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NEWS

11 JUNE 2010

Leaders can be made

Is it only 'born leaders' who are destined to be successful in the highly competitive world of small business?

"There are a lot of misconceptions surrounding the word 'leadership'," says Liz Zambonini, who started The Hope Factory 9 years ago in a garage in Cape Town with the express aim of helping previously disadvantaged South Africans to become entrepreneurs with their own businesses. "At The Hope Factory we are certainly not trying to turn out MBAs who are traditionally regarded as 'leaders' in the business sense. We do believe however, that with appropriate training, mentoring and motivation, anyone can develop the skills to become financially self-sufficient and very much leaders in their own right."

And Zambonini ought to know. As CEO of The Hope Factory, she has learnt the hard way what it takes to be a leader. Starting with seed capital of R3 000, she has seen The Hope Factory grow into an organisation with a turnover of close to R10 million and 33 permanent staff at its present premises in Port Elizabeth. "A clear vision of strategic goals, and how to communicate and achieve them, are the leadership qualities that every business, large or small, should aspire to," says Zambonini. "I have a concern that these qualities are not being demonstrated in South Africa at the moment and this creates difficulties for those who are looking for others to lead by example when in the start-up phase. A 'top-down' and bottom-up approach is vital if South Africans at all levels are to achieve their potential."

Leadership and The Hope Factory

Zambonini points to a number of leadership lessons she has learnt in growing The Hope Factory from its humble beginnings, which she is now passing on to its trainees. "Believing in your own vision first, however humble, and then sticking to it, is critical," she believes. "If you are unsure of where you are going everyone will have their own plans for you, so remain focused and say no when necessary. Make the tough calls when you need to - we had to close the Cape Town operation and retrench staff because we could only access funding for Port Elizabeth - but it proved to be the right decision as we are now financially viable. Listen to your intuition, play to your strengths, and motivate other members of your team to buy into what you want to achieve. And finally, however small your business, tie what you are doing back to the bottom line by delivering against your strategic goals."

So how does all this relate to The Hope Factory's concept? "I have found the lessons I have learnt extremely valuable in training our own staff and mentors to pass on ideas to the entrepreneurs we are trying to nurture," says Zambonini. "By developing skills and creating jobs we are making a real contribution to the alleviation of poverty in this country. I have seen a knock-on effect of leadership in the communities we serve, and I believe a leader is someone who takes others to an agreed goal or objective. If you can see the picture you can create it, and then the vision becomes part of who you are."

That the Hope Factory has graduated over 700 learners with a sustainability of 70%, demonstrates clearly that Zambonini's leadership principles are achieving her own vision of developing exactly the sort of entrepreneurs South Africa needs, in order to reduce unemployment and poverty in disadvantaged communities.

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