

Pushing the Envelope

In a customer-driven and ever-increasingly competitive market, companies are constantly looking for new and innovative ways to improve performance, to execute at speed in line with strategy and to stay ahead of the business curve.



Suzanne Ravenall, CEO

Beyond Outsourcing's service offering provides an organisation with the ability to be more competitive whilst reducing costs and improving performance. Entrepreneur CEO Suzanne Ravenall says that when she started her own business, she took a leap of faith. "Where most CEO's have the comfort of a corporate, and large infrastructures, this is not the case in the entrepreneurial environment," she says. "What this forces you to do is to work across all business disciplines, and hopefully develop the right leadership behaviours – you simply don't have the people or infrastructure to allocate boxed tasks to people in the beginning."

Ravenall says that this is why the corporate environment today is looking for talent from the entrepreneurial environment. "If they have been successful, they have learned to be highly disciplined, tenacious, brutally honest, and able to manage high levels of quantity and quality at the same time," she notes. "They also bounce back continually after adversity, have a good overall business background across all business disciplines, and have managed high and controlled growth. Above all, they have attained an understanding that humility and collaboration are the keys to success. They also know how to surround themselves with diverse talent."

More help does, however, need to be given specifically to women entrepreneurs. "There are very few companies in South Africa today that are medium-sized businesses owned by women," says Rave-

nall. "The challenge here is to get banks and suppliers to take you seriously in the beginning – there needs to be more support to help medium-sized enterprises flourish."

Ravenall also says that women need to support each other more. "Interestingly, when communicating with women and men CEOs via e-mail, one receives a better response from the men," she shares. "Why is this? Could it be that we are not supporting each other enough?"

Adapting Behaviours

A recent international article talks about men coming to work primed to fight, and women coming primed to network. "That makes the male work style combative, and the female work style collaborative," says Ravenall. "Such different styles mean clashes and confusion are almost inevitable, but is this any more different than dealing with the different generation gaps, such as the Baby Boomers, and the Generation Xers? Different styles inevitably involve some form of conflict – it comes down to adapting our behaviour."

Ravenall says that it takes a great leader to be bold enough to push the diversity envelope and commit to bringing the skills of women and men jointly together at senior levels. "Leaders need to face their fears of change in the boardroom, and recognise that only collectively can we have balanced, successful businesses," she says. "Those that shy away from this are not taking the courage necessary to start the journey of progressive change."

Ravenall feels that all leaders have an obligation to push the diversity envelope – "and as women we should take all opportunities that are presented to us, and learn to create the opportunity, and the future."

She says it is a tough road, but achievable. "This is not about window-dressing, but teaching both ourselves and our male colleagues to understand the differences between men and women, and bridge these differences in the way we operate," explains Ravenall. "We should take every opportunity we can to push women through management development programmes early on, to help with the process. At the same time, perhaps we should be thinking about an element of the charter that insists on a certain percentage of board members being women."

As a CEO, Ravenall sees her challenge as developing and instilling a keen sense for this reality, an agile strategy, and a culture of operating processes and standards within her leadership team and the rest of the community they operate in. "In practical terms, we have had to learn to move from hunting as individuals, to hunting as a pack," she says. "In the next ten years, we will have to hunt as a broad base of empowered people, with a passion for making the real difference every day, or we will simply be hunted ourselves. There will be no exceptions, in my view – it is time to change our behaviours."

Tomorrow's Leaders

Ravenall's advice to South Africa's leaders of tomorrow – especially young

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women – is to just go for it! “Don't let anything hold you back,” she says. “Demonstrate your capabilities as a great leader first and foremost – earn the right to be where you are.”

She has a number of leadership pointers, based on Collin Powell's laws of leadership:

1. Being responsible sometimes means upsetting people.

“Good leadership involves responsibility to the welfare of the group, which means that some people will get angry at your actions and decisions. It's inevitable, if you're honourable. Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity – don't avoid the tough decisions, or confronting those that need it.”

2. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them, or have concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.

“If this were a litmus test, the majority of CEOs would fail. Firstly, they build so many barriers to upward communication that the very idea of someone lower in the hierarchy looking up to the leader for help is ludicrous. Secondly, the corporate culture they foster often defines asking for help as weakness or failure, so people cover up their gaps, and the organisation suffers accordingly. Real leaders make themselves accessible and available. They show concern for the efforts and challenges of

their staff.”

3. Never neglect details. When everybody's mind is dulled or distracted, the leader must be doubly vigilant.

“Strategy equals execution. All the great ideas and visions in the world are worthless if they can't be implemented rapidly and efficiently. Good leaders delegate and empower others liberally, but they pay attention to details, every day.”

4. It's easier to get forgiveness than permission.

“It's true – good leaders don't wait for official blessing to try things out. They're prudent, not reckless, but they also realise a fact of life in most organisations: if you ask enough people for permission, you'll inevitably come up against someone who believes his job is to say ‘no’.”

5. If it ain't broke, don't fix it

“This is the slogan of the complacent, the arrogant or the scared. It is an excuse for inaction, and a mindset that assumes (or hopes) that today's realities will continue tomorrow in a tidy, linear and predictable fashion.”

6. Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

“The ripple effect of a leader's enthusiasm and optimism is awesome. So is the impact of cynicism and pessimism. Leaders who whine and blame engender those same behaviours among their colleagues.”

7. Command is lonely.

“Whether you're a CEO or the temporary head of a project team, the buck stops with you. You can encourage participative management and bottom-up employee involvement, but ultimately the essence of leadership is the willingness to make the tough, unambiguous choices that will have an impact on the fate of the organisation.”

8. Have fun in your command.

“Don't always run at a breakneck pace. Take leave when you've earned it. Spend time with your family. Surround yourself with people who take their work seriously – those who work and play hard.”

In closing...

Ravenall remains inspired by people's continuing energy, and persistence to keep raising the bar on themselves. “Those that show such tenacity in the face of adversity – they just keep bouncing back, inspired to tackle the next project,” she says.

“Another inspiration is living and working in a young, thriving democracy with the full opportunity to create and influence change, both across the full business and social spectrums, where access to our leaders is taken as a first principle or right in a community of Africans who are willing to listen, learn, change and adapt.”

What Ravenall finds incredible about our African community is that whilst we strive to compete in a first world economy, we maintain our culture. “It is one of the elements that differentiates us from any other economy I have found in the world.”

CEO