

Fostering a culture of creative entrepreneurship

 By [Mike Beukes](#)

15 Nov 2018

When I was 27, I was all guts and very little sense. I had so little I thought it was a brilliant idea to set up my own agency with my art director in London, after only having been there for two years. We had few contacts, a half-decent portfolio and the business sense of two guys who grew up in homes of entrepreneurs.



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Alas, having some exposure to hustlers doesn't the hustler make. And we learnt very, very fast that briefs don't suddenly materialise, cash flow really is king and there's an entire universe outside the creative department, which we sadly hadn't taken nearly enough cognisance of.

If we'd elected to be freelancers, it would have been a different story. We'd slot into the same world to which we're accustomed, but with our own independence. Easy. I'd like to be clear here, a freelancer isn't an entrepreneur, by definition. (Sorry all you amazing ladies and gents.) Freelancers are absolutely essential and there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not working with one. But unless you have a goal to employ more people, in order to make money whilst you're sleeping, then you're a freelancer.

SA's creative industry is potent

What we do need are more creative entrepreneurs - people who aren't just willing to take a risk with the work they produce, but a risk with their own money. And running an agency for a multinational isn't the same as bootstrapping your own agency and taking the risk upon your shoulders. It's a beautiful thing, but one which requires various appendages of steel and grit to stay the course until the (hopefully) inevitable illustrious exit.

South Africa's creative industry is incredibly potent. Our freelance culture is filled with world-class talent (I'm not just trying to suck up after my earlier comments). We have the groundswell of new, interesting and hungry start-ups. But what we don't have is a particularly safe place in which to grow them. Our agency operates from Cape Town and it's much tougher to succeed here than it was in London.

If we want an industry that is appealing to entrepreneurs, we need a few things. (And this list is by no means exhaustive.)

1. Clients must be more open to young agencies

Young agencies are often sidelined for being a 'risky' young business, despite the players within them very often carrying decades of award-winning experience. Yet, if the same client went to an established agency, they'd likely get more junior people on their business, rather than the skills of the owners or the lean group of seniors they surround themselves with. I'm not recommending handing over entire huge accounts, but throwing out more scraps to hungry start-ups will likely yield excellent work for far less.

2. This young (wo)man's game needs to be everyone's game

SA's industry is young in comparison to other countries in which I've worked. I've heard it joked that once you turn 40 in advertising, you should start making other plans. Conversely, in London, I've heard it joked that no one takes you seriously until you're 40. In building this hungry, young industry, we've created our own brain drain of brilliant minds that are looking for something less fickle and evenly paced, just when they're carrying their most valuable experience. We need stability, longevity and respect for the long game.

3. We need Entrepreneur Training 101

I can't think of anything I learnt in ad school which helped me to become an entrepreneur. Of course, we need to activate creativity and understand buying psychology. But, as creatives, we also need to understand how the business world works i.e. How to read a balance sheet, how cash flow works, how not to have the wool pulled over your eyes and how to monetise the ideas we come up with on a daily basis. We need to understand the concept of extreme ownership, the difference between optimistic ideas and opportunistic actions and the importance of a personal brand. No one teaches you how to network, to commit to lifelong learning or develop grit for business, not just for the work. And yes - how to exit.

4. We need to incubate entrepreneurs within our agencies

I've always been dumbfounded by people who get cagey about staff leaving. People come and go. What makes the difference is whether they've left better off and whether you'd work together again. Often entrepreneurial-minded individuals don't necessarily make the best employees. But rather than creating a system where they leave to start their own thing and then stumble, struggle and in many cases fail, we should incubate, support and mentor these people. Of course, they might one day be competitors. But some of my best friends are too.

5. Entrepreneurial creatives need to recalibrate

Being an entrepreneur isn't for everyone. If we want to be one, we need to approach our day-to-day slightly differently – we have to learn to be creative suits. We need to learn all aspects of the business (but mostly the finances), because, when it's your show, you're going to be doing all of it. So, at worst you need to understand how all aspects of an agency work and, at best, be competent at doing it yourself. Understanding your business also means you can better understand clients' businesses. You can add genuine value, rather than chasing the creative for whatever reward. You have to suck up information outside of creativity and marketing. Do an MBA or at least read the textbooks. Read business books,

investments, psychology, economics, and science - just keep stretching.

We're at a wonderful time of transformation in the industry. The landscape is standing wide open for hungry new independents who can define new business models, services or output which are built for today. We need these lion(nesses) of our industry to be nurtured, trained and given opportunities which can help define tomorrow. But before we do, it's our obligation to get a few things right for them.

ABOUT MIKE BEUKES

Since 2000, Mike's career has seen him working with agencies in London, Los Angeles, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Dublin...
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