the change that you wish to see in the world."*  
– Gandhi

David explains that it all starts with vision; leaders are those who can *see* what needs to be done and *believe* that it can be done. This vision is inspired by your principles and values. Everyone has a purpose in life,

it is not a task assigned to you, but rather a choice that you can make. Lacking a sense of purpose is like choosing to live like a useless creature.

*"You've got to have a basic idea of what you would like to see in the world . . . people expect you to have an opinion. They don't expect you to say, well I'm available to think anything you want"*.

When you are working towards a greater cause, your vision essentially guides your approach and the choices you make. While your vision is something you don't compromise, you should always be open to negotiating your approach; for your inner guide will not fail you.

In his book, the 8<sup>th</sup> habit, Steven R. Covey, asserts that greatness in life cannot be achieved unless we find our "voice." He defines this voice to be "*the overlapping of the four parts of our nature: our body, our mind, our heart, and our spirit. These also represent the four intelligences: our IQ for the mind, our EQ for the heart, our SQ for the spirit, and our PG for the body.*" To find our voice, Steven R. Covey suggests four questions to answer:

1. *What are you good at? That's your mind.*
2. *What do you love doing? That's your heart.*
3. *What need can you serve? That's the body.*
4. *And finally, what is life asking of you? What gives your life meaning and purpose? What do you feel like you should be doing? In short, what is your conscience directing you to do? That is your spirit.*

*"One word expresses the pathway to greatness: voice. Those on this path find their voice and inspire others to find theirs. The rest never do."*

– Steven Covey

David certainly is one of those who found the path to greatness. His commitment to making a difference did not end with the fall of apartheid. He continued to pursue a career that contributed directly to reducing the suffering of deprived people in South Africa and beyond.

David has dedicated the last twenty-three years of his life to changing water policy and impact evaluation of municipal service delivery; primarily with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa . His research has actively supported the under privileged in achieving a better life through accessing life sustaining household services including: water, sanitation, houses and electricity. He pioneered the innovative project Accelerating Sustainable Water Ser-



Tasting water, a check on water in northern Zululand, South Africa: the water was brackish and the pipes corroded, and a new borehole was sunk.

vices Delivery (ASWSD), which brought together seventeen scientific bodies and implementation agencies in implementation research to rapidly deploy infrastructure development for delivery of safe drinking water in the most remote areas of South Africa.

While at HSRC, David led fourteen water-related research projects, wrote numerous research reports, and published peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. Together with co-researchers he undertook evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in the water and sanitation sectors in Malawi, Botswana, Tanzania and South Africa. He co-edited the book *Poverty and Water*, and his research on cholera has been featured in the award winning film *FLOW (For the Love of Water)*.

He is currently working with engineers in South Africa, Germany and the United States to produce new modular water plants and other innovations to meet the water and energy needs of the rural poor by using solar-voltaic designs.

He has also served as the water expert in the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Lesotho impact evaluation project since 2009 which involved developing the water module for the Impact Evaluation Multipurpose Survey, designing impact evaluations for urban and rural water projects, and analyzing baseline data.

*The notion of contradiction:* David explains that his journey through life, including his career, is a paradigm

that illustrates the “notion of contradiction!” He explains that he did not plan to arrive at the point he is now. It has been as if his life was calling him to do something and his response to that call created the story.

*“To understand my career you have to understand the notion of contradiction. Because, actually, I did nothing that was intended for me, really, apart from having an education.”*

David pointed to the first and the primary influence that his parents imprinted and that greatly helped him to form choices later in life:

*“My father was a quantity surveyor working out the numbers of bricks, window frames, and other materials for buildings. My mother used to criticize my father for attending cocktail parties where public works contracts were discussed. She came from the Plymouth Brethren and felt all business was based on corruption. Professions had to be virtuous. My poor father would just have to smile, because he had to bring the money home. There were always lively debates at home.”*

Hearing this story, you won’t find it surprising that David ended up using the scientific approach “the intelligence of his father” to materialize the virtuous vision “the spirit of his mother”

*Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.*

– Warren Bennis

David says that passion is vital to success but it is not enough to bring your vision to life. Passion has to be followed by a map that takes you to your destination, it is your methodology, for “*Your passion guides your interest in a subject material; it drives your idea but then by rising out of that, your methodology has to develop.*”

### Seven lessons learned from David Hemson

David’s view of transforming vision into reality in the research field can be summed up in seven tips: (1) Adopt a robust scientific method; (2) Diversify your knowledge ; (3) Secure your funds (4) Make your research findings available to all. Above all that you have to; (5)Surround yourself with the right crowd; (6) be an Inspirational Leader and an effective manager; and (7) Be Courageous- voice your beliefs.

### 1. Adapt a robust scientific methodology

David's approach in applying scientific method is based on innovation. Great leaders create they don't reproduce.

*"If you want something different, something new, you have to find a new approach, and then push it to its limits, so you must think through, if you can, all the internal logical connections in your argument or method."*

He adopts the mixed method approach in his research, incorporating a wide range of research techniques, including statistical analysis of small and large-scale survey datasets, focus groups and key informant interviews, cost-benefit analysis, and questionnaire design. David quotes, John Phillips' book *Statistical Thinking* in extracting meaning from numbers and certainty in results:

*"To understand the meaning of any measurement in the social sciences, you must come to know at least two things about it. First, you must be able to describe the operations by which it was obtained, and second, you must be able to place it in relation to other measurements that have been obtained in the same way."*

While answering your research question, he advises that you should challenge your ideas, your approach and your interpretations. Anticipate "critical appraisal" and be sure that your work is defensible. Justify and explain every statement with supporting evidence:

*"... Every single statement needs a footnote, everything you say has to be justified, and that's actually a proven scientific method."*

### 2. Diversify your knowledge

As a researcher in the water field and as a leader, David considers diversifying skills and knowledge as a key for success:

*"Now, I've undertaken a wide range of types of research from planning, service delivery data analytics, Value for Money studies, methodologies to assess local government, and, of course, analysis of water systems."*

He points out two avenues he had to pursue in his field as a water expert researcher, explaining that his choice of which skill to develop depended on whether it is appropriate and usable in a given time:

Applying that to specializing in water he says:

*"Water specialization, for example, involves a combination of sectoral knowledge, data analysis and a social commitment to change. "Water" inevitably involves public administration because all of the systems have to be managed by the regulation of public service and other aspects such as human development, training, and systems analysis"*

He explains that having knowledge in all these areas does not by any means suggest that you are an accomplished expert. You need to read intelligently and continuously and critically in a field and learn from other specialists to enhance your understanding, and be prepared to work in teams.

David adds that information is always attainable; so one really has no excuse to complain about the lack of it. It's pretty straight forward: refer to those specialists in the field, or just do an internet search:

*"When I found I did not understand some aspect of water technology I would search the internet and track an expert opinion. You'll find all the information's there. And even in a digestible form. And often, you must read abstracts, you must read manuals and so forth, because the information is often better presented than if explained verbally."*

Demonstrating, probably unknowingly, his approach to deepen and diversify his knowledge, David shares with us his next plan. He wants to take advantage of working with some "superb statisticians" here in the U.S. and get beyond "bumping up against the limits of existing statistical approaches".

David explains that one way to expand your knowledge is to use your mistakes as a fuel to go forward. Leaders see mistakes as opportunities to improve. When he makes a mistake he jokingly says "I feel like I'm being creatively punished.". But it doesn't end there, he uses the challenge that the mistake offers, as a stimulus for growth.

*"... and then I think, I'm not doing that again. I'm not allowing myself to be hit between the eyes and I'm going to brush up my approach and never do that again."*

### 3. Make your research finding available to all

David believes that all the data and the research conclusions must be available to the public either free or at a very cheap price. This is important to "spread the ideas, the findings, and to confirm its validity" During his career he fought with others for public access to research reports and this succeeded, "that was a huge battle," David professed.

#### 4. Secure your funds

Given the challenges you face in funding projects related to policy work, when you adopt a rigorous methodology you will attract funders. And that is the blood of any research to keep it going. *“Money is a part of life, it’s something you got to have if you want to carry out large-scale research.”* But with money you have to be responsible and create products that have value.

Drawing funds is just the natural result when you establish a good reputation. You can’t go wrong when you constantly perform premium work with honesty and high standards. Universal laws guarantee that!

*“You should be doing work in the best way possible so that people will feel that it was good research. . . This is how to establish a good reputation”.*

*“When I worked for the Human Sciences Research Council, my directorship was not only based on my publications, but also based on the fact that I was able to bring in contracts. I could actually build up a whole team based on the funding that I could attract.”*

#### 5. Surround yourself with the right crowd

David is particular in choosing who he allows into his inner circle; understanding that who he hangs out with has a huge influence on who he becomes:

*“Choosing people who are interested, committed and hold high standards these are the type of people you want to reward yourself with having in your life. . . avoid distractions”*

*“My mother always said I’m a lucky boy,” he says with a gracious smile, “and I am very lucky because I’ve met people who have been very generous to me and that is an explanation of our success”*

#### 6. Be an inspirational leader and an effective manager

Part of the people you surround yourself with, is the team you lead. David believes that you are not a leader if you can’t inspire others, especially your team, to believe in your vision, and work towards it. As a manager you have to have the ability to communicate your expectations *“break down a research topic into its components”* and always provide rapid feedback. And when things don’t go well, *“you have to help raise their morale and spelling out the steps out of the difficulty.”*

When David talks about his fellow workers you would think he was talking about family members, sharing their private occasions.

*“We had birthday parties, and leaders within the organization would attend and lead the singing of ‘happy birthday’.”*

He says that as a leader, you have to think carefully about every step, for now you are not a researcher in your *“little box”* you can’t act recklessly. You are responsible for a team *“they’ve got to bring home the necessary resources; this is the kind of a leader he is; considering his employees “assets” not “liabilities.”*

It is not surprising, with his style of leadership, David was able to build a team with synergy, enthusiasm, and commitment.

#### 7. Be courageous-voice your beliefs

*“Two roads diverged in a wood . . . I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”*

– Robert Frost

Nodding at what the crowds believe or what the powerful will approve, will only turn your voice into useless noise. But facing the storms of controversy, in order to do the right thing, is what will distinguish you from the crowd, and that is David’s principle.

*“You might not receive their approval, but you will always receive respect,”* he assures. David’s career is a proof that you can make it without giving up on your beliefs, discarding your principles, and running after money. People will remember you, they might not agree with your views, but they will respect your truthfulness and your commitment.

David tells us a recent incident where he attended a book lunch where the author was a member of ANC and was complementing its accomplishments. When the author recognized David (as a long time critic of its failures in government) he said: *“well of course there are also people that believe that the ANC never achieved what it set out to achieve in the first place and we’ve got someone sitting right here. . . and I ask you to please stand up and receive our applause.”* David says that was such a privilege because all what he said was all true.

*“I had always been of a different point of view, but if it’s intelligent, committed, and not linked any way to racism or to some other hidden agenda, you will receive respect.”*

*“It’s nice to be right, but it’s also nice to be accepted as a respected critic even if not perceived as right, and to fit within a spectrum of those determined to see real change in the lives of those who were oppressed.”*

Is it courage or recklessness that describes your actions? A reckless person is one who is controlled by the craving for quick results, blinding himself from seeing the whole situation. Guided by misperception and misjudgment, a reckless person usually gets caught by surprise when things don't turn the way he intended.

On the other hand, a courageous person is he who does not crave results but creates them. He plans his moves in the light; he is never caught by surprise for he anticipates the consequences of his actions, and knowingly accepts them.

David's life exemplifies courage in its purest form. When making a choice, he takes his life as a whole into account. The choice has to be integral with everything else; with his vision, his role and the people involved. When it comes to true leaders there is no compromise with principles.

*"You see, you've got to think of everything, especially as you get older: you've got a family, you've got a sort of standing in society, you've been given authority, which can come as a surprise. And then, what do you make of it? Do you drive the car with your foot flat until your fuel runs out and say, "well I had a go?" Or do you drive carefully so that you can actually reach the destination and know that you've done a good job?"*

As a leader and as a researcher in the water field, David critiques policies, practices and beliefs. His role is to scientifically prove how a specific factor can directly cause or influence a problem. Evidently, this process fosters resistance and sometime conflicts. David shares with us what made him successful in this area:

a. Admit your intent

Your intent behind providing critiques drives the whole process. One way to know your true intent is to ask yourself where your voice is rising from. Is it rising from your wisdom or from your ego? Do you want to prove that the other side is wrong or show that you are better, or do you want them to rise and break through their limitations? For David the intent was always clear, to make a difference in people's lives, and to convince others to buy into that vision. Even when David was part of a state research agency, he used his influence and his gifts to change the system from within.

*"A state body should not become a loudspeaker for the government. It actually, should be a loud speaker for the people and amplify the critical social trends, the needs of the people, and use the results of research to argue for far-reaching change."*

b. Avoid pointing the finger

When a person or an institution is under attack it is only natural that it will go into the defensive and/or cut off all avenues of communication and go about their practices as they always did. If you want your critiques to be effective and to be heard, present them in a way that offers an opportunity for improvement, not in a way that shoots the other party down. How do you do that? By looking for the positives, as well as the negatives, and by being sensitive; knowing when to advance and retreat. Blaming others for shortcomings and failures might allow you to win the argument but it will prevent you from making the changes you are seeking.

*"Bring together a combination of ideas to show that you're not entirely negative and be "bold" in listening carefully to criticism before pushing forward."*

Another piece of advice David gives in that regard is: when you find that people are wrong, or not telling the whole truth, you provide your argument as a set of questions and let their answers bring about the conclusion. This way you can achieve the same results without putting them in a situation where they feel they have to deny or defend their position. He provides a hypothetical situation of technologists providing misleading information:

*"... if they come and say that everything is fine, I say "Hold on guys, can we just check a few things here? So, have you spoken to the people? Can this system really serve twenty thousand people? I'm just asking, please tell me."*

*"... maybe they're wrong, but you never say that they're wrong. You just ask intelligently so that you've got it down, and they'll come back and change."*

c. Prepare your argument intelligently

When it comes influencing and persuading others, it is not enough to state the facts and pass the "logic test", David indicates, every element of your argument must also be supported by evidence.

*"I found if you have a minority opinion, don't change it but think carefully of how you are going to argue it. My passion may be to denounce wrongs in the world but I also need to stand back a little and think about how to prepare the argument. Apart from just stating the facts, the methods are*

*very important. So it is actually an intellectual exercise to engage in issues."*

When evidence is based on science, no one can claim that it was driven by a personal agenda, for science is not subject to personal agendas. Eventually, the energy will be channeled towards finding solutions and not endless arguments.

Courage does pay off: In the year 2001, David was appointed a director of research in South Africa, mainly on the basis of writing an article critically evaluating access and sustainability in the water sector. He wrote that women in rural areas were struggling in conditions similar to those under apartheid and that government had yet to meet the needs of people in remote rural areas and analysed the data on distance women had to walk to water sources. The article ended up with the minister of water affairs, when he was in the hospital, so he had time to read! He was very angry,

*"... but instead of finally taking it negatively, actually he thought this was good because he thought I was able to provide intelligent, informed and committed criticism."*

### Response to attacks

As a leader you will always be the subject of public attacks, criticism or disapproval knowing how to respond to these condemnations is a crucial skill that one has to develop in order to achieve desirable results. Great leaders never feel that they are victims, for they know that they are in charge of their situation.

We analyzed David's responses to when he faced attacks, and drew lessons that illustrates his approach:

- a. Don't take it personally, don't allow your ego to take over, even when you know that the attacks are targeting you unfairly.

*"... You have to be prepared to take the tough stuff and then to fight with it intelligently-not to get upset and to say "How dare you ask me".*

Note that David didn't say fight the attacker but fight with it (the attack)! His focus is on what has been said not who said it. Also he says "*fight with it*" not "*fight it*" which shows an initial acceptance of the challenge at hand.

- b. Listen with tolerance; show a desire to understand the other person's point of view. David says that for him, one way to attain this is to take notes of what is being said.

*"... instead of getting angry, you've got to think, "okay, why? Let me hear you correctly?" And then you listen to it carefully and write it down.. take every criticism that comes, even if it's the most outspoken, vicious, and stupid criticism, you should make notes of it. This is the making of hypotheses."*

- c. Wait until you have clarity to answer and then come with your reply:

*"When you're sober and have had about twenty-four hours, you can actually reply: "thank you for those points, these are much appreciated and now I'd like to reply if I may." And then you come back with your carefully prepared points.?"*

Remember that when you apply a clear and rigorous methodology, it will always defend itself

*"The lesson I learned from many exchanges is that your methodology has to be impeccable."*

**Your attitude and method can defend you from losing my job:** You should not choose the path of courage, unless you are ready to embrace the consequences, for the consequences are not always "lollypops and roses."

David was sharply attacked by a representative from the Presidency at a conference when he critically evaluated the governments' post-apartheid targets and looked at the presidential contribution to the state of delivery. At that time the Presidency felt embattled as tens of thousands of people from the shack settlements and poor townships were taking to the streets demanding water, housing and jobs. A later chapter in a book hit the newspaper headlines in the capital city press and caused consternation.<sup>4</sup> The ministry overseeing national social science gave David two hours to give a line by line justification of key paragraphs his conclusions.

Although he felt he had a reason for each sentence he felt his job was a stake. But since he had used a rigorous methodology drawing each sentence from the data, the review concluded that there was "scientific merit" to the conclusions and the matter was dropped.

<sup>4</sup>Monare, Moshoeshe. "Researchers Slam Mbeki on Service Delivery." *IOL News*. 1 Nov. 2005. Web. <[http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&art\\_id=vn20051101062026197C136121](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20051101062026197C136121)>.

Well argued critical reviews of government performance provided the evidence for the rise of mass social movements and led to political debate in the ruling party. The second president of democratic South Africa was deposed at the 52nd Conference of the African National Congress in September 2008.

### Future plans

*“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”*  
– John C. Maxwell

David has a desire to go back to writing social history after leaving it for twenty-three years.

*“In the democratic transition there was a tendency to forgive and even forget the crimes against humanity and the displacement of people from one area to another under apartheid.”*

Inspired by his friend the late Cosmos Desmond who wrote the first book about forced removals,<sup>5</sup> would like write with others to honor him and to preserve the history of the discarded and the rise of new social movements.

*“I’d like to return to history to re-examine how the course of human social movements have changed in the past few decades. Unfortunately, South Africa has a weakness as there is little interest in history at the moment as we face our current challenges. Perhaps then we can recognize the contradictions of our past and the potential for change in the present and make a better future.”*

He certainly has a lot to say, for the history from his perspective will be an inspiration for courage, commitment and perseverance that will guide generations to come.

### Afterward

The authors of this paper, Basema Maki and Daniel Lee are students of the George Washington University’s Certificate program who were taking the survey management (course 6238). This project was a semester long assignment; consisting of an interview, transcription, and paper (which will all be available electronically). The “leaders” that were chosen by the class are all unique and excel in their profession. Dr.

David Hemson was picked, not only because he is an expert in his field, but fought the oppression of apartheid. His struggles made him into the man he is today. His leadership helped him during his “moment of crisis.” Both Basema and I hope you enjoy this paper, and learn David’s experience as much as we both did.



Picture taken April 3, 2012. At NORC, Bethesda. (From left to right: Basema Maki, David Hemson, and Daniel Lee)

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