

Credibility and Thought Leadership

Mpumelelo Mdhlahla

Introduction to Thought Leadership

*A fool has to say something.
A wise person has something to say.
- African proverb*

One of the greatest truths in life is that the biggest impact you can have is not in the volume of your contribution but in the QUALITY of the contribution that you make. Whether you are giving input at a tense family meeting, coming up with a game plan for your local football team, or leading an executive team at a multi-national global company, your contribution must be of value. You must be trusted and recognised, so that your opinion could have an impact on the decision to be made. However, most of all, you must be credible. Credibility is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “the quality of being trusted or believed in.” This is the basis of ‘thought leadership.’

The term ‘thought leader’ is a manufactured term, therefore the definitions are not as exact, but there is one commonality: It is a person or company from whom employees, stakeholders, customers, the media, and even competitors seek to obtain knowledge and insight. The thought leader is the ‘go-to’ person, the individual that must be consulted before making a big decision, the final authority that is the final ‘sounding board’ before executing the project.

Thought leadership is providing valuable insight into an industry or sector that will drive constructive direction to your stakeholders. Thought leadership is not making populist statements or simply speaking at rallies or events. It is about adding value and providing expert insight that will move the industry or sector in a positive direction.

My Personal Career Journey

Before I go into the specifics of being a thought leader, let me take you on my personal career journey, so that you have context and understand the path that I have taken to reach this point.

Originally, my passion was marketing. I was always intrigued by the creation and sale of products and services on a mass scale, that can meet the wants and needs of the public. I studied a tertiary commerce qualification majoring in Marketing. Thereafter I worked in several multi-disciplinary agencies before working at Coca-Cola for several years as a marketing manager.

Thereafter I saw a gap in the market to start my own communications agency which I have called my 'best failure.' During this time, my interest was spiked by an article that I read on the then Obama administration. The article relayed that this administration was setting aside \$2.5 billion for investment in renewable energy in Africa over the next 20 years.

The 'light bulb' went off.

I realised through extensive reading that the global shift was moving towards diversification from fossil fuels. My focus was torn between trying to make my agency work and this newly ignited passion of learning about the energy transition. I absorbed information, ravenously seeking opportunities to converse and speak to anyone involved in the sector.

At this time, due to the electricity supply challenges in South Africa, Eskom and the Department of Energy and Mineral Resources embarked on a large-scale procurement programme to buy energy from independent power producers of energy. This programme was handled holistically by the Independent Power Producer Office. In 2014, an opportunity to tender for advisory service at the Independent Power Producers Office emerged and believing it was a 'long shot,' my partner and I tendered. We were successfully appointed lead advisers and so my journey began. I was thrown in the deep end. The day that we got the call from the Department of Energy and Mineral Resources, I decided to wind up my marketing agency.

So there I was, an advisor with limited work experience in a highly specialised sector tasked with giving direction to 'technocrats' with decades of experience and academic expertise in a pivotal sector for South Africa. After completing my assignment at this office, I was head hunted and joined the renewable energy trading company POWERX. This company buys and sells power from the independent power producers, so my involvement in the sector remained consistent, just dealing with a slightly different set of stakeholders.

Since then, I have grown to become a public speaker, lecturer, and media commentator on the energy sector, not just in South Africa, but internationally as well. I previously lectured at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) and I also advised the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). Furthermore, I served as a panellist at forums such as POWER Africa and African Utilities Week.

Now I have taken up a new challenge, having been tapped by Volkswagen South Africa to create and head up their Energy Programmes division for Sub-Saharan Africa. My task is to decarbonise the entire product value chain for the manufacturing of vehicles for several countries (including South Africa).

So how does a former marketer for Coca-Cola turn their career 180 degrees to gain prominence and become a thought leader in a sector that they were not academically trained for? It was not because I was the smartest or the most connected, I was simply willing to take the risk of rejection to achieve my goal.

For example, when I was trying to form a partnership with GIBS, I had to send several e-mails and chase up several people for months before they invited me to speak. Before my first TV/radio interview, I sent over 62 e-mails and made over 43 phone calls to different national and regional radio stations. I was rejected countless times, even told that I was wasting my time, before I secured my first interview. It is all part of the process. You must become comfortable with rejection and know that you will fail far more than you succeed.

It is not a path for the faint-hearted, but well worth the journey. This is what I will expand on in the remaining part of this chapter: What are the key focus areas on your path to thought leadership?

The Best Time is Now

The biggest failure we have as humans is procrastination. It is not laziness or a lack of intelligence, it is the inability to act immediately and accept that you may fail in the process. There is never going to be the ‘right time’ – the stars will not ‘align.’ You just have to make an imperfect decision and know that you will learn on the way. The people who succeed in any business/profession/sport are not the smartest, fittest, or the ones with the best networks, it is the people who show up every day. Whether they feel like it or not, those who become thought leaders in their field have an obsessive need to constantly learn and enrich themselves in terms of knowledge in their industry. They do not wait for the ‘right time’ to register for a seminar, they do it anyway. They do not wait

for the ‘right time’ to take that speaking engagement, they do it anyway. What will separate you from others in your field is your urgency to act and deliver on what is asked of you. Do not obsess over perfection of your output, focus on the volume and frequency.

When I decided that I would become a thought leader, I did not even have an academic qualification for it. I was not a scientist or engineer. I just knew what the goal was, and I started on the path. I acted immediately with full knowledge that I could fail. I knew I was not as smart or as educated as my peers were in this field, but I acted quicker and took bigger risks.

Did I fail and do I still fail? Of course, yes, but failure brings the equivalent seed of success. The most successful people have failed more than they have succeeded. However, because they were willing to fail, their success ended up overshadowing their failures. Warren Buffet only became a billionaire when he was already 60 years old. Jack Ma of Alibaba could not even get a job at KFC. When Howard Schultz, founder of Starbucks originally tabled the idea, 217 out of 247 potential investors declined his proposal. JK Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series of books, was in a one-bedroom apartment, living off welfare when she wrote the books. She only became wealthy when the series of books was adapted into a movie franchise.

Read and Keep on Reading

The respected and revered author, Malcolm Gladwell popularised the theory of 10,000 hours to become successful. The basis for his theory is that it takes 10,000 hours of intense focus on a particular skill to become successful. If you look at a typical calendar year, there are in total 8,760 hours, based on a 24-hour cycle. So, if you focus on training and dedicate yourself 10 hours a day, it would take you four years to reach the 10,000 hours mark, based on working every single day of the year. The basic premise is that it takes time and dedication to become successful. It is therefore important to immerse yourself in a sector in order to become a thought leader. It is important to literally become a “sponge” and absorb as much information as possible.

We are now in the information age where you can source information literally anywhere from your phone or laptop. Therefore, consume as much information as possible. Become obsessed with learning everything that there is to know about your industry. You must become irrational in your thirst for knowledge.

On my path to becoming a thought leader in my industry, I read excessively. I read in the morning before exercising, I read between meetings at work, I read whilst eating my lunch, I read at home at night, and I read on weekends. It never stops and you will not always feel like it, but it must be done.

It's Smart to be Dumb

Judge a person by their questions rather than their answers.

- Voltaire

In your goal to become a respected thought leader, be willing to humble yourself in order to gain knowledge. Pride will not help you. In fact, it will leave you ignorant and disadvantaged. Do not be worried about other people's opinions of you, it does not matter. In fact, my experience is that they will respect you more for having the courage to ask the mundane questions in order to learn.

In my early days of being involved in the energy sector, I used my professional and personal networks to seek out mentors in the sector who would be willing to spend time with me. I would meet them with specific questions, and they would provide me with frank feedback. It may cost you a cup of coffee or lunch, but the knowledge you gain will be priceless.

It is a practice that I still employ today and continue to implement throughout my career. I believe it is imperative to always be humble and willing to learn.

Stay Uncomfortable

Becoming a leader in any sector or profession is not a comfortable process. You must continue to grow and develop your knowledge of the industry and challenge yourself to experience discomfort in order to learn. Steve Harvey, the famous comedian has often said, "You will fail in your comfort zone." What he means is that you will deprive yourself of the ability to test your limits and exceed it if you stay where it is comfortable. Similarly, in thought leadership you must be willing to put yourself in situations where your knowledge and expertise will be tested.

For example, in the past few years, I made a deliberate point to actively contact media houses (e.g., radio and TV) and offer my services to provide expert opinion in the field of energy. I submitted opinion articles to several newspapers, proactively asking them to publish my work. This was extremely humbling. Some media houses ignored me, others hung up on me when I

called, others were just plain rude and said that they don't know me. Whilst the rejection was painful, it is part of the process. You must develop a 'thick skin' and continue to push on.

After countless attempts and submissions, the 'tide' started to turn. Soon the media houses contacted me and asked to interview me, then the newspapers started to publish my work, and then I was invited to speak at business seminars and events. Now, I experience even more difficult levels of discomfort, but that's what I thrive for. I know that on the other side of discomfort, I will be better equipped to achieve the goals that I have set for myself.

Crab in a Bucket

There is a widely known human behavioural concept called 'crab in a bucket' syndrome. This is founded on the behavioural fact that when there are many crabs in a bucket or closed area, when one tries to climb out, the others will hold it back. Similarly, within a community or organisation of people, there will always be people who aim to develop themselves to move up and add greater value. The other members of that community will do everything possible to prevent these driven individuals from progressing and becoming successful. This is the parallel behaviour likened to the crabs in a bucket.

On your path to becoming a thought leader or person of significance in your industry, you will be met with resistance from those who question your intentions/abilities with questions like, 'Why don't we see you anymore?' 'Why are you reading so much?' 'You are so boring these days!' and 'Why do you work so hard?' These will be comments that you will be sure to get from your family, friends, and colleagues. In fact, if your behaviour is not noticed by those closest to you, then the changes you are making are not that significant.

Time is the most limited resource we have, and the more time you spend expanding your knowledge, the less time you will have for other activities, such as socialising, hobbies, relaxing, and partying. These are inevitable sacrifices that you will have to make. There are no shortcuts, and I guarantee that you will not make everyone happy. The best solution to mitigate the pain of such a transition is frankness and honesty with your family and friends. Whether they are supportive or not, be candid and explain that as you are embarking on this path of self-development, you will not be able to spend time with them anymore.

In my own life, people have questioned my complete change in career:

"But you are a marketer! What do you know about energy?"
"Who does he think he is, ridiculous!"

“He won’t last.”

“Selling windmills and solar panels, what kind of work is that?”

“Stupid, leaving Coca-Cola for this?”

These are actually words that I have heard from those close to me, as well as from total strangers. Do these words hurt? Of course they do. However, I didn’t change my plans because of it. These words fuel my resolve and spur me on. Every successful individual or company was ridiculed initially. They were laughed at, criticised, and derided for their convictions. Nonetheless, they proceeded and now they are admired by the same people who used to laugh at them.

So, do not be afraid to be the crab that tries to climb out. You cannot become a thought leader in your field while stuck in the ‘bucket.’

Criticism is your Friend

This theme is quite like the previous theme, but it focuses specifically on dealing with criticism, whether baseless or indeed founded on constructive intentions. Criticism is part of becoming a leader in any organisation or industry. The moment that you put your ‘hand up’ and voice an opinion, not everyone will agree with you.

Leaders will be criticised more than they are celebrated. That is the cost of leadership. When developing and building yourself into a thought leader, you will be criticised by your peers in the industry, you will be criticised by your own family and friends. The last people that you expect to criticise you will do so, often behind your back, and it will be painful. However, that pain builds your resilience. It is a necessarily part of the growth process.

*There is only one way to avoid criticism,
do nothing, say nothing and be nothing.*

- Aristotle

Therefore, if you are *not* being criticised in one form or the other, you need to question what value you are adding to the space in which you are operating. What impact are you making? Becoming a thought leader is a path of constantly being second-guessed, your opinion derided, and your credentials questioned. That is the burden of criticism, and you should wear it with pride.

Birds of a Feather

In order to become a thought leader, you also need to change your environment. Jim Rohn once said, “We are the average of the five people we spend the most time with.” This is premised on the fact that we are a product of our environment, and those people whom we chose to spend time with, will in fact shape our opinions, thinking, and inevitably the actions that we take.

Steve Harvey refers to this concept in his uniquely comical way, when he said, “If you have nine friends and they are all broke, you will be the tenth one. If you have five friends who are all drunkards, you will be the next alcoholic.”

Therefore, to become a thought leader, you must aim to surround yourself with ‘like-minded’ people from the same sector. Go to industry events, join associations and seminars. Immerse yourself in environments where you can learn and absorb knowledge. It will be uncomfortable and awkward talking to people, but it is the only way to expand your network and build your personal profile and confidence. However, it is important to be very definitive about the direction which you take. Do not become ‘wallpaper.’ When you attend a seminar or speak at an event, you must always ask yourself three important questions:

- ◆ Why am I participating at this event?
- ◆ What will I learn from participating at this event?
- ◆ What value will I add to this event?

If you cannot answer these questions positively, then do not attend under any circumstances. Only attend if you can answer these questions with confidence. In this way, not only do you develop yourself, but you will also become a credible and reliable thought leader.

Stand on the Shoulders of Giants

The saying, “Two heads are better than one,” could not be truer. On the path to becoming a thought leader in your field, you will need to lean on mentors who have far more experience than you do. This is where mentorship becomes so vital. The textbook definition of ‘mentorship’ is the guidance which is provided by an experienced person in a company or educational institution. I would expand this definition to include any person who has extensive experience in your chosen field.

Entrepreneurs who have started companies will have far more insight than those who have simply worked within existing companies. You will need a mentor(s) to guide you and provide you with candidness, as well as the necessary

feedback that will help you to develop and grow. Typically, you do not want to engage a mentor who is on the same career level as you. You want to choose a mentor who is way ahead of you, someone that epitomises exactly where you see yourself in the next 10 or 20 years.

Take the time to think of leaders in your sector whom you would like to interact with and make a concerted effort to track them down. Find out which associations they belong to, where they attend events, maybe even identify what their hobbies are. Once you know where they are, be deliberate in finding a way to physically meet them. If it means spending money to gain access, then do it.

Do not be afraid to use your existing family and friends to meet them. They will not reprimand you for leveraging your network, in fact, they will respect you more for it. I will give you an example. In my own case, I identified a mentor that I wanted to guide me and help me on my journey. I spoke to a relative of mine who ensured that I would be invited to an event where he would be present. It took me six months to set-up, but I finally met him. Now I am glad to say that he has been my mentor for several years, and I am glad I made the effort. At this point, you must put all pride aside.

Don't care about what people think of you? Do not worry about being rejected.

Remember the worst thing that anyone can say is NO. Once you accept that fact, you will feel more confident and less afraid to approach total strangers.

Ideally you would want to have at least three to four mentors in your network. These are individuals whom you will aim to spend at least 30 minutes with, every two months, exchanging ideas and seeking guidance. These individuals are very busy, so you need to ensure that you come to them prepared with questions. Draft questions that you believe will enhance knowledge in your field and enable you to become a thought leader. I advise no more than four questions per session. In this way, you will get a more comprehensive response per question and thereby greater context and input.

Each One Teach One

*Just remember you can't climb the ladder of success
with your hands in your pockets.
- Arnold Schwarzenegger*

On your path to becoming a thought leader, always make sure that you take the time to help others on their journey. Once you begin to gain a certain level of prominence, those who are younger or more inexperienced than you, will come to you for advice. Take it as a compliment and make time to assist them. The fact that somebody comes to you for advice, means that they aspire to reach and exceed your level of success regardless of where you see yourself.

Whether it is a meeting by chance at an event, or you become a mentor for someone whom you know well, do not underestimate the power of helping others. However, you must set-up some “ground rules” To ensure that you do not exhaust too much of your time mentoring others, at the expense of meeting your own goals. Look at the following points of good advice:

- ◆ Be precious with your time. Do not tolerate tardiness. If someone asks to meet you and they make you wait 30 minutes, never engage with them again. Time is more precious than money. It cannot be replaced, therefore demand punctuality.
- ◆ Always request questions in advance. The person/s you meet with must send you their questions in advance of your engagement. This will allow you time to review and apply your mind prior to the meeting. In this way, you can provide constructive input in the shortest possible time.
- ◆ Try to work with groups and not individuals. To maximise the number of people you are assisting, try to coordinate group meetings. This will not only enable you to mentor multiple people in one session, but they will also learn from each other and find opportunities to help one another. However, try to keep the groups small – less than six. In this way, each person should have ample opportunity to ask for advice and receive counsel.
- ◆ Don't try to be all things to everyone. You are being consulted because you are considered an expert, but you can't possibly know everything. Where you are queried on an area where you can't assist, be honest and acknowledge it. However, try to point the person in the right direction. Whether you refer them to someone else or send them a link to a website, any assistance will be valuable.
- ◆ Don't mix business with pleasure. Regardless of your status, whether married or single, do not become romantically involved with those your mentor. It will create a conflict of interest that you will not be able to manage. If you sense something like this, you are conflicted.

Enjoy the Ride

Tony Robbins, the world-famous author and motivational speaker has always stressed that it is not about reaching the destination, but who you become in the process. The human being is the ultimate adaptable creature, and you will not know your limits until you are tested. However, in being tested, you adapt and grow to perform at the level that you need to become a thought leader.

Becoming a thought leader in your industry, is a journey with no end, as you will discover. There will always be more developments in your industry. In fact, in the age we are living in now, it will only accelerate. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us, meaning that regardless of the sector you are involved in, trends will change at an exponential rate. That is why, as a thought leader and expert you should always stay abreast of changes by constantly consuming information.

Make a point of it to constantly read daily online papers and business publications and find leaders in your industry to engage with on a regular basis. In fact, you will find that the more you interact with your peers in the industry, the more you will find yourself becoming involved with converging industries.

Google, for example had one aim, and that was to organise the world's information. In the process of achieving that goal, they have diversified into driverless cars, artificial intelligence, and numerous other areas. However, their anchor strategy remains: They remain focused on organising information.

The people whom you meet in the process will influence your life. Some of the impacts will be positive, while others will be negative, but either way you will learn from the process.



MPUMELELO MDHLADHLA is a prominent executive in the energy sector.

He was Senior Adviser to the Independent Power Producer Office for several years supporting the implementation of over 80 energy projects totaling more than \$15billion in investment

In addition he was requested by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) to adjudicate the awarding of over \$100M in funding for small-scale energy projects.

As an expert in his field GIBS (Gordon Institute of Business) have invited him to guest lecture at the school as well as speak at international conferences.

Furthermore he is often requested to provide media commentary on the energy sector. As such he has regularly appeared on radio, TV and print publications providing insight as to the direction of the sector.

Previously he lead commercial operations at POWERX, the only renewable energy trader in South Africa. In this role he grew the business exponentially increasing revenue by 30% annualized over his tenure and diversifying the customer base to include large industrial and commercial companies

Now he has been appointed Head – Energy Programmes at Volkswagen Southern Africa responsible for leading the energy transition at the automotive manufacturer.

In this role he is responsible for South Africa as well as several markets across East & West Africa

In support of the drive to create meaningful black participation in the energy sector he is also a lead member of the Black Energy Professionals Association (BEPA).

As part of Mike Teke’s mentorship program he is excited to support this book project.