

PEOPLE | MBA AND PHD ALUMNUS

Steyn Heckroodt: strategy expert, thought leader, teacher

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The USB MBA and PhD alumnus Dr Steyn Heckroodt had a big year in 2013. He launched his book on strategic insights and he was appointed as senior lecturer extraordinaire at USB. He also lectures at USB's management development company (USB-ED) and abroad – and all this while running a consultancy with his wife. He spoke to **Cherice Smith**.

You have two passions – business strategy and systems thinking. What is this about?

There are two strategy schools. The one is where organisations believe they have to come up with the best strategy, design it and build it. The other school, which I associate with, says strategy is not something you start from scratch; instead, it is a choice from a range of possible strategies. To know what the possible strategies are, I apply a detailed environmental scan and combine this with an internal audit of the organisation to determine its potential. Systems thinking is the thought framework I use to help organisations group the information that has been gathered into components so that I can give them a holistic picture of their world.

Did you ever think your career would go in this direction?

I studied Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU), but in my undergraduate years – at the end of the 1980s – I realised that I could not continue in the church structure. I was uncomfortable with the status of the Dutch Reformed Church within the apartheid government. I completed my undergraduate Theology course, but soon found myself in the corporate world working as a sales agent. More often than not, I would give advice on how to sell instead of actually selling. Soon, I worked my way up from sales agent to advisory consultant, helping others to grow their businesses. My encounter with systems thinking was coincidental. In 2004, I was approached by USB-ED to present a course on systems thinking. I decided to study systems thinking and I read the book *Bio-matrix: a systems approach to organisational and societal change* by well-known futurist and systems expert Elisabeth Dostal four times. I also attended her course on systems thinking and I fell in love with this discipline. My passion for systems thinking is about the ability it gives you to make sense out of information. It opened up a whole new world for me. Elisabeth Dostal is a messiah in my life.

You are co-founder and director of the consultancy Lateral Dimensions. What does your company do?

My wife Anneke and I founded Lateral Dimensions after both of us had obtained our MBAs in 2000. Anneke is managing director of the company that mainly focuses on marketing strategies, which is her field of expertise. I focus on company strategies. Lateral Dimensions started off small, but it has led to the establishment of two other companies. Along with my sister and brother-in-law I am also a founding member of Nyansa Africa in Ghana, where they live. This company focuses on South African companies that wish to expand to Africa and West Africa through Ghana. I am also a founding member and director of Empowered Intelligence in Johannesburg which strategically looks at black economic empowerment.

How was the experience of doing your MBA with your wife?

I didn't want to study again because I worked for myself and things were going well. Then Anneke started with her MBA in 1996. For the whole year I wished that she would quit, but when she enrolled for her second year, I realised that I had lost the fight. So I also enrolled. We did the Modular MBA and graduated at the same time. Initially, we started separately. But we worked closer and closer together, motivating each other. Many people say the MBA stands for **M**arriage-**B**reaking **A**ssociation, but it worked really well for us.

You obtained your MBA from USB in 2000 and your PhD in 2012. What is the value of these degrees?

The MBA helped me to understand the business environment, and I could take my consultation to the next level. It is the best degree to do if you have an interest in the business world. My MBA empowered me. However, my PhD made me realise just how much knowledge there is. It humbled me and I believe it made me a better person. It created so many opportunities for me.

Your book, *Strategic Thinking – GAME OVER*, was published last year. Why this book?

The book is an adaptation of my PhD thesis. Businesses struggle to function in the current economic environment because they cling to old thought frameworks. I wanted to encourage businesses with the idea of thinking differently. The feedback is amazing. I have already had a book launch in Botswana and received invitations from Namibia, Zimbabwe and Dubai to launch my book there. If you had asked me last year how I was doing, I would have said: I am living my dream!

How do you keep up with the latest knowledge?

I read. My reading material for my next four flights is ready ...

How important is it for you to share knowledge?

It's non-negotiable. I travel often, especially on our own continent, and I am always saddened when I see the huge difference between people who had the opportunity to learn and those who did not. I am driven by the desire to share knowledge. I enjoy people, the diversity and the fact that I learn so much through others. At the end of a class I know much more about people, organisations and other parts of the world.

What are your top tips for success?

Be passionate, work hard, keep learning and always be first.

What would you still like to achieve?

I would like to get my professorship status and become more involved with SU. In the long term, it is my dream to lecture at Harvard. I want to do this before I am 55 – I still have nine years' time!

More about Steyn**1. What is your life philosophy?**

I am a religious person. My philosophy is that if you do not want to believe in Jesus, at least try to listen to his philosophies.

2. How do you relax?

I started playing the piano in 2012. My mother, a piano teacher, taught me. I am besotted with it.

3. When are you at your happiest?

In the evening, when I'm cooking for my family.

4. What can't you live without?

My wife, Anneke.

5. What is your favourite country to do business in?

Hong Kong for the unbelievable night life, Accra for the friendly people and Dubai because I admire the quantum leaps that the country has made over the past 30 years.