

Servant leadership key for healthy and growing businesses

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The success of beauty brand Sorbet hinges on its people and their passion, argues its founder and CEO, Ian Fuhr. Speaking at a UCT Graduate School of Business event in July, Fuhr said that if you focus on your people and create a working environment where they feel nurtured, cared for, content and inspired, they will be motivated to serve their guests to the best of their ability.

Servant leadership in business is important particularly in the South African context, says Ian Fuhr, founder and CEO of Sorbet – a leading South African beauty brand.

“It [servant leadership] becomes more important in the South African context because the country is highly diverse... it’s about race, it’s about religion, culture, and language,” Fuhr said during a roundtable discussion on his new book at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) in July.

According to Professor Kurt April, chair of the Allan Gray Centre for Values-based Leadership at the GSB, servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organisations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world. A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and wellbeing of people and the inclusive communities to which they belong. He adds that it starts with self-mastery. “If you cannot lead yourself, you will struggle to lead diverse others and head up organisations. It starts with the self, with true self-awareness that guides behaviour, choices and decision-making.”

According to Fuhr, building a successful organisation requires leaders to “accept and respect people who are different to us and to learn to live with each other”.

“There is no reason why we cannot build a rainbow community within our workplace. We have to understand each other, accept and respect people who are different to us, and learn to live with each other... and this is one thing we work on [at Sorbet] to get people to understand the importance of accepting and respecting people who are different to you. You might not agree with them but you need to respect that they have different views to yours and that you are not always right,” he said.

Servant leadership requires a paradigm shift and that you have to lead by example, Fuhr continued. In this spirit, he says the he personally does the induction training at Sorbet. “It helps that I am able to explain directly what’s important and why they [workers] have to believe what we believe in.”

The GSB regularly hosts business leaders to discuss and share ideas to improve business and society on its Distinguished Speakers Programme. Facilitating this event was GSB alumna, Heloise Janse van Rensburg (MBA 2017), whose MBA dissertation was on “How the ‘Sorbet Way’ of Servant Leadership is Scooping Up Success”.

Fuhr established Sorbet in 2005 and it has become one of the largest beauty franchise businesses in South Africa, with just over 200 salons, including five stores in London.

Advising up-and-coming entrepreneurs, Fuhr said business owners need to have intuition “which tells you something is right”. “You have to have courage because there will be times when you want to throw in the towel... and determination because it’s a long journey. No business ever happened overnight. You should not be afraid to fail.”

In his book, *The Soul of Sorbet: Building People, Culture and Community*, co-written by Johanna Stamps Egbe, People

and Culture Manager of the Sorbet Group, Fuhr emphasises the need to focus on employees and customers in order to grow a business.

“It’s like the age-old question: ‘What came first? The chicken or the egg?’ Similarly, in business we have to ask: ‘What comes first? The purpose or the reward?’ I believe that the purpose is paramount and the reward is the natural result.

“If you focus on your people and create a working environment where they feel nurtured, cared for, content and inspired, they will be motivated to serve their guests to the best of their ability with a positive attitude, and to touch the lives of those guests in a powerful way. This creates loyal guests who will feel good about themselves and enjoy visiting your business on a regular basis, and spending money on products and/or services.”

Fuhr added that “lean and mean” businesses might well produce short-term profits for the shareholders, but sooner or later the culture will impact negatively on productivity.

“There will be nothing to inspire exceptional performance and the culture of fear will begin to debilitate the business. Negativity will spread like a cancer. Demotivation will set in and customer service will no longer take centre stage. Despite the fact that they might be earning a good salary, when people are discontented and disillusioned in their working environment and unhappy about the way they are being treated, their anger and frustration become directed towards their managers. The internal conversations become nothing more than moaning and bitching sessions and the biggest casualty, by far, is always the customer who is now just an interference in the ongoing battle between management and staff.

“A short-term profit obsession can sometimes lead to fundamental blunders, particularly when restructuring is overdone and the staff complement becomes so thin that the business can no longer effectively serve its customers.”

It is next to impossible to grow a business without focussing on the people that make the organisation,” he concluded. As Stamps Egbe has said: “How will you grow your business if you do not grow your people... that is an important philosophy.”

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