

BACKGROUND

When we started in 1987, we offered people in Cape Town townships 6 weeks of training, comprising vocational and business-skills components. Because we had a lot of support from overseas donors in those days, we were able to train several hundred people under the "Triple Trust" banner in a relatively short time.

We were horrified to find that only 23% of the businesses were still operating after 9 months. While the donor agencies seemed to believe that this was good, saying that our results were at least as good and often better than other projects that they funded, we were not satisfied, so we investigated further.

It soon became apparent that almost none of the people actually used the business skills that we were teaching them (importantly, the teaching was conducted by highly-qualified and gifted members of the same community as the learners).

Our immediate assumption was that we were getting this wrong, so we consulted with many "experts" from the ILO and various universities, which led to further frustration, because their offerings simply did not "fit" our target audience. We then adopted a very naive approach, where we visited several hundred of our learners, to try to understand the difference between the successes and the failures. An (in retrospect) obvious pattern began to emerge, revealing that there were 3 main factors that separated the successes from the failures, namely:

1. The successful people had found a unique "gap" in the market, while the others tended to copy each other.
2. The successful people somehow got their costing and pricing more-or-less right, and
3. The successful people had learned to manage their cash-flow properly, separating business and personal money in the process.

When we had sufficient data, we devised a series of questions based on that data and handed these questions to several groups of people who were undergoing vocational training. The motive in this, was to get feedback that would test our assumptions based on the data.

To our surprise, each of the groups demonstrated over a period of time, that they were actually applying the principles built into the questions (the 3 differences above) in their businesses.

The content of the questions was very similar to the content of our original training, but the outcomes were remarkably different!

This led to a decision to design a course that would be:

1. Learner-driven,
2. Outcomes-based and
3. Simple enough for someone with a grade 6 level of literacy to access.

That process took us nearly 6 years, mainly because of the need to achieve the required simplicity of language. We persevered because we were seeking what Johnny Clegg some years later called "the spirit of the great heart." Our ongoing passion has been to build bridges in order to empower marginalised people who haven't had the breaks that money and connections and education can buy.

We continue to upgrade and improve both the content and the process at regular intervals. We have, to date, done this without government support, as we have desired to be part of the solution to ongoing inequity and economic inequality in this country. We are not a charitable enterprise, in fact we have operated as a "for-profit" company since the year 2000, without making a profit. We are now in need of your support! Since that date we have chosen to focus on training community-based Trainer-Mentors who are either self-employed or employed by NGOs, CBOs, FBOs, or training companies. For a summary of the content of the Micro-MBA course, see <https://micro-mba.com/the-micro-mba-course>.

TRAINING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

In 1991, we were invited by the newly-formed Mineworkers Development Agency to train a team of 14 retrenched miners to become facilitators of the course, known then as "One-Up Business Training (aka "Township MBA"). On the first day of the course, I realised that we had a major problem – there were 14 victims on that course! The process that started that night in my hotel room continues until this day. If the trainer is the natural mentor of the fledgling businesses, then s/he must be empowered help people with a mindset of poverty and victimhood to move to a position of taking responsibility for their own economic destinies. We are not attempting to offer short-term palliatives, but rather long-term possibilities to people who are not necessarily natural entrepreneurs, but who need to earn money in order to feed their children. We always share with our trainers the basic principle, "If it doesn't work in your life, don't try to export it to others!" Victims cannot help other victims any more than crabs can crawl out of a bucket filled with other crabs! Therefore, we have learned to place a strong emphasis in our trainers' courses on Emotional Intelligence and the process involved in moving from a state of victimhood to a state of emotional and economic freedom. In this regard, we seriously miss the support of "Mama" Albertina Sisulu, who would often visit these courses to encourage the new Trainer-Mentors. (She was our beloved patron from 1993 until she passed away in 2011).

Since 1991 we have empowered more than 6000 trainers in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. They in turn, have offered the Micro-MBA to nearly 200000 emerging entrepreneurs.

OUTCOMES

Although the course is unashamedly aimed at grassroots people, we have received a lot of feedback suggesting that many people who have grown their businesses to a significant level as "natural entrepreneurs" have found the Micro-MBA to be an accessible entry-level course, enabling them to manage their own cash-flow, do their costings and stock-control more effectively and understand their business plans (because Micro-MBA enables them to write these themselves)..

In 1997 USAID withdrew from supporting business training programmes in Africa after sponsoring the training of many thousands of emerging entrepreneurs in South Africa and the neighbouring states. Before doing so, they sponsored the making of a two-part video (which is still worth watching today), called "Find the Gap" and "Take the Gap," respectively. Both are

available on YouTube by searching for Micro-MBA. They also appointed a team of auditors from Ernst and Young to assess the impact of the programme on a number of emerging entrepreneurs that had been trained in Orange Farm and Beckersdal between 1993 and 1996. The auditors reported that 15% of the learners could not be located (no surprise, considering the social upheaval and violence that was prevalent during that period). It was gratifying to hear that 81% of the learners were still found to be economically active. 67% were still running their own small businesses and 14% had found employment (which they did not consider to be a failure of the course).

The Mineworkers Development Agency trained many thousands of retrenched miners and family members throughout Southern Africa. At the end of 1999, they conducted a retrospective study of these people, who had also been offered vocational training by Rutec, where necessary. They reported that 65% of the beneficiaries were still running their own businesses.

Between 2003 and 2007, the Finland - South Africa Association, in collaboration with the Finnish Department of Foreign Affairs, sponsored the training of about 1 800 unemployed people, by means of Micro-MBA. This training was carried out by nine church groups across the country. A follow-up evaluation was published under the title, "Hit the Ground Running." This revealed that 65% of beneficiaries of the intervention were still in business and many were flourishing. A PDF copy of this publication may be downloaded from our website at <https://micro-mba.com/our-approach>.

These three objective studies have confirmed our own in-house evaluations. We have chosen during the past decade to focus on training Development Practitioners who then train the emerging entrepreneurs. This model is efficient in terms of multiplying our impact, but is not conducive to conducting impact assessments, which are left to the discretion of the implementors.