

The dilemma of leadership in the advertising and media industry

 By [Chris Botha](#)

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Maria Ramos appointed CEO of Park Advertising Group (NOT REALLY...)



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A similar news headline recently caught my eye: “Maria Ramos tipped to head up Eskom unbundling”. WHAT? I naively thought to myself. A bank CEO is going to manage the unbundling of a state-owned enterprise? What does she know about electricity generation?

While Maria has a massively impressive CV, electricity generation and the unbundling thereof is a different kettle of fish altogether. Oh, how narrow-minded I am sometimes. While time will tell how successful Ms Ramos will be at this exercise, my reaction in itself caused me to think a bit more about the advertising and marketing industry’s approach to leadership.

Industry experience not the be-all and end-all

Look at every big advertising and media agency in South Africa and you will find one thing in common when it comes to their senior management profile – they are people who, for the most part, grew up in the industry and in all likelihood practised the trade at some point, and then got promoted to leadership.

Brett Morris (CEO of FCB) is a copywriter by trade. Alistair Mokoena (CEO of Ogilvy) has a marketing background by trade. Most media agency leaders (including myself) come from media strategy/media owner/marketing backgrounds. We are not ex-lawyers, ex-bankers or ex-doctors.



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I find that strange. Surely to lead a marketing business, you don't really need to have a marketing background. You need to be able to lead people. You need vision to grow a business and have the ability to see the opportunity that others don't. Sure, industry experience helps, but it is not the be-all and end-all.

How are leaders chosen?

How are leaders in our industry chosen? Often, the position goes to someone who is 'likeable' and a natural 'people's person'. Oh, and often very good at their job. But is that the real qualities that we need in a leader? I don't think so.

As some of you will know – I am a rugby fanatic. A not so well-known gentleman Steve Tew is one of my heroes. He is the CEO of New Zealand Rugby. Steve took over the reins in NZ in 2007 after the country got knocked out of the Rugby World Cup by France. He was not a provincial rugby player. He had never coached a provincial rugby team. So why is he my hero?

1. He led NZ rugby to become the most dominant force in sport winning every single trophy and world cup since he took over.
2. He signed broadcast deals that have massively improved the profitability of NZ rugby and helped the country retain some of their best talent.
3. He created a structure where all players are centrally contracted, ensuring that NZ Rugby always has their best players, playing for the best union, and are centrally managed and controlled.

Interestingly, he appointed Steve Hansen as NZ rugby coach (a man who only played a small handful of provincial games). The rest is history. Their success is unrivalled not only in rugby but in any sport. Jake White was one of South Africa's best rugby coaches who similarly never played any provincial rugby of significance.

Back to advertising Chris....

I would love to know what Maria Ramos would do, should she be appointed Group MD of Park Advertising (owners of The MediaShop and Meta Media). Some might assume that just because she has never spent a day in a media agency, she would not be able to do an amazing job. Well, quite the opposite might, in fact, be true.

The fact that she doesn't know our legacy issues should count in her favour. The fact that she doesn't know what agency commission is might well lead her to structure a far more common sense approach to agency remuneration. She is clearly a strong leader, a strategic visionary, and a vastly intelligent leader. I would personally love to see what she does after spending a few weeks in our business.

I think the boards of major media and creative agencies need to relook how they appoint their leaders. Knowing the ins and outs of our industry, I believe, can be taught in a few months. But real leadership instinct is something that no amount of years can develop if you don't have it. I challenge everybody to cast the net wider.

ABOUT CHRIS BOTHA

Chris Botha is Group Managing Director, The MediaShop, Johannesburg. Chris started his life in media when he was a student at the University of the Free State. He ran the local campus radio station (RSM) and was the proud presenter of the sport show.

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