

Transformational leadership needed for digital industry

By [Musa Kalenga](#)

28 Jun 2016

More people on the planet own mobile phones than toothbrushes. These levels of mobile technology adoption have created the ability for people that were previously "excluded" to be part and parcel of local and global business.



Musa Kalenga

Our economies are undergoing severe accelerations and external pressures to produce and compete simultaneously. Global businesses are looking to African economies for opportunities and companies that they can partner with or acquire to realise the "Africa Opportunity".

This may range from accessing financial services to education and even broader opportunities in commerce. This inclusion has forced traditional businesses to re-think their business models and imagine them in a new context. The wholesale inclusion of people through mobile technology coupled with the disruptive spirit by which companies that are forward-thinking are surviving, makes for really exciting changes in the world today.

We need leaders that will meet this opportunity head on with the interests of Africa at the centre of their thought process and decision-making. We are called for such a time as this.

Our continent requires wholesale leadership changes. We now have seven of the fastest growing economies in the world on our continent. Our economies are undergoing severe accelerations and external pressures to produce and compete simultaneously.

Talent search

The South African digital industry is no different and continues to face diversity challenges in building representative and inclusive workforces. The talent pool has been made that much smaller by the globalisation of the workforce and the mobility of the younger generations. Skills acquisition continues to hamper the talent pool that show promise and where the skill exist, we still have to master the sharing process that leads to scalable value sharing.

I also believe that we need to materially enhance the quality of conversation between clients (brands), agencies and industry bodies. We are not exempt from external forces as the volatility in the foreign exchange rates and the downstream impact thereof impacts on ability to acquire sufficient inventory without material depreciation over time.

Although there are many things to consider, I think it is increasingly important to address the “black elephant” in the room when it comes to the South African digital industry. We are not in a position to skirt around the need for wholesale transformation and the reasons why this kind of transformation is vital to the industry.

Let me start by telling you a few things that you know – or at least should know. Most black South Africans – and most Africans in particular – remain severely disadvantaged compared to white South Africans. The numbers tell us that 4% of adult Africans have a tertiary qualification; 25% of white South Africans do. We have seen this statistic lived out in the media and social spaces as young students fight for their right to education. When they take to the streets they do so to address this skew and crippling education scenario faced by most young South Africans.

Throughout the South African economy 70% of top managers and 59% of senior managers are white. White senior management structures will unintentionally preserve the status quo and while I choose to believe that this is not always intentional, it is a reality – it is human nature. The unemployment rate among Africans is 28.8%; among white people it is 5.9%. This, once again is a result of many years of disadvantage. White families can easily find employment for their children, nieces and nephews; the same doesn't apply for black kids of the same age.

In South Africa, 16% of Africans live in extreme poverty and regularly suffer hunger; 99.9% of white South Africans are better off than that. Even those in South Africa that may go on to become successful still have residual memory in their lived experience and the people close to them. This is nearly impossible to truly quantify, but is a material reality that compounds the social status of most South Africans.

Diversity is the destination

Diversity is the destination. Transformation is the journey...

So, my belief is that we are all in this together and the key question is much like I am challenging you, how would you challenge your colleagues in the industry to promote transformation? For one, I think we should stop spending time trying to figure out ways of crooking our way around the imperative and need to transform. All that energy needs to be repurposed and focused such that we spend time solving for diversity.

Starting the journey is difficult, but if we begin with something simple and iterate as we gain in confidence and understanding, the probability of success is that much higher. A very practical way of uncovering some of our bias is to encourage external interaction as much as possible and engage contrarian conversations. Yes, go ahead and speak to some people who would benefit from transformation. Speak to their peers and understand their challenges. Then go ahead and engage in contrarian conversations, listen, learn and then start applying your mind to how you can affect transformation

The digital revolution has given every person on the planet the ability to change the world. What we do with that responsibility is up to us. My plea to every one of you today is that you absolutely have a responsibility to dream big and push generational boundaries. You need to endeavour to dream about a world of freedom, inclusion and prosperity. But in your quest to change the world – change Africa first, change South Africa first, change your business first and change yourself first.

Transformation absolutely does not mean that there is no place for white staff or that white South Africans cannot expect to enjoy the rewards due to hard work and to skill. What it means is that all of us – black and white – must do everything we

can to create a demographically normal society in which everyone has a fair opportunity to succeed.

Masiye Phambili

To build this better world for future generations of South Africans a little patience and a degree of sacrifice is required from all of us. This is not an extraordinary burden, however mature and responsible leadership is required to carefully plan for the future, in so doing exercise self-restraint and sure-footed leadership towards the common goal of a diverse and inclusive digital industry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Musa Kalenga is IAB SA Head of Brand Council (Facebook). Kalenga qualified as the youngest chartered marketer (SA) in Africa. In 2005-06 he became the first chairman of the Youth Advertising Board of SA. His keen insights into the youth led to the establishment of Monatefellaz, a marketing and research consultancy. He has been hailed as a marketing fundi by Sunday World newspaper and has received much acclaim for his work, including an unprecedented three nominations for the prestigious Black Business Quarterly Awards.

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