

# What can we learn from the late Dr Richard Maponya?

On [6 January 2020, Dr Richard Maponya passed away](#). A legendary business icon and activist, Maponya was known to many as 'Soweto's most humble giant'. The 99-year-old remained an indomitable force for good right up until the end, rallying other leaders to support his dream.



Source: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

An astute business person, Maponya's empire included real estate, construction, retail, transport and energy. The epitome of an entrepreneur, he surmounted significant challenges brought about by the restrictions of the apartheid regime to propel black business forward. That earned him another nickname, "the grandfather of black business", and a reputation for unprecedented resilience.

Here are four leadership lessons we can learn from the businessman South Africa will seriously miss:

## 1. Adapt and don't give up

Despite the government only granting Maponya and his wife, Marina, a limited licence to sell daily necessities, they found a way to bring a brand-new business venture to the township. They used their savings to establish a dairy business delivering milk to Soweto customers via local boys on bicycles. This was a first. And it was an incredible example of how Maponya stayed true to his values.

According to *Daily Maverick*, Bidvest chairman Bonang Mohale said Maponya inspired others to 'ride the tiger of apartheid, be brave and fearless'. That's how he lived his life. He refused to see himself as a victim of a system. Rather, he defined a new brand of entrepreneurship despite the confines of his environment.

## 2. Community first, always

From the start, Maponya's mission was to see Soweto develop. He was extremely astute at solving real challenges that the community faced. That was the basis for his businesses. Evolving the 'milk startup', he opened Soweto's largest supermarket at the time – Maponya's Supply Stores. These expanded across Soweto and secured Maponya's success.

He recognised a community need and answered it. Later, this led to him opening Maponya Mall in 2007, one of the previously underserviced area's biggest shopping centres.

### **3. Don't suffer stereotypes**

Maponya also built a Soweto filling station and auto-dealership, refusing to buy into the ridiculous idea of the time that black people couldn't afford new cars. Again, this demonstrates his pioneering and 'can do' spirit.

### **4. Live your principles**

As well as encouraging and inspiring black entrepreneurs, Maponya was also a founding member of the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce (Nafcoc). During apartheid, this helped further the rights of black businesses. His ethical and principled approach to business earned myriad accolades; it also made him beloved.

Maponya built a dynasty, despite the apartheid system. He overcame huge odds to become one of the country's most inspiring success stories. Tributes demonstrate his phenomenal passion, empathy and intelligence. He lived his life and ran his businesses as a person of unwavering principle.

To emulate this kind of leadership, self-awareness is critical.

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