

# Headhunting the best

Anne Pratt believes that you can best recognise excellence if you pursue it in yourself, which is why doing an MBA at WBS was important for this director of an executive search company. **By Helen Grange.**

**P**ockets of excellence – where to find them and how to grow them – is what Anne Pratt, director of executive search company Memela Pratt & Associates, says is her all-consuming passion. According to Pratt, it is the leaders within these rarefied pockets who are not only invaluable to her clients but wield the power to pull South Africa out of the moral decay that continues to undermine its economy and social fabric. Her clients include blue-chip companies, the government, state-owned enterprises and NGOs.

"South Africans are struggling to remain hopeful, because they are disappointed in the quality of the country's leadership," she says. "We face a moral dilemma, and finding good, strong leaders with integrity, with a social and moral conscience, is critical. Crime and every other social ill is a symptom of moral decay. I've believed for a long time that this is by far the greatest threat to the future of this country."

Broad-sweep utterances like this are standard fare in an interview with Pratt – a multi-awarded, self-made businesswoman who, over the past 13 years, has forged an international headhunting company that apparently has an enviable record in finding competent, visionary individuals for leading organisations. Telkom, Tiger Brands, The Core Group, Standard Bank, Absa, GloCell, MTN, MacMillan, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Impala Platinum... these are among the heavyweight clients for which Pratt and her business partner, Totsie Memela-Khambula (also CEO of Eduloan), have found top-quality candidates.

Memela-Khambula herself was the target of Pratt's eagle eye for a luminary who'd be a perfect fit in her own company. In 1995, Pratt co-founded Woodburn Management

Selection, and three years later launched Anne Pratt and Nyasulu, which became Anne Pratt & Associates in 2001. She'd been watching the reports concerning the controversy unfolding at the Land Bank, where Memela-Khambula served as acting MD at the time – and, in particular, how she handled it. "I realised there is more to this woman than was in the media reports. I got a sense of her, that she was a woman of substance and integrity, and I asked to meet her. When we did meet, we really connected. I have a lot of respect for her," says Pratt.

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Widely travelled, insightful and loquacious, Pratt wasn't always this self-assured. "I failed my first year BCom (at the University of KZN)," she admits. She did, however, get a social sciences degree (economics and industrial psychology) as well as honours in psychology, before starting her career in consumer marketing in 1983 with Unilever. Five years later, she joined McCann Advertising as account director of its retail agency.

Jumpstarted by a bursary from the Businesswomen's Association, Pratt enrolled for an MBA at WBS in 1991. "I wanted a formal, well-rounded business qualification, and a WBS MBA was the obvious choice, given WBS was rated the best business school in South Africa. I did it full time,

because I'm a sprinter not a marathon runner. I don't have a natural aptitude for maths, so I worked harder on those areas. I found that discipline and consistency are what you need for an MBA," she says.

During the course, Pratt won the Nedcor award for the full-time student who had made the most outstanding contribution to business. But one of her most memorable events was meeting the late Chris Hani, leader of the SA Communist Party, who had been invited to WBS as a guest speaker. "He made a lasting impression on me. I asked him about how he reconciled his political position with South Africa's market economy. He was thoughtful and practical in his response. We had many guest speakers of his calibre during the course, and they make invaluable contributions to your learning," she says.

Pratt's fascination with deciphering what it is that "makes good leaders tick, and how they keep going" was ignited long before her university days, however. "I've always been attracted to great leaders. At a young age, I was reading biographies, to get to the bottom of how these people operate." Leadership, she says, comes down to "the four Qs" – IQ (intelligence), EQ (emotional intelligence), SQ (spiritual intelligence) and, not least, PQ – people who can apply their learning in a practical way. "Chris Hani was a good example of someone with PQ," she says, quickly adding that she's not "touchy feely" in her approach to business excellence. "At the end of the day, the measure of success is hardcore results."

Pratt has set a good example herself of what it means to "value add and beneficiate". She is a member of the Black Management Forum, the Businesswomen's Association and the Institute of Directors, and also participates

regularly in business school panel discussions or takes the lead as a guest lecturer. Last year, she won *CEO Magazine's* South Africa's Most Influential Woman in Business and Government award in the category Business–Professional Services.

Yet Pratt in person is modest and accessible – an affable and chatty person who is all too aware of how accolades can play smoke and mirrors in the headhunting game. "Research shows that 57% of senior management executives have misrepresented information in their CVs. So, in the process of identifying quality candidates, we undertake an in-depth research process, which entails talking to people behind the scenes. We are also highly networked. This process is enormously important when you're looking for placements like the one we're busy with now – the next chief electoral commissioner of the Independent Electoral Commission," she says.

When she's not headhunting the best, Pratt is happily engaging other people of quality – her friends and family. She lives in an elegant home in Sandton – for which she had most of her furniture custom-made – and loves to entertain. "I actively seek out balance in my life, so I keep fit and I regularly spoil myself at the spa," she smiles. She also dabbles in property investment, development and interior design – a hobby that has evolved into a substantial business. In short, Anne Pratt is an all-rounder, with good marks in most subjects. 



Anne Pratt