

focus on excellence

by Laura Franz-Kamissoko

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Anne Pratt, Managing Director, Memela Pratt & Associates, and an inspirational African leader in her own right



“I was head-hunted by a head-hunter!” she admits enthusiastically. “I was on the short list for a management recruitment company, and they asked if I would be interested in the field. Executive search and recruitment was not something on my radar screen at that point and I have never been involved in human resources per se, but they recognised my passion for successful business strategies and leadership, which I think was a powerful combination,” explains Pratt, who then became the Managing Director of Woodburn Management Selection in mid-1995. “Three years later, after being approached by a couple of other top, global executive search firms to consider joining them, my partner and I decided instead to launch what was then a pioneering concept in South Africa: an executive search firm that ‘walked the talk’ in terms of transformation and empowerment, a global player with a passion to deliver world-class excellence,” she adds.

It is interesting to note that Pratt has several degrees in the fields of social science, psychology and business administration, including a Master of Business Administration (MBA). “From a young age, I decided that I would be successful in life and that I would make a difference. I wanted to learn from others – global icons who shaped their organisation, their country and the world. I was interested in those who were successful broadly speaking,

In Praise of African Leadership

Although Anne Pratt came to the human resources and leadership field somewhat circuitously, today she is the Managing Director of Memela Pratt & Associates, a top-end executive search firm, and is making her mark in this industry and beyond.

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CEO

but I was particularly interested in political and business leaders. I wanted to learn from them; to understand what drove and shaped them to create their successes and lessons in life. I began reading biographies and autobiographies of great leaders the world over. I read much about their strategies, their personal make-up and their social and familial background, just to get an idea of the mettle of the individual. In my studies, I also majored in economics and psychology and became acutely aware of the relationship and strong positive correlation between strong leadership and solid economic performance. Both are critical to create sustainability for organisations, nations and the world. It also motivated me to develop a career in strategic marketing, and specialise in strategy in my MBA. I really believe that it is a blend of skill and competence that creates great leaders and winning nations," maintains Pratt.

Just some of the women whom Pratt admires include political leaders like Hilary Clinton and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first and currently the only elected female head of state in Africa. But she also has great respect for Dr Mamphela Ramphela, who she describes as a pioneering and courageous leader, a friend and a client, and marketing legends and businesswomen such as Santie Botha and Hixonia Nyasulu.

While Pratt is not able to discuss any current projects at Memela Pratt & Associates, she does admit that her biggest career achievement was winning the pitch, together with her dear friend and business partner Totsie Memela, for the placement of the chief executive officer (CEO) for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and successfully placing the current CEO, Achmat Dangor, whom she describes as an excellent person in every way for the role. "We have handled many high-profile executive appointments, but this one meant that we, too, were humbly making a small contribution to help Madiba shape his legacy," she says.

As for the future, Pratt says she is planning to launch an African television programme showcasing Africa's pockets of excellence. "There are many sung and unsung heroes in South Africa and the continent as a whole. We

can learn from them and be inspired by them. We need to hear more stories that create hope, instil confidence and shape ongoing practical learning. As my economics professor at KwaZulu-Natal University used to say: 'Economic cycles are psychologically driven. When we change our mind-set, we change our behaviour,' or, put differently: 'we are what we think,'" Pratt elaborates.

She has gone on to win numerous awards in her own right, including South Africa's Most Influential Women in Business and Government award in 2011 in the Business and Professional Services category. "I would like to contribute on an African and global stage to help shape courageous leadership at all levels and across all sectors in society. Sometimes, when we feel blocked and frustrated by the type of leadership we are experiencing, we need to tackle leadership differently and create a leadership 'revolution' from the bottom, and in pockets where we have world-class examples of excellence. It is simple to celebrate pockets of excellence, find out what makes them tick, benchmark similar organisations and replicate the success. I firmly believe that this excellence already exists in this country and on this continent."

As for the women of South Africa, Pratt encourages them to be strong and courageous, to do the right things, and to stand up to issues that do not support a better life for all. "Drive performance while being sensitive to broader social and environmental issues. Live the triple bottom line in our daily lives, that is, make a contribution to the financial, social and environmental success of yourself, your family, company, community and country," she says.

"Stand up actively against crime and corruption – when enough of us do so, the tide will eventually turn. Create strong support systems and networks around you, and find strong mentors – they can only help you raise your game, but don't forget to 'lift as you rise'. Women must continue to educate themselves in the hard skills – finance, risk, and compliance, as we need to be skilled to play by these rules of the world of work. Finally, work to develop a healthy self-esteem, and a sense of wellbeing and confidence," says Pratt. □