

## Wangari Maathai

"I know that I am doing this work for all who cherish freedom and justice and without such ideals, we can't save this planet." These words from Wangari Maathai embody the leadership spirit that seems to be devoid in so much of our world today. Maathai, a woman and a Ph.D. in Kenya has emerged as a major threat to the male dominated culture in this African country. In a country impoverished by the greed and abuse by the men that run the country, Maathai as a woman that stands up for the rights of the ecology and the people of the country has shaken the very foundation of the status quo in Kenya.

Maathai was the first woman to become the Chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate Professor at the University of Nairobi. This would be enough for many women in a society so dominated by men, but something inside of Maathai drove her to do more meaningful work. She took action to heal the forests in Kenya, forests devastated by deforestation. And in so doing created a movement that would help women take control of their lives and help transform grass roots conservation efforts around the world. Through her grassroots efforts, by 1997 The Green Belt Movement has created over 5,000 grassroots nurseries throughout Kenya and over 20 million trees planted. In the process she has created over 3,000 new jobs for impoverished women and created small business opportunities for many more.

The government in Kenya planned to spend millions on a new skyscraper in a critical open space in Nairobi. She fought against this and through pressure the project lost funding from

its international funding sources. Two ministers that spoke up for her were murdered. She was viscously attacked by the government and labeled a mad woman.

Even though the police have broken into her home and placed her under arrest, have clubbed her into unconsciousness, and have attacked her publicly and internationally, she perseveres. And she gains in stature. In 1997 she decided to run for the Kenyan presidency against the entrenched incumbent. The government's response was to widely publicize that she had withdrawn her candidacy and as a consequence she received few votes. Yet she fights on.

Wangari Maathai embodies what I view as true leadership attributes. She first and foremost sees the world as a living system with the need to create sustainable development. Add to this her vision, courage, passion, and her willingness to ask questions that matter. Then add her ability to create conversations around these questions that matter, her modeling of what she believes in, and the fact that she will not give up when facing adversity, even when it might take her life, and you have defined the attributes of a true leader. Is she one of the corporate executives that so many admire? No. She was not hired into her job, she saw a way to improve the world and she acted and people have followed. She is devoid of handlers, press agents, spin, and propaganda to enhance her image. She shuns the greed and power so common among many so called leaders. She is a leader by what she does and she is making a major difference in the world. And people notice and follow.