

The Power of a Vision

Last month I had the chance to attend the 7th **Business Driven Action Learning conference**, this year in Johannesburg, **South Africa**. At one of the lunch breaks, we had a guest presenter, whose story made a deep impact on me and I want to share it with you, as I have been sharing with others since that day. His name is **Taddy Blecher**, and he is a white south African that meets the **Level 5** category as it is described by **Jim Collins in his latest book "Good to Great"**: "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.(...)They are incredibly ambitious - but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves." Taddy, in his mid thirties, had a dream that he could change the destiny of South Africa, without being noticed. And he is achieving it. Let me tell you how.

A bit of history and context

South Africa has a population of about 45 million, of which approx.40 million are black and 5 million are white. 1994 was the end of Apartheid when the first black government took charge of the country. As a consequence, a big percentage of the white and wealthy population began leaving the country and unemployment rose. This made the country an even more unsafe place to live. Taddy, educated in international universities, had quit his job at Monitor, the international consulting firm of Michael Porter, had packed his 42 boxes, and was **ready to leave South Africa**.

Then suddenly he stopped and said to himself, "I don't want to leave, I want to do something for my country". He reflected with a friend and they concluded that education was the key. **Only 6% of the black population over the age of 20 have a post high school qualification**. The black population has little access to college education, because they come from poor schools with low resources, therefore they are ill prepared for the admission tests, plus they don't have the money to pay for it anyway. **If South Africa could educate this large black population, they would be able to change the destiny of the nation**.

With his friend, they crafted a letter to test this idea and sent 350 faxes to principals from the poorest areas of the country, asking if they would be interested in selecting their 5 top students for a free, top class business school. Two weeks they waited with no response. Deeply disappointed, they concluded that it may be the way to change a destiny, but this population was just not interested.

The surprise

Then, on day 16 a fax arrived. A principal had 5 interested students. The following days more and more faxes started to arrive, and before long there was a crowd of parents, uncles and grandparents in front of the office building, asking to register their kids. The idea was working.

The next challenge

The students filled out forms, and asked "Where is the campus?". So Taddy and his friends promised to inform them in 10 days and rushed to find a space where they could build the first free business school in SA - with no resources at all; they personally were in debt. They found a warehouse, which was in bad condition but could be cleaned at least. They got plastic chairs and opened the doors for the first group of 600 students.

They needed professors so they talked to the most prestigious executives in local companies and asked them if they would be interested in teaching. So they got Marketing VPs, CFOs, Sales managers, etc. He had his staff. **They also needed textbooks** so the students came up with the idea of getting the equivalent of the "Financial Times" that was not sold from the day before. They went to several newsstands and organized to get those for free and used the news as text to debate and learn.

The next challenge was running the college; it was too much for Taddy and his friends, to teach, organize, run the administration, get resources, and in the evenings clean the facility! So they decided to ask the students to run the college. They quickly organized committees and distributed tasks: cleaning, cooking, admission, administration, computer maintenance, registration, marketing and market research, maintenance, computer training, sports departments, library and so on. This was and is action learning in practice.

A different approach to learning

Taddy had a clear vision: this is not just a college to learn business, it also has to help students change their mindset, learn to think differently about themselves, develop their self esteem, and their leadership skills. Therefore, the 9.5 hours daily classes are divided into 4.5 of business subject, and half for **developing the self**. This is the component called Self Management, and it comprises developing creativity, problem solving, memory and stress reduction, using Transcendental Meditation.



If you happen to visit the college, you will find 1600 students silent during the first hour in the morning, and then again the last hour of the evening. They are in meditation.

They attend classes 40 - 44 weeks per year (compared to the standard 34-39 weeks), for 4 years, to achieve a Bachelor degree in Business, with one certificate at the end of each year. The intellectual component includes all the traditional business subjects. Then, they have:

* **Knowledge of the world:** personal finance, insurance, business and government;

• **Skills:** computer, professional and life skills;

• **Values and Attitudes:** principle centered leadership, philanthropy;

• **Recreation:** 70 different sports, clubs and societies

90% of the students come from rural areas and townships, as well as from other countries of Africa. They are accepted upon the condition that they go back to their community periodically to teach and train others on specific subjects: HIV prevention; teamwork; business principles. This way Taddy plans to reach out to the whole South African population over the next 5 years.

Action Learning

Because of the practical work they do running the university and their community, they are **learning by doing**. In addition, entrepreneurship is compulsory. In their 2nd year, students construct a detailed business plan which integrates all the subjects they have covered. In their 4th year, they establish their business in teams, with successful businesses to be continued after graduation. These businesses are graded along with traditional exams, tests and assignments.

They are encouraged to find community opportunities to learn and help. Some students work with street vendors to help them rethink their business. As a result, they come back to the classroom enriched able to debrief their experience and extract lessons from it.

The power of a vision

Currently, the university is supported through **partnerships with companies** who see this educational initiative as an investment for their own future. Computer companies are donating older computers and printers, knowing that they are expanding their market to a whole new generation who otherwise would stay in their rural areas without ever having had contact with a computer. Financial service institutions are offering support in exchange of “branding” their programs. Publishing companies are donating former editions of their business textbooks. Top business schools from US are offering student exchange programs, visits and special courses run by top academics. LIM is offering leadership development workshops. Other consultants are offering programs to stimulate the thinking and enrich the experience of the students.

In a conversation with Taddy, I mentioned the fact that he was finding these “win-win” opportunities to get support. He answered sheepishly, ‘Isn’t this wonderful? We are changing the world – and no one is really noticing it!’

Final reflection

This was a significant experience for me. It triggered many thoughts, including the power of a vision. How often do we blame lack of resources as an excuse to pursuing our dreams? Taddy’s dream is that this experience, now in its second year, will be replicated in other parts of South Africa, in other countries of Africa and in other countries of the world. He is ready to share how it works.

What does this inspire in you? 🌍

Isabel Rimanoczy

For more information, email CIDA City Campus – Taddy.Blecher@Monitor.com

If you think you have something to contribute, don’t let anything stop you from doing it. Contact Teddy. You are building hope. If this inspired you to try something similar, get in touch with him. He is ready to share his lessons.



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