

JOHN HARVEY

---

When Ira Chaleff was 10 years old, it struck him as curious that his maternal grandmother did not seem to have any family or friends of her own.

The Chaleff household in New York City was the proverbial Grand Central Station, with relatives coming and going to enjoy the kind of homely warmth only an extended family can bring. Yet his grandmother seemed isolated; not distant, but estranged by experience.

It soon became clear to the young man that she was a survivor of the Holocaust, and that she, like millions of others, felt alone in the world, despite escaping the horrors of Hitler's Final Solution. In a matter of years, she had lost almost everyone close to her, largely because millions of Germans simply followed orders.

With this realisation, Ira Chaleff embarked on a life's journey to comprehend how people, good people, could fall victim to despots and authority figures with a contempt for the principled, whether it be in the political or business realm. Learning how to stand up to those who have taken leave of their morals in the pursuit of personal gain, he believes, plays as significant a role in an individual's development as their ambitions for success.

Today, Mr Chaleff is the author of the internationally-acclaimed books *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders* and *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When What You're Told to Do Is Wrong* and is one of the world's leading thought leaders in the field of Followership, a willingness to accept direction and guidance from leaders in an organisation.

While on holiday in Cape Town to visit family last week, he was invited to address an audience at the UCT Graduate School of Business at the V&A Waterfront, where he discussed "intelligent disobedience" and the importance of doing

right when the instruction is wrong.

"I went to the Kruger Park, which I loved. We also spent time on a farm in the south west of the country, before we arrived in Cape Town," Mr Chaleff told the Tauler over coffee on the sidelines of the seminar last week.

"Before I came here, a lot of people told me that Cape Town is one of the world's exciting cities. You get that excitement in places like Barcelona in Spain, and I definitely feel it here. It's very cosmopolitan, and the topography is amazing."

Mr Chaleff said he had been particularly taken by the South African Jewish Museum, given his work was so deeply rooted in the Holocaust. "I think the first thing I had to recognise is that I would never really succeed in what it is I do. There are always going to be problems, but my goal is to encourage people to think about how they might change cultures so they do not destroy themselves," he said.

"In my work, I deal a lot with the US federal government, and what I always try to get across is that you have to take responsibility for your actions. That includes the people who follow leaders in politics and business. They have to recognise that there comes a point when they have to speak up, and that point is when leaders are impeding progress to do the beneficial thing for the society or business."

Never one for the orthodox, Mr Chaleff has taken a unique approach to the implementation of his message.

"The best example of intelligent disobedience are guide dogs for the blind. These dogs are trained not only to ensure the safety of their owners, but also to resist an order when they sense danger. If there is a car coming and the owner urges them to move on, they will know to pull up so that neither owner or dog is hit," he told the audience.

"The first thing a person should do is question who has the right to authority. But then you also need to

consider what is known as 'internalised rules of behaviour'. We've all heard them: 'listen', 'don't talk', 'don't cause trouble', 'don't speak back' – these are the things we hear as children, which we then carry into adulthood. That is where the fear of authority comes from, and why so many people fail to speak up even when they disagree with an order."

He said there were several reasons why a leader would give a bad order.

"They might be missing data or have the wrong data, they might have a faulty interpretation, there might be systemic pressure or there might be 'normalisation of deviance' factors; that is, people have simply accepted immoral decisions."

While evidence of people failing to question leaders was rife in the political space, a recent survey of Colombia Business School graduates showed an astonishing 40 per cent said they were rewarded for doing something they considered morally unacceptable.

"To me, you can never say, 'I was just following orders'. It's not what you say, but what you do that counts. Once again, humans should learn from the guide dog, and ask what it would do. The process is as follows: Firstly, you should observe the risk. Secondly, pause the action. Thirdly, resist obeying. And lastly, counter pull to save the leader from falling into the road.

"There are cases when the leader won't listen of course, so here it is important to resist diplomatically. Seek to clarify the order, or query the order verbally or in writing. You may have to appeal to a higher authority, but, of course, there are times when you may have to raise the potential of resigning. Ultimately, if at any stage you believe executing an order will produce harm, that is when your intelligent disobedience needs to take over."