

Beyond learning by trial and error for principals

Youth Development Award
Winner

Partners for Possibility

Emma Jordan

Started in 2010 by Louise van Rhyn, Partners for Possibility (PfP) is an award-winning, home-grown social change innovation. The first of its kind in the world and a Proudly South African initiative, PfP is a creative example of cross-sector collaboration for social change.

It engages business leaders and school principals to develop their leadership skills in a co-learning and co-action partnership that includes a number of accredited formal leadership training courses, and a further 12-month partnership of leadership and community building to start addressing challenges that schools face.

“During the last five years we have developed a process to support business and community leaders who want to make a meaningful contribution to South Africa’s education system,” says Van Rhyn. “There are currently 498 business leaders from more than 170 organisations involved in this process.

“These leaders become learning and implementation partners to school principals. Given the reality that most principals have not been adequately equipped for their task to lead change at their schools, this partnership creates an opportunity for leaders to share their knowledge and skills with a principal and



Collaborators: A school principal has a chat with a partner from the Partners for Possibility programme.

Photo: Inge Schoeman

school leadership team who are keen to learn and lead change in their schools and communities.

“Business leaders who are part of the process report that they have been inspired by the calibre of school principals, but also dismayed at how these principals are expected to just learn about being a principal through trial and error. School principals have one of the most important jobs to do in South Africa and yet they are simply not equipped or supported for this task.”

A participating business leader is requested to commit 150 hours to the programme during the first year of the partnership. The partnership with the business leader together with the PfP training provides the principal with fresh leadership insights to transform her school and, in turn, the entire community. In return, the business leader develops her leadership ability through hands-on experience in an environment that differs from their day-to-day life.

According to Van Rhyn, many of the business leaders report that they have learned more about leadership from being a partner to a principal than they’ve learned from attending a course at a business school.

“I anticipated that I would be inspired by my principal but I underestimated the extent to which this would be so,” says Melanie Burke, social entrepreneur and partner to Principal Siddieka Hassen, Capricorn Primary, Capricorn Park, Cape Town. “I am

humbled when I see how vital the role of the school is in the Vrygrond community, and the responsibility Siddieka has in this context. My 20 years business experience now feels like an apprenticeship for the work in the developing and educational sectors. The complexities, ambiguity and challenges faced and humanity required from principals is astonishing. PfP enables me in an authentic way to ‘walk together’ with a principal while making an investment in my personal development as a leader.”

“The courses I attended brought about many changes in my life, not only in teaching, but also in my everyday life,” says Virof Esau of Wittebome High School in Wynberg, Cape Town. “They have brought about a change in my management of my staff too, especially in staff meetings. I have learnt to become a better listener, afford equal opportunity to all present and afford each person an opportunity to have their say. I now deal differently with learners and parents. I don’t just rush into situations and make decisions; I analyse and listen very carefully. The partnership has exposed me to many new ideas. I have developed professionally in the short space of time more than I had developed over the past five years. I have learnt so much from this partnership.”

In 2016 the project was selected as WISE award finalist, and to date 498 schools across South Africa have benefited from being a part of the PfP process.