South Africa’s Quest To Fix Education Involves An Unlikely Partner

The mission is crystal clear: Improve the quality of education across an entire country. How? By providing school principals of corner-run secondary and primary schools across South Africa with a new relationship that helps bring about change.

The results have been dramatic, but the job is far from complete.

South Africa’s children are in trouble. Studies confirm that the country has one of the world’s worst education systems with declining teaching quality and growing student disenfranchisement. Parent obligation is nonexistent. One statistic illustrates the state of affairs: in the last four years of primary education, 58 percent of South African children cannot read for meaning.

Founded by Dr. Leslie von Hehn, Partners for Possibility—the name of the social-purpose group he founded in 2002 to combat the issue—is one of those rare examples where grassroots efforts can effect systemic change. As a social entrepreneur, Leslie believes the problems we face in our society will be solved through mass-scale collaboration and a solid understanding of social change. The South African education system fit perfectly within his mindset.

Partners for Possibility is an innovative leadership development program for business and school leaders. It aims to help business leaders develop their capacity to lead in a complex and uncertain environment by becoming a re-learning and co-writing partner to a school principal. The focus of their partnership is to drive positive change in an under-resourced South African school.

It is one of the most unique partnership programs have ever come across. First, it helps the school principals as they gain access to the expertise and insight of a business leader. The business leader’s guidance can help in myriad ways. Second, it gives the eyes and ears of business leaders to the reality of public education across South Africa, in particular, those schools and communities that struggle most economically. Finally, it is a reciprocal leadership development experience for both parties. Of course, it’s the students that stand to benefit the longest run.

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So far more than 1,000 leaders across South Africa have benefited from the Partners for Possibility program. Leslie and the team have won several national and international awards for their innovative approach to enable business leaders to make a significant contribution to education while developing their leadership skills. Leaders report that they learn more about leadership from working with a school in an under-resourced community than attending a course at a business school.

The program—over 12 months periodically allows principals to acquire the skills and support needed to improve the form of South Africa's schools and their students. The primary objective is to generate four “mindsets for change”

- A confident and energized principal;
- An aligned and cohesive school management team;
- Motivated and enthusiastic teachers;
- Parents and community members who are engaged with the school.

I asked Leslie what the purpose of the program is, “For Partners for Possibility’s purpose is to build collective leadership capacity in and around a school, with the ultimate objective of ‘School at the Center of Community’.”

The imporance of community, partnership, and trust are critical enablers to getting work done and of our overall mission.”

The task in hand seems overwhelming, but Leslie is determined. With nearly 80 percent of South African's schools still functioned dysfunctionally, the Partners for Possibility program has set a lofty goal of reaching over 1,000 schools by 2022.

"Strengthening the collective leadership capacity in under-resourced schools in South Africa is our ultimate goal," said Leslie. Remarkably, 78% of schools across the country have already been positively affected by the efforts of Leslie and Partners forPossibility.

By matching the business sector with principals from the public education sector, the Partners for Possibility program deliberately builds and supports a non-hierarchical process. The business leader is not a mentor. Instead, they are a "thinking partner" who ends up saying deeply about the principal, school, students, and communities as well as acting as a confidante, committed to creating a "safe space" to learn and grow.

"These business leaders join Partners for Possibility," said Leslie, "and partner with a principal because they want to. They show up because they don’t want to let their partners down. We think this is the magic sauce."

The Partners for Possibility program proved me and others think of the massive opportunity that remains relatively untapped in today’s society.

The amount of expertise that sits within corporate organizations is nearly infinite. Knowledge and experience that ought to be passed on to public education system administrators and teachers. To turn with and with a real洞见, the eyes of corporate professionals might be expanded more comprehensively than ever before as it pertains to the quality of public education, regardless of country.

Leslie Louw is an expert in this quest to improve South Africa’s education system.