

# Effective leaders don't take all the credit



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**L**YNNE DU TOIT started out as a teacher and practised as an archaeologist but moved on to becoming global director of Disney Publishing Worldwide in Paris.

Today she is the CEO of Juta and has led the company through some trying times. She is the type of person who takes opportunities as they arise, rather than follow a career game plan with exactness.

After adventures as an archaeologist and teacher abroad she arrived back in South Africa in 1995 hoping to find a teaching job. At the time, however, teachers were being retrenched throughout the Western Cape.

Despite this and the fact that she had no car, she walked from school to school dropping off her CV to no avail. Fortunately a marketing manager position became available at Oxford University Press and she was appointed.

While working there Disney approached her to drive their publishing business locally. Later, she moved back to Oxford University Press in South Africa as a director until she was approached by Disney Publishing to relocate to London and moved up the ranks to the position of global director based in Paris.

When her youngest daughter was born the excessive travelling became more taxing on family life. This, and other factors, resulted in a decision to return again to South Africa. With the support of her husband, the family returned and Du Toit ended up as CEO of Juta.

When she took over the leadership of Juta the organisation was not in a happy "place" and experiencing a lot of pain. It was closing bookshops; the education division, which had been making a loss, had just been sold; retrenchments had largely just been completed; the company was in survival mode.

Some warned her against taking up the role – not to accept the leadership role for a "sinking ship", as someone commented to her.

Four years later Juta has made huge strides and has just had its most profitable year yet.



**MAKING STRIDES:** Lynne du Toit's leadership has turned an ailing publishing business around.

The law division has had the freedom to grow from strength to strength; bookshops are profitable; there is an amalgamated academic and professional development division; a training and professional development programme; and the company has launched electronic learning courses.

It is in a new head office that is much more aligned to the company's brand and business requirements; it has just reached agreement to partner with Scholastic, the world's largest publisher of children's books; and Du Toit has a fantastic team that she is exceptionally proud of, and a company with a strong performance culture.

What jumped out at me as Du Toit described their turnaround

journey, in no particular order are: she didn't want to take all the credit, as the previous CEO and the board also made some difficult calls that paid off; she took time to understand and feel how the business was operating before making dramatic changes; after understanding, she and her team plotted the vision, values, and strategic architecture; but even during the understanding phase they built the efficiencies to improve profitability.

It was about stabilising the business and recognising small wins along the way; difficult decisions had to be made, like writing off substantial stock, exiting certain businesses and making retrenchments at senior management level.

She made mistakes but recog-

nised and rectified them; the company reinstated an annual climate survey in order to understand the attitude and needs of the staff, who are, of course, fundamental to delivering on strategy.

As movement occurred, Du Toit and her team could do more daring things such as moving to a more appropriate building, even though initially most stakeholders did not appreciate the business imperative for this.

They had been in their old building in an industrial location for 30 years and owned it. But she felt it wasn't conducive to future business needs, interaction with the market or a productive space for knowledge workers. However, being a consultative leader she parked the idea for a short while.

Not long after she saw a building up for sale that looked the part and took her executive team for a guided tour. Excitement grew and even though they did not end up in this particular building, their attitude started changing.

They found another place, sought the buy-in of the board and then went through a lengthy process of consulting with staff to integrate their feedback into the planning. They moved and never looked back.

Another daring act was to complete her executive MBA as CEO. She did it at the UCT Graduate School of Business, achieved a distinction and was awarded the honour of class medallist. Did she really need to do her MBA?

Looking back, Du Toit believes that, although she benefitted enormously – way more than anticipated – she probably embarked on the MBA for all the wrong reasons.

At the time she was interviewed for the role of CEO she knew there had been a question mark around her lack of a formal business qualification, specifically her financial acumen for the position. Du Toit decided to eradicate this concern once and for all and also realised that she may have certain gaps that could be filled with a MBA programme.

My impressions are that it was not only the quality of the programme from which Du Toit benefited but the level of her commitment and her attitude towards the journey.

She was able to apply much of the systems thinking methodologies practically in the workplace, especially because she was the CEO of the business. Not many

MBA students have such an opportunity.

When she reflects on her career as a leader so far she says the following about leadership:

- It is not as lonely as many claim. She was able to tap into mentors, her own team and build strong relationships with the board.

- Acknowledge that you are going to make mistakes and that you sometimes need to do so to gain better understanding.

- Be brave enough to admit you were wrong and change mistakes rather than trying to make them work, even if it hurts perceptions of you. Have the courage to deal with it.

- She believes in "patching". Vision is not carved in stone. Though it is a beacon, you should be able to adapt on the way there, sometimes quickly

- As far as development is concerned, coaching has worked well, combined with always working on trying to understand how the team can work together better. Do what is necessary to get them to know, understand and support one another

## LEADSA PRINCIPLES FROM THIS ARTICLE

- Give credit where credit is due
- Take time to understand
- After understanding, plot the vision, mission, values and strategy
- But don't stand still during the understanding phase. Continue building efficiencies
- Some challenges need stabilising
- Recognise small wins along the way
- Make the difficult decisions
- Tap into the thoughts and feelings of your people
- As movement occurs, start taking more bold steps
- Develop yourself and your team

■ To develop leaders who will have the capacity to apply these principles, get in touch with TowerStone Leadership Centre on 021 975 0311 or visit [www.towerstone.co.za](http://www.towerstone.co.za) for more.