USB MBA alumnus Lebo Thagane works in two very different career fields – human resources for a corporate company and wine marketing for her family’s business. She tells Cherice Smith what she brings to the table and what she wants to achieve.

As a full-time human capital manager at Adcock Ingram and part-time wine marketer for her family’s business M’hudi Wines, 2010 USB MBA graduate Lebo Thagane is a busy lady and she loves it.

“I love interacting with people. I love people. I also love the fact that I am able to show other people that no matter how big your dream, it is possible to achieve it. They just better be willing to get down and work for it.”

Lebo is currently based in Johannesburg after living in the Stellenbosch winelands where she used to work for M’hudi Wines full-time with her parents and two brothers. M’hudi Wines outside Stellenbosch is South Africa’s first wholly black-owned and black-managed wine tourism farm.

“My parents moved to the farm in 2003. They had been trying to buy a farm since 1994. It was such a huge relief to be able to purchase a piece of land that they did not stop to think about the fact that they had absolutely no knowledge on how to embark on such a task. In 2007 my mother, who is the CEO of M’hudi Wines, began encouraging me to join them on the farm. I did not hesitate. I resigned from my job as human resources manager in Johannesburg. Life on the farm was absolute bliss. I loved waking up to a view of the Simonsberg mountain and seemingly endless vineyards.”

Lebo, who was trained in wine retail by professionals from the British retailer Marks & Spencer, describes working for M’hudi Wines as very comfortable. “Not only because I work for my mommy,” she says jokingly, “but because the environment is very relaxed and informal. We share a common goal and there is seldom a need to doubt anyone’s loyalty and commitment to the business. We know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and are able to step in to support one another. We are brutally honest with each other. There is never a need to walk on eggshells because we realise that whether or not the business relationship succeeds, we will always be family.”

As the creative brain in the business, Lebo usually provides out-of-the-box solutions and ideas.

“For some reason my family thinks that I am creative and this creativity also comes across in the way I perceive the business and its challenges. I am also the family Rottweiler. My family can call on me for any situation that needs a firm approach, even though I am also good at diffusing tension and conflict. They know that I am not afraid of saying what needs to be said openly, honestly and with respect. I am also able to defend and justify my decisions no matter how difficult they may be.”

In the corporate world it is the people that get her going. “At Adcock Ingram my love for people makes my job fulfilling. I find that I am most effective in team building, I have been able to get teams to the point where they have a better understanding of each member, firstly as individuals, then as members of a team. This is where I draw on a lot of what I learnt in the Sustainable Leadership course during my MBA.”

For now her career goal is to work in management consulting, which she says came as a direct result of doing her MBA.

“I love the idea of helping to co-create sustainable business solutions, especially ones centred around leadership development.”

The MBA also taught her self-awareness, she says.

“I am able to be honest with myself. More than anything, the MBA has made me more aware of my own strengths and shortcomings. I have learnt to have authentic conversations with myself and to evaluate myself firmly but also caringly. I have learnt not to crucify myself for things that I wish I could achieve or do better. I have learnt to look for assistance in areas that are not my strengths. I have learnt that asking for help is not a sign of incompetence but a sign of maturity.”

Recently married with two young children, Lebo has to make sure that she maintains a balanced lifestyle.

“Most of the time during the week I focus on my work for Adcock Ingram, and some evenings and on weekends I market the wine. I have to remind myself to ‘check
out of work when I get home. Sometimes it isn’t possible but fortunately, because I enjoy my husband Letshego’s company so much, it is easy. We’ve recently bought a house so when I get home I cannot wait to get started on redecorating.”

Although she’s currently working in the corporate world, Lebo says her future is and will always be M’hudi Wines.

“I intend to go back to work for M’hudi on a full-time basis in the next five or so years. My return to the corporate world is not the end of my journey but a detour for a traveller thirsty for knowledge. I look forward to teaching my children about the wine business and preparing them to take over the baton from my parents, brothers and I. Our dream is to create a legacy for our children and their children. We would like to be a fixed feature in the South African wine industry landscape for many generations to come.”

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Lebo Thagane, human capital manager at Adcock Ingram and part-time wine marketer for M’hudi Wines

Who inspires you? My mother, Malmsey Rangaka. She is an amazingly intelligent and hard-working woman. The best decision that we have made as a family was to appoint her as CEO of M’hudi Wines. She has a quiet strength and is able to pull us together to work towards a common goal. She led us to achieve the Emerging Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2010. She is not only my mentor but also the sanity centre in my brain.

What achievement are you most proud of? I am a trustee of the FunDza Literacy Trust, a non-profit organisation that aims to play a significant role in creating a culture of reading among previously disadvantaged youth, which will hopefully increase the levels of literacy in the country.

What is your favourite pastime? I am a chronic home body. It doesn’t help that I am also married to a hermit. We spend most of our time at home with the kids. I’ve embarked on a quest to learn how to draw. I must say my first attempts were really good. I think there is some talent!

What can’t you live without? A glass of M’hudi Pinotage and chats with my mother.

‘I have learnt to have authentic conversations with myself and to evaluate myself firmly but also caringly.’