

Ready to grow: A caring mentor can be a shortcut to success

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Having established himself as a respected photographer and advertising art director, Justice Mukheli has grown into a film director to watch. He recently invited a young photographer to work on set with him while shooting an advertising campaign for Absa.



A good education can get you a long way, but nothing beats the knowledge and insight you can gain from a mentor, says Justice Mukheli.

Justice has benefitted from various mentors during his career to become a successful commercials director with Romance Films.

Now he's experienced enough to become a mentor himself, and when he filmed Absa's latest advertising campaign, he invited photographer Basetsana Maluleka to work on the set with him. Basetsana was shooting the stills that will accompany the advertising campaign, and this was her first assignment in her own right rather than being a photographic assistant.

"Mentorship is quite amazing because it gives you opportunities and guidance beyond what education can give you," Justice says. "It gives you experience of the actual profession you are interested in. The mentor has walked the path you wish to walk, and the insight and experience of their journey becomes your experience as well."

Justice is still coached by his colleague Greg Gray, who has a beautiful way of sharing and mentoring that doesn't feel too structured, Justice says. "His way of teaching is through friendship and allowing me to be myself and by questioning and subtly challenging my thinking and my approach. He teaches in a way that doesn't make me feel stupid but is empowering. He'll say I love how you approached this, have you thought about that?"

A mentor can pass on the experience gained from their own successes or failures, so their proteges don't have to fail themselves to be able to learn, Justice explains. "Mentorship is like a safety net, letting you go out into the world knowing that even if you fail you have someone to fall back on. It really shortens the journey drastically if you've got someone who's already walked the walk because they've already made the mistakes and can walk you through that. Even when I fail, they're there to say hey, I've been through this, it's not the end of the world, you'll get through."

Directing Absa's 'Here for the Ready' campaign gave Justice the ideal opportunity to continue the cycle. "With this campaign I can share my knowledge and experience as a photographer and creative director with someone who is interested in working hard to occupy that space, and that's amazing because my break in my own career was through mentorship."

For Basetsana, working on the Absa advertising campaign with Justice to guide her was a breakthrough experience. "The idea behind the campaign is to show people that if they are ready, there are people who care enough to give them the opportunity to start," she says. That core philosophy was clearly demonstrated through this mentoring element.

Basetsana is enthusiastic about the ReadyToWork programme that forms part of the campaign, because it will help young people make themselves more employable by gaining essential soft skills for the workplace, or entrepreneurial skills to create their own opportunities. Young people with ambition often don't know where to start, who to approach, or how to break down the doors, she says. "Now there's a platform with the resources to help you get in."

For her, working with Absa and Justice was the stepping-stone she needed. "I have always been assisting and I thought shooting commercial stuff was daunting because I don't know where to start or who to ask. An opportunity like this shows that people genuinely want to help you because you are good at your work, so I'm super grateful."

Justice was already someone she looked up to, and she found him the ideal mentor. He gave her time to get her own shots in between the video filming and helped with technical advice.

"I've seen a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff and I know how hectic it can get, and he calms everybody down so you can fully immerse yourself in the work. I could pull him aside at any time to ask him anything," Basetsana says. "With a mentor I think the biggest thing is having someone who cares, who answers their phone and says this is what you need to do. It's having someone to guide you and connect you to people you never thought you'd be connected to."

Working on this project for a respected company also boosts her portfolio and will help her win more work in the future. But knowing that her images must be good enough to represent Absa to a pan-African audience was a huge responsibility. "It's been pressure, but in a good way," she says. "It's knowing you need to step up and prove to these people that you actually deserve to be here."

Having Basetsana on the set and being able to help her was a pleasure, Justice adds. "Bassie is kick-ass, she didn't need her hand holding, all she needed was an opportunity and she knocked it out of the park."

One reason he chose her as his mentee was because he's a great believer in equality and wants more women to succeed in the industry. But the main reason was because he'd seen her excellent photography, and believes she exemplifies the spirit of 'Ready'.

If you ask him whether potential mentors might be reluctant to share their knowledge with someone who could become their future rival, he laughs at the idea. "I've never felt that way because I'm a product of mentorship myself. I've been given an opportunity to occupy a space where I became competition to my mentors at some point, but that competition was healthy for both of us."

"Mentorship keeps the mentor young and, on their toes, so it's beautiful for both parties. I'm nowhere close to keeping my mentor Greg on his toes, but I'd love to get to a place where we can sit and laugh about me giving him a run for his money," concludes Justice.