

Leading Edge

Effectiveness Company

by Andrew Ngozo

A professional headshot of Dr. Suzanne Ravenall, a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white collared shirt and a dark blazer, smiling at the camera. The background is a plain, light color.

Execution with Excellence

Dr Suzanne Ravenall, Chief Executive Officer, the Effectiveness Company, believes that living one's life in honesty and with integrity is the certain way to thrive in business. She shares her ingredients to success, and explains why execution is important for business success. Operating in a dynamic and unique environment of business transformation outsourcing, Ravenall says you either innovate or you will never realise real profits.

*Dr Suzanne Ravenall, Chief Executive Officer,
Effectiveness Company*

The Effectiveness Company has been named among the Best Employers for five consecutive years. What do you attribute this recognition/success to?

We are not a massive global organisation with thousands of employees that provide, or are even able to match, all the benefits. However, we are an organisation that believes that pushing the boundaries to the edge and providing ongoing consistency put our people in a position where they understand how they can improve on a day-to-day basis. So, they say the breakfast of champions is feedback. Not something we are all very good at receiving. We believe that people can do anything they want to do if they put their heart and soul into what they do and continue to observe their behaviour and adjust it for the better to achieve a greater outcome every day. Our ability to provide employees with feedback that allows them to transform themselves daily should they choose, surrounded by a challenging environment that observes the elements of what makes a successful business, has earned this recognition. When a defining moment comes along, you can do one of two things, define the moment or let the moment define you.

How does the way you treat your employees benefit the customer?

Do not follow where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

Our key competency is transformation through execution and in order for you to execute well, you have to be attentive to detail. It is about the small things you do on a day-to-day basis that give the customer satisfaction. We can achieve this by continuously reflecting back to ourselves in order to improve on how to do things differently. There is not a day in the business that we don't reflect on how to do things differently, reinvent and improve. Ultimately our customers are looking for transformation solutions that will make things better, faster, more efficient than they were before.

Do you think a woman leads differently from a man, thereby extracting the most out of each individual member of staff?

People often say women are from Mars and men are from Venus! Whilst we are different, I believe that both men and women, over a period of time, must develop a certain set of leadership behaviours and a lot of courage in order to be good or great at what they do. It is not about your gender or your colour, but it is the wisdom and the capabilities you bring to operate successfully. Winston Churchill once said the kite rises higher against the wind. People come in all

different colours and have different capabilities. We should therefore focus on those areas in which leaders should excel and hone those skills and in so doing, set an example for others to follow. Often leadership is about the tough decisions, the right path is rarely the easy one. If we do that, then we may have better businesses all over the world. Be daring, be first, be different, be just.

What is your perspective on what gives you the competitive advantage over other players?

We are a business transformation outsourcing (BTO) organisation and we operate in an industry that is worth about US\$450 billion worldwide and of that, if we work on the standard numbers, South Africa gets about 11%. It helps us understand the potential size of the market for BTO. BTO as an industry is right at the bottom of the bell curve, poised for an explosion, demonstrating substantial

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opportunity. The industry has gone through a number of changes over the years and worldwide, BTO is an area that has now become exciting, tangible and a very real need for the South African market to assist in speedy but sustainable transformation.

In Africa there are not many BTO companies, however there are many outsourcing companies. Our core differentiation is in the depth of execution capability and as a result the transformation that is achieved and the areas that we outsource. I like to say we get stuff done, at speed, professionally, with high impact that is sustainable.

Do you face operational challenges in Africa as companies in other sectors do?

We have already gone into the African space and the challenge we have faced thus far is financial. As we travel around Africa, we find that the customers really need you to have a base in the countries in which we intend to operate and, as a medium-sized company, it is quite a challenge. I think every country in Africa has its own conditions and requirements in terms of doing business, as in other parts

of the world. So the key is really understanding what is the right way of doing business in a certain country and how can we adapt to the environment instead of fighting against it. What we have found in our operations, wherever we go, is that the challenges are very much the same. Many of the same aspects trouble CEOs all over the world. The key is the solutions that can be implemented to turn around the challenges presented.

What is your leadership style and what makes it work for you?

I think it all goes back to the fact that there are traits or behaviours as leaders that we should all look to develop. I am an entrepreneur through and through and all entrepreneurs think similarly. What is important to me, is upholding the values that I entrench in my life in our business. Our culture is very important to us and we try to embody this every day. One of our values is honesty and this is something that not all people always like to hear. I am not talking about perception or feeling. We all like to think we are honest with ourselves and the people around us. Watching a Ted Talks recently I was interested to hear that we are generally lied to up to 200 times a day, even small or white lies. What stands out for me is that we live life with integrity. We try and promote that to our staff and we also share it with our customers.

What challenges are inherent with leading such an organisation as the Effectiveness Company and how do you turn these into successes for you and the company?

It has been a tough economic climate for everybody and anybody who survived over the last few years has a strong business. We are, luckily, at a point right now where the business is strong and stable and we have equally strong and stable customers coming on board as well. In order to stay at the top of the game, we have to keep being different and innovative. We need to make sure that our customer experience is at the top of the agenda. If anything, our challenge is to raise the bar for ourselves and ensure that we do well and find better ways to do that.

You have the strategic ambition to be a global distributor of performance improvement in the near future. Can you shed more light on how such a mission is to be fulfilled?

We are in the process of doing that, but being a global business does not mean having offices all over the world. What we have learned over a period of time, is that we have become pretty good at transformation and execution. We are busy with technology where clients will be able to go

online and buy the tools they need. So we would like to offer clients a platform where they can download information on "how to" and then share it with others. We believe in the very near future we will be sharing our success stories in that regard.

Having been in business and industry for almost two decades, what areas do you consider still need to be addressed if the sector is to realise its full potential?

Outsourcing used to be simple but not anymore! You need to keep being innovative to stay ahead of the pack. From an industry perspective, it would be good to see more government incentives for other areas of outsourcing. From a customer perspective, I think we are seeing the long awaited changes. Perhaps BTO, at a point, required the early adopter, those that were willing to take a risk. Each day we are seeing more and more customers that deeply understand the concept and see the real need for utilising services of this nature. It is very exciting.

What have been your key lessons in life and in business, that any leader should live by or follow?

I am of the view that you learn from everybody every day. That applies to the people I talk to on the street to those I talk to in the office and in business. If you are wide awake, conscious and observant enough, you cannot afford not to learn from other people. The challenge that applies to me as to any other person is: 'what do I do when things go wrong?' As I have travelled through life, I have learned that there is a solution to just about any problem that arises; it all depends on how you look at it and giving up is just not an option.

Do you have any parting thoughts for CEO Magazine readers?

Over a period of time, I have seen that if we could extrapolate what the top 10% in the business excel at and convert this into "how to" for the rest in the human race, we can achieve just about anything. We need to focus on how we can change things, what we can do differently to make this country great. How you are involved in helping to bring about change, even the smallest thing every day can make a difference. Having been in this business for 17 years, it has been an amazing time. Bringing new people into the business means the company is going in a positive and new direction and I am really excited for the future. I am starting to take a step back and let the new blood do their thing. I will watch and learn from them.

"Beginnings are usually scary and endings usually sad, but it is everything in between that makes it all worth living" □