

# Partners for Possibility

## Business working to transform education

Mandy Collins



On the southern tip of South Africa, in 415 schools, a ground-breaking initiative is taking leadership development into schools, and facilitating a transformation in education – one school at a time. The project, Partners for Possibility, is a beautiful example of what is possible when business looks beyond just the bottom line, and sees itself as a citizen able to make a positive contribution to the society it operates in.

Partners for Possibility (PfP) began five years ago when founder and CEO, Louise van Rhyn, joined in partnership with Ridwan Samodien, the principal of Kannemeyer Primary School, an under-resourced school in Grassy Park, Cape Town. Louise says she wasn't quite sure what this journey would entail – only that it was vital that someone began it.

Louise is an organisational development practitioner skilled in dealing with large-scale social change, and she had long wanted to do something to contribute to forging a new future for South Africa. She felt strongly that education lay at the heart of writing a new story for the country.

In conversation with school principals, she received a strong message from them that they needed something other than the traditional approach to sorting out education. “They said they didn't want someone to come and fix them,” Louise says. “What they needed was someone to walk alongside them and help to build their capacity; equip them in areas where they felt they needed support.”

South Africa's education system is widely regarded as being in crisis. Eighty percent of the country's Grade 5 scholars are unable to read at grade level. Only half of Grade 3 pupils are literate. South



Africa is consistently on the bottom of international academic measures of literacy and numeracy. Half the children who start school never finish, and only 35% of those who start school ever graduate from high school.

So instead of losing hope at the scale of the problem, or focusing on what was wrong, PfP took the approach of looking at what was working in the country's 5 000 well-performing schools. "You don't look at divorce to figure out what makes for a good marriage," Louise quips, to illustrate this approach.

And what they found, was that well-functioning schools had two things in common: a principal equipped for his/her very complex job as the leader of a school, and a supportive community of teachers, administrators, parents and other community members.

Principals in South Africa often leave the classroom at the end of one month, and step into the principal's office the next, and the job is extremely complex. In most of these schools,

principals have to oversee all the administration of the school, any human resources issues, cope with maintenance of the schools, deal with infrastructure and technical challenges, and budget and run the finances – alone.

And that's on top of the most important part of the job: ensuring that every child receives a high quality education.

In addition, most of these schools are not supported by a strong community. Principals and teachers simply battle on alone and do the best they can against enormous odds. When you compare that scenario to the way business is run in South Africa, you see a stark difference. Business leaders in South Africa are constantly being equipped for their roles – and they have the necessary infrastructure and support to keep their businesses running by clockwork.

The opportunity here was to bring these two worlds together, and form partnerships where the learning would flow in both directions.



Both partners would have something to teach the other. And by walking together, they could find the solutions for each unique school, and set them on a new path.

There is no doubt that the principals' leadership skills flourish as they go through the programme. But PfP is as much a leadership development initiative for the business leaders as it is for the principals.

The programme is something of a 'next-level' leadership process, as it provides what Phil Mirvis, of the Global Network of Corporate Citizenship, calls 'consciousness-raising experiences'. Mirvis points out that business leaders learn the most powerful and relevant lessons when they move "from the relative comfort of the corporate classroom into unfamiliar territory where they encounter people and problems seemingly far removed from the day-to-day scope and concerns of business life".

This is precisely what Pfp delivers. Business leaders find themselves in an entirely unfamiliar environment – education – and yet they are called upon to lead. They have no authority, no mandate, no direct control, and this has a transformational effect on the way they conduct themselves both at work and at home.

"Many of our business leaders report that they learned far more from their principal than they felt the principal learned from them," says Louise. "It's a transformational leadership experience because they are challenged to re-think their way of being in the world."

The Pfp programme is aligned with the thinking of the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI) and specifically their vision of 'Management Education for the World' (also known as the 50+20 vision).

One of the calls from 50+20 was for management educators to develop 'collaboratories' that would feature new models of leadership development. In September 2014, John North (managing director of the GLRI) cited Pfp as a vivid example of this and invited Louise to be a collaborator in developing "an inclusive learning environment where action learning and action research meet".

John was pointing out that the core ideas in the Pfp process are aligned with the core ingredients of collaboratories as defined by the 50+20 authors: "Fostering active collaboration among a diversified group of stakeholders, convened around a single issue or question, and working with whole person learning, creative, and systemic approaches to foster collective problem-solving and co-creation."



To date, 415 of these partnerships have been formed, comprising business leaders from 255 organisations, and the results have been truly astonishing. One by one, schools around South Africa are transforming themselves – not through hand-outs or large injections of funds, but through the power of active citizenship and community building.

As one business leader on the programme put it, “We used to wait for something to happen, someone to do something. Now, 18 months later, in our country we have the same president, the same government, the same learners, and the same social challenges. At our school we have the same (mostly) unemployed parents, the same old school building, the same teachers, the same principal, and less budget than was allocated last year.

“But we have reduced the size of our classes, revamped our bathrooms, built our first ever sports facilities, improved security and hygiene at the school, started a new library, and the children’s academic results are starting to improve.

“Through Partners for Possibility we create partnerships and leaders who influence the conversations we have, conversations that result in the community creating the future we want ourselves: done by us, for us.” ■



### About the Author

*Mandy Collins is a freelance writer and editor who isn't quite sure how she ended up writing about education when she had a career in television production all mapped out. She's a mother, an ardent baker, a garrulous tweeter and a procrastininja, among other things.*