

Who are you becoming? Why Leadership Development should start before career planning

By Dr Sandy Geyer
Allcopy Publishers

During my recent time in Cape Town, I had the privilege of speaking to a group of Grade 12 students about leadership. Not leadership positions. Not prefect badges. Not titles, authority or organisational charts. Leadership itself.

I began with a simple question: "Who knows what they are doing next year?"

Most of the room nodded.

Then I asked: "And then?"

A few nods remained.

"And then?"

Silence.

The room became thoughtful.

It struck me once again how much time we spend helping young people answer the question, "*What do you want to do?*" while spending remarkably little time helping them answer a far more important question:

"Who are you becoming?"

The world has changed

For decades, education has largely been built around preparing students for careers. Study hard. Choose the right subjects. Obtain a qualification. Enter a profession.

While these remain important, the world our young people are entering looks very different from the one many of us entered.

People will change careers multiple times throughout their lives. Entire industries are being reshaped by technology and artificial intelligence. Skills that are highly valued today may become obsolete within a decade. Roles that do not yet exist will become commonplace.

In such an environment, technical competence alone is no longer enough.

The individuals who adapt best are often not those with the highest marks or the most prestigious qualifications. They are those who understand themselves, lead themselves effectively, and can navigate uncertainty with confidence and resilience.

Leadership begins before the Badge

One of the greatest misconceptions about leadership is that it begins when someone gives you authority. Many people believe leadership starts when they become a manager, a captain, a prefect, a director or a business owner.

My own experience taught me something very different.

I held leadership positions at school. I held leadership positions in my career. Yet my true leadership journey only began when I co-founded my first business. Suddenly, there was no title to rely on, no hierarchy to hide behind and no manual explaining what to do next. I was forced to confront a far more challenging reality:

I had to learn to lead myself. I had to understand my strengths, my weaknesses, my motivations, my reactions under pressure and my ability to work effectively with others. Only then could I begin leading anyone else.

What research reveals

During my doctoral research, I explored the factors that helped entrepreneurs navigate one of the most disruptive periods in modern history: the COVID-19 pandemic.

I expected participants to identify factors such as business structure, cash reserves, industry sector or years of experience. Instead, they consistently pointed to something else.

They highlighted self-awareness, self-leadership, adaptability, resilience and their ability to positively influence and collaborate with others. In other words, the qualities that enabled them to survive and grow during uncertainty were not primarily technical skills. They were deeply human capabilities. When I asked where they had learned these skills, many gave a similar response:

"The hard way."

Not at school. Not at university. Not through formal training. Through experience, mistakes and years of personal growth.

The missing conversation

Schools do an excellent job of developing knowledge. Universities do an excellent job of developing expertise. But far fewer environments intentionally develop self-awareness.

How often do young people learn to understand their communication style?

How often do they learn why they react strongly in certain situations?

How often do they learn how their personality influences trust, collaboration and decision-making?

How often are they encouraged to explore purpose, values and identity before life demands those answers from them?

These questions matter because leadership is not simply about influencing others. It begins with understanding yourself.

The Most important ingredient

Whether a young person chooses to become an engineer, teacher, entrepreneur, artist, accountant, doctor or business owner, one truth remains constant:

They are the single most important ingredient in their future success.

Not the qualification. Not the job title. Not the organisation. The person they are becoming.

The future will undoubtedly continue to change at a rapid pace. Careers will evolve. Industries will transform. New opportunities will emerge. The question is whether we are preparing young people merely for their first job, or for the lifelong journey of leading themselves through an increasingly complex world.

Perhaps leadership development should not begin when young people receive responsibility. Perhaps it should begin much earlier. Perhaps it should begin with helping them understand who they are becoming.