

The business of learning to lead

Colleen Dardagan

KWAZULU-Natal business leaders heard this week how a partnership between school principals and business leaders had overhauled the education and business systems in 400 schools across the country.

Partners for Possibility is an initiative initiated in 2010 to arrest the crisis in South Africa's education system.

The programme was started by founder and director Louise van Rhyn, who became the first business leader to set up learning partnerships with a principal.

The organisation's vision is quality education for all children in South Africa by 2023, by improving the school environment and encouraging better relationships between teachers and parents and the management and leadership of the school.

In simple terms, a business owner or leader partners a principal from an under-privileged school for a year. Over that period the pair attend a series of courses on effective leadership and they are given "thinking" tasks in which they come up with practical ideas to improve the effectiveness and management of the school.

The programme is active in most of the country's provinces, but it was only launched in KwaZulu-Natal at the start of this year.

Patrons of the organisation include the Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the rector of the University of the Western Cape, Brian O'Connell, and social entrepreneur and business leader Wendy Luhabe.

At a function to promote its work and to invite company owners to get involved at the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the guest speaker and another patron, Brand Pretorius, said if leadership was sorted out in the country and particularly at schools, then the South Africa of "all our dreams" would become a reality.

According to statistics, only 5 000 of 25 000 schools in the country were considered functional.

But, said Pretorius, research coming out of the business sector suggested that there was a crisis in the quality of leadership in the corporate sector as well.

"Over 46% of staff in our top companies are completely disengaged with the vision of their organisations. That means that almost half of all our employees are not doing their best to fully attain the objectives of the companies they work for," he said.

He said these results, in education and in the corporate sector, were a reflection of the quality and effectiveness of leadership rather than on employees or teachers.

Pretorius said the Partners for Possibility programme was started to address what he described as an urgent crisis.

During his business career as head of the McCarthy group, and particularly during the period when he was tasked with rescuing the group from bankruptcy, Pretorius said, he learnt important leadership lessons which were universal, as follows:

- Leadership is a responsibility and not a right.
- You cannot instruct people to put their trust in you. Trust is earned.
- Leadership has nothing to do with position or power, but it is about influence.
- There is a difference between managing people and leading people.
- Well-managed people are not necessarily inspired people.
- A great leader is a transactional leader who sets the right example.

● To care about the people you serve takes leadership to the next level.

● If you cannot lead yourself, you cannot lead someone else.

● Great leaders are committed to truth, they know the difference between right and wrong.

● Great leaders don't keep their followers on a diet of unfulfilled promises, which, more simply put, become lies.

● Great leaders have a sense of purpose and commitment.

Durban businessman Craig Coombe, who with Durban's Investment and Promotion Agency head, Russell Curtis, is promoting the programme in the province, said he had attended a number of courses conducted by Van Rhyn last year.

"Not only did I come to realise that we needed servant leadership in our country, I realised that we who are better off polarise ourselves from our under-sourced communities.

"I also realised that the only way we can tackle the big issues in our country, such as poverty and inequality, is through better education and a collective effort – of all of us understanding the roles that we can play – to find a solution," he said.

Durban businessman Rama Naidu, who is in a partnership with a community school, said the experience had not only humbled him, but had brought home to him the almost insurmountable odds facing school leaders.

"I thought I would go in there and solve all that school's problems. Instead, I became the student," Naidu said.

"I now understand the challenges and I won't over-simplify those ever again. This experience has not only turbocharged the management of the school, but my leadership abilities as well," he said.

Harry Naidoo, the principal of Newhaven Secondary School, who is also participating in the programme, said through the course he had realised he knew nothing about leadership and that he had learnt to think positively about what each and every one could do in "our own little space" to make things better.



Rama Naidu, the executive director of the Democracy Development Programme.



Harry Naidoo, the principal of Newhaven Secondary.



Brand Pretorius, patron of Partners for Possibility and a veteran businessman who has specialised in the discipline of servant leadership.

PICTURES: COLLEEN DARDAGAN