

In search of real transformation

Helping to create a mindset shift in corporate SA

CORPORATE SA intellectually understands but is not yet emotionally committed to the need for transformation, says Anne Pratt & Associates MD Anne Pratt. To change this, she launched an executive search company in 1998, after spending the previous three years as MD of Woodburn Management Selection, a subsidiary of Woodburn Mann Consulting Group.

Ironically, one of the greatest challenges she faced was embracing diversity within her own company.

"We were the first global search firm to appoint a black woman consultant, Rosemary Mangope. She and I had to resolve critical differences as a result of our very different attitudes towards business, created by a Western results-driven focus on the one hand and an African focus on relationships on the other," says Pratt.

"To overcome these differences, I applied skills acquired 12 years ago through the international Life Skills training programme of the Kairos Foundation. Rosemary has also done the course, and I encourage all my staff and business partners to do the same.

"But my role model for what real transformation is about remains Nelson Mandela. One of my most exciting moments was when I not only met him last week, but bought the suit he wore when he was released from prison."

Pratt attended a Women in Action for Development function in Johannesburg, where various items donated by Mandela were auctioned to raise funds for this initiative that strives to bring about the empowerment and development of women.

"In business I chose Jack Welch, former General Electric CEO, as one of my role models and still concentrate on his three pillars: customer satisfaction, team satisfaction and cash flow – not profit. This focus led to my company having a positive cash flow within four months," says Pratt, who admits that, apart from being a strategist, she also "loves" numbers. To strengthen her numbers ability, she did an MBA at Wits.

Pratt, who also holds a social science degree in economics and industrial psychology as well as honours in psychology from Natal University, says she often refers to the lessons learnt at "the university of life" when she worked for Unilever. There she moved through the ranks of trade marketing and marketing. "Marketing strategy is the actual strategy of any business," she says.

Pratt says one way of generating positive cash flow is to outsource everything not a part of the company's core competencies. "We therefore only have three consultants and four full-time researchers. Even our offices are off balance sheet, as we hire office space in the Regus business centre.

"One of my huge challenges was IT. I'm no expert in this field, and my ignorance cost me dearly, because I had to try three different partners before finding the right one. But I'm convinced that to find the right advisory and support team, you have to have a value-for-money approach and not be penny-wise and pound-foolish."

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Another challenge in setting up the company was to find the right international partner. "After eight months of trading, we approached the top 12 executive search firms as ranked by *The Economist*, and all 12 granted us an appointment. That really boosted our confidence, as did the reaction of the Accord Group in New York. They said after our presentation to them that we had 'set the standard' for their conference."

As a member of the Accord Group, Pratt's company is well positioned to source middle management and senior executives within South Africa and



Businesswoman and role model... Anne Pratt in the jacket that Nelson Mandela wore when he was released.

globally. According to Pratt, corporate SA needs a shift in mindset from appointing people from an existing talent pool to spotting potential. "We realised we could not stop at the end of the search process. Consequently, we are involved in executive development, induction in board and corporate governance matters, including internal mentoring and external coaching.

"SA has lots of talented people, but we have to look at developing them to change a situation where of the 2 787 directors of the 407 JSE-listed companies only 369 are black, and they sit on 515 boards. There are 152 women directors and this number also needs to be increased," says Pratt.

She is excited about the fact that one of her clients, a Cape Town-based company with 15 000 employees, has asked her to find a suitable woman for the board. "In its specific industry it makes sense to have a powerful woman on the board. It seems that some companies are eventually beginning to realise the importance of these things," says Pratt.

* In July, Pratt won the Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the Regional Business Achiever Awards for Gauteng, which runs concurrently with the Businesswoman of the Year Award, sponsored by Nedbank and the Businesswomen's Association.

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