

# The shape of things



ENGAGING WITH THE WORK FORCE IS A LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY THAT LOUISE VAN RHYN KNOWS BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE



Louise van Rhyn is an internationally acclaimed organisational development (OD) practitioner who has just been awarded the HR Leadership Award at the 2009 World Human Resource Development Congress. Her CV is impressive: she has been a leadership consultant for BBC, Nokia and Marks & Spencer; and she has supported global change initiatives for companies, such as GlaxoSmithKline, Aventis Pasteur and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

Imagine her surprise when she returned to South Africa in 2003 and found that the OD field had all but disappeared. 'It was a strange feeling. I felt as if what I had to offer wasn't valued in South Africa,' says van Rhyn.

Being in high demand overseas, and yet having few opportunities for interesting work here meant commuting to Europe and back on 10-day cycles. 'After four years of this, I had had enough. It was great for my bank balance, but not for my family,' she smiles. 'I had to decide where I was going to focus my energy. To be honest, moving back to the UK would have been the easy option, but I was fired up to create and do my work here in South Africa. I've seen what this kind of work can contribute to organisations and communities.'

So, she started her own company: Symphonia Leadership Development. You'd be forgiven for thinking that it has anything to do with music (it doesn't). But van Rhyn does have a great interest in making voices heard – she is emphatic and

passionate about the difference good leadership can play in South Africa.

'To me, leadership is about the willingness to make different choices about how we talk. Most leaders are unaware how their talking shapes the experience of others. For example, if a leader typically responds negatively when people offer their input, the voices within that organisation go quiet. Leaders are responsible for harnessing the collective intelligence of the people around them. Barack Obama is a perfect example: he is a leader who has promised to listen to all the voices and contributions.'

Van Rhyn sees the workplace (the link to reaching communities and society) as a great example for the need of an attitude change in leaders. The sad reality is that the majority of people are just disengaged at work (see *Strictly Business*' book choice, page 9) and only work to a fraction of their potential. 'Large amounts of people are not working creatively,' she says. 'They are not getting joy from their work and so they are not working to capacity or making the kind of contribution they could make if they were enthusiastic and engaged.'

According to van Rhyn, there are social and financial consequences to this. We spend a large percentage of our lives at work, so if we see our work as unhappy drudgery, we take that frustration home. This in turn can be reflected, in a list of social ills. 'This country cannot afford the social costs associated with employee disengagement,' says van Rhyn. 'It is a leadership responsibility to address this issue.'

The other option for people is to leave their jobs, or even the country. 'Young people have high expectations of their work environment. They don't want to experience work as wading through treacle or being bound in shackles. And why should they when there are well-paid options in other countries? Talent management has been identified as the key strategic issue for the next few decades. If our leaders don't respond to the demand for a lighter, brighter, more engaging organisational experience, our talented young people will soon be snatched up by the US and the rest of the world,' she warns.

Companies around the world have woken up to the fact that we, as humans, are one of the scarcest of resources. 'We are going to have to do more work with fewer people. Energy management is a key leadership responsibility because higher energy levels result in higher output. We have the people, but when I talk with HR professionals in South Africa, they estimate that more than 80% of the people in their organisations are disengaged. What worries me is that they don't seem overly concerned about this. Surely, at this time in history, this the one place where we need to focus our attention! Imagine what would happen if we engaged 20% of the people who are currently not, and enrol them to enthusiastically support the initiatives that we are working on?'

This is the challenge that gets van Rhyn out of bed every morning. 'My job is to help leaders create vibrant organisations where people can live remarkable lives,' she says with bright eyes.

'My role is to bring energy, joy and vibrancy back into the work place. That is why I am here: that is what I can offer.'

Van Rhyn is determined to rekindle the appreciation for OD and to further develop the field of organisational change in South Africa. In 2007, she established the South African OD Network (SAODN), and there are now more than 800 members. Symphonia is currently talking to potential partners to start an Academy for Organisational Change Practitioners. 'I am also looking to collaborate with a leading international business school to offer an MA in Organisational Consulting,' she says. 'My vision is to create a world-class organisational change consultancy in SA so that large organisations don't have to contract consultants from Europe or the US like they are doing now.'

With all this vision and energy, it is not surprising that she continues to win awards and is listed on the American Biographical Institute's Great Women of the 21st Century (2006/2007).

We are proud to have our fellow South Africans return to our shores, people who choose to stay and work here because they believe that this country is alive with possibility. □

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