

Improve education, enhance leadership for our dream SA

LYSE COMINS

KwaZulu-Natal business leaders are partnering with school principals to grow crucial leadership skills in a project that is transforming the education system by uplifting one under-resourced school at a time.

A positive spin-off for business leaders, apart from enhancing the quality of education to grow the economy's future skills base, has been the honing of their leadership skills through the programme.

Partners for Possibility (PFP) patron and retired motor industry magnate, former McCarthy chief executive Brand Pretorius, has encouraged local business leaders to stop lamenting the problems facing the country and rather "light a candle" by joining the growing number of businessmen and women who had partnered with principals to improve the country's prospects.

He was addressing a Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry meeting this week.

PFP is an internationally-recognised programme that brings business leaders and school principals together for a year to collaborate to make an impact on the school community and quality of education.

"If we look at the objective measurements of the quality of education in South Africa we are failing our children," Pretorius said, adding it was with a "feeling of profound sadness" that he reflected on the international gauge of the quality of the country's education system.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report 2015, South Africa ranked 146 out of 148 countries in the quality of its education, and was bottom for the quality of mathematics and science education.

"Half of our pupils do not complete Grade 12 and only 5 000 of our 25 000 schools are classified excellent and fully functional.

"Our children are our future and the key to a better future is to be found in quality education. Should we be able to sort out education and enhance the effectiveness of leadership of all levels, then the South Africa of our dreams will materialise," he said.

Pretorius added that while the country had some outstanding business leaders, the results of a 2014 Gallup employee engagement survey showed that only 8 percent were fully engaged, saying they were committed to the attainment of the vision of their organisation, had confidence in the quality and effectiveness of leadership, and did their best to translate the organisation's vision into reality.

He said 46 percent confessed that they were completely disengaged and did just enough to stay out of trouble and did not trust the leadership or identify with the organisation's vision.

"Unfortunately, it's a reflection of the quality and the effectiveness of leadership."

Pretorius said PFP aimed not only to address the quality of education at schools but also to enhance the effectiveness of business leadership.



Pretorius's leadership lessons

BRAND Pretorius retired McCarthy chief executive, played a pivotal role in reviving the automobile group from bankruptcy when its share price plummeted from a high of R21 in 1997 to a low of 18c in 2001. He shared the following insight:

1 Leadership is a responsibility, not a right. Trust doesn't come automatically – one has to daily earn the moral mandate to lead. Leadership is a privilege and an honour.

2 Good leaders are experts in their ability to influence as leadership has nothing to do with position, power or authority but everything to do with being able to influence people and this must be earned. The only mechanisms one can use to influence are personal example and results.

3 Understand the difference and strike a balance between leadership and management. Leadership provides inspiration and focuses on doing the right things in terms of strategy, providing direction and setting the example in principles and values, while management focuses on doing the right things regarding activities, processes and productivity.

4 Adopt your own authentic leadership approach modelled on a leader you admire because great leaders don't lead on autopilot or by simply emulating.

5 Servant leadership as adopted by Nelson Mandela is effective because before you get to touch a hand, you have to touch a heart. These leaders are bold without being a bully, firm but fair, rigorous on results but not ruthless and kind without being weak.

6 Self-leadership is a vital, never-ending challenge because if you can't lead yourself, you can't lead others.

A prerequisite is moral intelligence to know the difference between right and wrong. You need to be committed to the truth, to manage and control your emotions, resist the temptation to be moody and impulsive and have the self-discipline to do what you have to do when you have to do it.

7 Good leadership is not about charisma, ideas and efforts but about character and results. The acid test is to have the ability to translate a vision into reality and get the job done.

"Relationships are formed between school principals and business leaders and it is a partnership of equals in which they work together to achieve specific objectives – to improve matric results, assist the principal with leadership tasks and specifically the management of change, to improve the viability of schools to ensure there is financial viability and proper budgeting, to make the school the centre of that particular community and to turbocharge the level of involvement of parents."

Pretorius said his sons, Brand jr; and Louie, had joined the programme as business leaders and had reported that their leadership skills were being "turbocharged and tested" and that their "eyes had been opened" to the reality of the challenges facing the country.

Democracy Development Program executive Rama Naidu, who partnered with Bechet Secondary School in Sydenham, Durban, said his experience with the programme had been "cathartic" and "perhaps the most important leadership journey" of his life.

"I had said the system was rotten – it stank. I couldn't do anything about it and the programme taught me there is always something you can do about it," he said.

Champions

"I got into my school as Superman thinking I am going to fix this damn school. I am going to show this principal how to sort it out," he said.

But he found he was not there to "save" the school, that they worked together as peers and both had the power to improve the school.

"Principals face insurmountable problems but I have seen champion leaders, I have seen schools with no doors and kids with no shoes or textbooks achieve 90 percent and the difference was the quality of leadership," he said.

"When you start the programme, you can't turn your head away. The active choice is to say: Where am I in this story?"

"Am I packing my bags and going away or are my children part of the future? We can't sit here and say someone else will fix it. We can go out there in our little corners and do what we can," he said.

Harry Naidoo, Croftdene's Newhaven Secondary School principal, said he had worked with his business partner to enhance his leadership skills and they had together developed an alumni society to help improve the school.

"There have been many spin-offs already and in the long term there is much that can be done," Naidoo said.

PFP KwaZulu-Natal manager Sumeshnee Dheyara said the programme had forged 413 school partnerships in the country, including 20 in the province.

"There are about 2 500 schools in the province and our goal is to partner with 50 schools a year and to do 250 schools in the next five years," she said.

PFP was founded in 2010 by Symphonia for South Africa, a national NPO.