

BREAKING BARRIERS: The story of Divine Ndhlukula

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SYNOPSIS

This case study traces Divine Ndhlukula's history of triumph over circumstances. She founded and manages a multimillion dollar security company called SECURICO in Zimbabwe. It shows that it is possible for women to break patriarchal barriers and glass ceilings that limit opportunities for women in business. The case study utilises a desk research approach mainly because there are many recorded interviews of Divine Ndhlukula which provide a nuanced analysis of a lived experience as a female entrepreneur in a male dominated industry. The use of interview transcripts ensures that her voice is dominant in this narrative. It is from her thoughts, fears and wishes that we can distil how a widowed woman was able to circumvent not only patriarchal norms that relegate women from the public sphere but also the economic crisis in post 2000 Zimbabwe to build a multimillion dollar company.

Among the key findings: Women face multiple structural challenges in business yet it is possible to succeed through perseverance, hardwork, professionalism, quality service, determination and capacity building. It is important for entrepreneurs to understand their business and industry whilst gaining knowledge about managing enterprises.

The key lessons: The lessons learned from Divine Ndhlukula's history are important for young women and girls aspiring to, one day, start their own enterprises. In one of her speeches, Divine highlighted ten lessons she learnt from her business: The customer is always king - Look after your staff - Success comes with hard work - Embrace new technologies - Executing a plan needs discipline - Always be frugal - Never stop learning - Celebrate success - Failures can be valuable - Use your business 'to do good'. Divine also highlights the importance of challenges. Young women should not see challenges as impediments but rather as tools to sharpen their focus and determination. Failures may occur multiple times before success. Divine Ndhlukula's experience of failures motivated and taught her lessons which are invaluable to her business operations today. Failure in one endeavour is not the end but rather an important step in personal growth.

The main recommendation. There is need to promote more widespread mentorship sessions for young women with such luminary businesswomen to act as motivators and examples of what could be possible with perseverance, preparedness and hardwork.

Introduction

This case study outlines the experiences and path to success of Divine Ndhlukula. She is the founder and Managing Director of SECURICO, one of Zimbabwe's largest security companies. The Harare-based outfit is a market leader in the provision of security services and electronic security solutions. The objectives of this case study include: documenting experiences of Divine Ndhlukula in a male dominated industry; examining the challenges faced by women in business through her experiences; and highlighting how the success of this women can act as motivation for young women. Jalbert (2000) highlights that there is need to recognize the emergence of women entrepreneurs fully in creating a vibrant and dynamic economic development of a nation. Mrs. Ndhlukula has defied the odds and risen to the top of her industry. She has emerged as a business mogul after overcoming so many structural barriers. Her story is instructive to many female entrepreneurs that it is possible to excel in areas dominated by men. Nyatara (2011) shows that women are not expected to run large enterprises as this is believed to be a male domain. This is because of issues to do with balancing their roles in the home and their enterprises. Family and relatives are also resistant towards women wanting to start a business because women are expected to be dependent on their husbands. Yet Divine Ndhlukula has shown that it is possible for women to run large enterprises. The main objective of this case study is thus to use the experiences of Mrs. Ndhlukula to highlight how that it is possible for women to succeed in male dominated industries.

Methodology

The case study uses desk research to highlight the experiences, challenges and successes of Divine Ndhlukula. Desk research uses books, documents, newspapers, magazines, articles and journals to understand the nature and extent of the problem under discussion. Desk research is the analysis of information that already exists, in one form or another. Mrs. Ndhlukula has given a lot of interviews

in the past which are readily available and will form the major part of the desk review. This information is easily available since it had been already collected over the years for purposes other than that of this project. In many instances, the issue, problem, question, etc. which prompted the idea for a research project is resolved or answered by studying previous research reports in the literature or analyzing, either statistically or logically, or both, data drawn from existing databases. The study undertook multiple physical (newspapers and magazines) and web based document searches.

It's a Man's World: Business in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean women are traditionally brought up to view business as a male domain and women are to play supporting roles. Women socialised not to aspire to have a lot of money, when they have it they have to hide the fact because this tends to reduce their chances of getting married. Nyatara (2011) argue that the customary law in Zimbabwe views women as not having individual economic rights on the ground that they have benefits given to them through their spouses or male relatives. Esplen and Brody (2007) are of the view that globally women are becoming entrepreneurs but in the developing countries they represent a minority group. The majority of these women entrepreneurs are in agricultural related business or in small enterprises. Esplen and Brody (2007) commented that women have the capacity to start and manage their own businesses but factors such as education, patriarchy and culture and gender roles are some of the inhibiting factors undermining the economic empowerment of women in entrepreneurship (Nyatara 2011).

Story of Divine Ndhlukula

Profile and background

Divine Ndhlukula was born in Gutu, a district which is located in Masvingo province. Her parents were

entrepreneurs¹ in their own right and this developed her keen interest in business. She is a mother of eight and her husband passed away in 2001. In many interviews, she has always highlighted how at a young age she saw her future in business. In 1995, she enrolled in an Entrepreneurial Development Programme to learn the critical elements of running a business.² Box 1 below highlights Divine's background in her own voice.

Box 1: Divine Ndhlukula's background

I have an Executive MBA from Midlands State University and an MBA (Honorary) from Women's University in Africa conferred to me in recognition of my business leadership and efforts on gender equality. After attaining an accounting diploma from an institution in Zimbabwe, I worked briefly for the government and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation as an accounting officer. I went on to take up an appointment at Old Mutual and later took up a job at a local insurance company in 1985...I had made enough money to buy an 8-tonne truck, which I hired out to a construction company. As time went on, a situation cropped up where I had to rescue my late father's farm from being auctioned. My brother...had taken a loan with a local bank which he had been unable to service, so the bank opted to auction the farm which my brother had tendered as collateral...The title of the farm was changed into my name and I ventured into the farming business in 1992 and quit my job. I then took a loan against my house in Harare, to prop up the farming business and poured the loan in a maize crop that flopped due to a drought that season. As I was almost losing my house in 1995, I then went back to my former employers, Intermarket Insurance (now ZB Insurance), and asked for my job back.³

This highlights that entrepreneurship enterprises require preparation through education and training. Business related training is important for entrepreneurs as they learn many new skills which will assist in their businesses. This story shows perseverance required to make it in business even in the face of insurmountable challenges. It teaches us

that whilst you may fail in some endeavours, it is important to keep trying. All the failures are an important part of the learning experience required to make it in business.

SECURICO: The beginning and state of the company

SECURICO Security Services was formed in 1999 with the first offices of the company located in Divine's backyard cottage. This highlights how humble beginnings can often lead to great businesses. In 1998 she saw an opportunity in the security services sector. From her own analysis, she found that there was a lack of professionalism and quality service which would be a way in for a new player. For any entrepreneur it is important to see the gaps and opportunities in the industry you intend to focus on. Success is about knowing what advantages you have over the competition. Ultimately professionalism and quality are very important especially for players in an industry. Below she narrates the beginning:

With next to nothing in capital and no security background, just armed with passion and determination to succeed in a hitherto male dominated area, SECURICO was founded in Dec 1998 in the cottage of my small home in Harare with 4 employees. The business idea was after the realization of a gap that I had noted in the market for a service and quality oriented security services provider. I set up operations in December 1998 and the company was formally incorporated in 2000. We started with three security operatives and two administrators myself included. I used to do literally most functions like office administrative work, accounting, deploying operatives with my one vehicle, supervision, training and other related activities. We converted my servants' quarters to an office

¹http://www.pindula.co.zw/Divine_Ndhlukula#cite_note-1

²<http://businessstarafrika.com/divine-ndhlukula-queen-of-the-security-industry-in-zimbabwe/>

³<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2012/01/20/africas-most-successful-women-divine-ndhlukula/#1312575a3066>

and we had only one desk for furniture that we shared.⁴

The \$13 million (revenues) company now has more than 3,400 employees – 900 of whom are women.⁵ The company was also the first security outfit in Zimbabwe to achieve an ISO (International Organization for Standardisation) certification.⁶ This dedication to value addition and quality has meant more clients for the company.

SECURICO now offers a wide variety of security services which include uniformed guards and electronic systems. The company has grown its range of products over the years and has been able to adapt to new technological advances in the security industry. The visionary leadership of Mrs Ndhlukula has been credited as a catalyst for this growth. Box 2 below she describes the services offered by her company.

Box 2: Services offered by SECURICO

When we started we were primarily offering guarding services but we started cash and assets-in-transit services in 2002. This service offering has grown phenomenally and we are now the market leader in this service in Zimbabwe with a fleet of over 80 armoured vehicles. We have since diversified this service to “Cash Management.” Besides moving cash, gold bullion and other valuables, we provide on-site banking where we deploy our own cashiers to receive cash from our clients’ customers. At that point the cash is considered banked so our customers are able to cut back on expenses to do with employment and transporting cash. They also reduce risks involving cash to zero. It’s a very attractive and innovative offering. We have also gone on to propose value to our clients by another offering of providing them with receptionists who besides being frontline personnel also provide security incognito for their premises. In 2008, at the height of the Zimbabwean economic crisis, we acquired an electronic security systems company – MULTI-LINK (PVT) LTD as a going concern. We

transformed this company into a high tech installer specializing in the latest innovative and cutting edge electronic security solutions. We have since established partnerships with suppliers in South Africa, China, Hong Kong and India. Within the last two years we grew this company into the second largest in Zimbabwe in the provision of electronic security systems like CCTV, access control systems, alarms, remote site monitoring and response services, electric fences etc. We also do private investigations, employment vetting, and security consultancy. Our consultancy includes risk assessments, security policy formulation, setting up security systems and establishing security profiles of employees. In 2005 we founded a subsidiary company – CANINE Dog Services – that breeds, trains and leases guard dogs. The company also trains dogs for domestic use or as pets. The initial mobilization of funds was not easy. As a person who went into this industry as an underdog, we started very small, doing the best that could be done, exercising a lot of discipline in terms of cash management and literally grew with very little borrowings save for bail outs from family when the need arose.⁷

Awards

Divine Ndhlukula has over the years won many awards for her success in business. In 2014 she came second in UNCTAD’s Empretec Women in Business Awards and received her award from Tarja Halonen, the former President of Finland at a ceremony held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. At the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, where she is Vice President and Chairperson of the Women’s Desk, Ndhlukula has pioneered the Women in Enterprise Conference and Awards to mentor women in business in Zimbabwe and to celebrate their success. She has won the following awards: Empretec Entrepreneur of the Year 2001 and Empretec Entrepreneur of Decade (Services Sector) 2002; Manager of the year 2005 for Zimbabwe

⁴<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2012/01/20/africas-most-successful-women-divine-ndhlukula/#1312575a3066>

⁶<http://www.esbri.se/GSWE/gswe-biopop.asp?id=6>

⁷<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2012/01/20/africas-most-successful-women-divine-ndhlukula/2/#11cd4fe9242e>

Institute of Management; Celebrate a Sister Business award 2006; Institute of Directors, Zimbabwe Director of the Year (SMEs) 2008; Institute of Directors Overall Director of Year (Run Up) 2009; Zimbabwe Women Filmmakers/UNIFEM Business Award 2010. Her company has won several awards among other National Quality Awards Company of the Year 2011; Zimbabwe's 7th Best Employers 2010 and won the Africa Awards for Entrepreneurship 2011 Grand Prize run by Legatum and Omidyar.⁸ She is a member of the National Executive Council of the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC) whilst being the vice chairperson of ZNCC Harare. Mrs Ndhlukula is a former chairperson of the Security Association of Zimbabwe and also sits on the Chamber of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) Business Linkages Committee.

Challenges

The company was started in 1999 and by 2015 it was worth over US\$13 million with 3,400 people employed. She has broken barriers in a male dominated industry. In Box 3 Divine outlines the challenges she faced.

Box 3: Challenges faced by Divine Ndhlukula

The first major challenge was that the industry was heavily male dominated and there was a general perception that security was not a job for women. The challenge was to convince the market that I could do the job despite the fact that I was a woman. Clients even refused to be guarded by women and it took a lot of persuasion to convince them that their security would in fact improve if they accepted women to guard them. Changing that negative perception about women was not easy but my team and I persisted and with time women were widely accepted in the industry. The other challenge was that I was coming from a totally different industry and had no knowledge about how security organisations operate. I therefore had to learn the job from scratch. My aim was to learn the job, innovate and improve and perform better than the

competitors. and that worked quite well. Another challenge was that the industry was dominated by big players who had been in the business for a long time. They had the brand and financial muscle but I was certain that I could beat them on service quality. I also struggled to get funding for the new business. At that time the economic challenges that faced Zimbabwe for the next decade were just starting and the financial sector was very jittery so they mostly refused to provide funding. I was also unlucky in that I was a woman venturing into a business where there was a general belief that women would not succeed and this contributed to the failure to secure funding. In the end I decided to make do with the little that I had and eventually I grew the business by ploughing back all the profits.⁹

Working in a patriarchal society presents peculiar challenges for women wishing to engage in business. Zimbabwe is a patriarchal nation where culture plays a role in defining the roles of man and woman in society, as a result, gender sensitive barriers have inhibited women from entering the business world at the same level as men. Mupotsa (2004) posits that women throughout the developing world continue to experience problems related to lack of money, resources and economic power which has inhibited their full economic empowerment in entrepreneurial activities. This is the lived experience of Ndhlukula as she noted in the interview excerpt in Box 4 below.

Box 4: Experiences of a female entrepreneur

The Zimbabwean economy is actually driven by women at the micro level. However, the biggest challenge women entrepreneurs' face is to break into big business and grow their enterprises. Accessing loans is almost impossible because they do not have the security required by banks. Accessing markets is also a tall order as women generally find it difficult to go out and network at the various forums to increase their opportunities. Cultural beliefs by society also militate against women entrepreneurs, as success is not usually associated with women. Rather the stereotypical role is that a woman should become a good wife and mother, therefore many women

⁸<http://www.esbri.se/GSWE/gswe-biopop.asp?id=6>

⁹<http://bullsnbearszimbabwe.blogspot.com/2012/08/bullish-thoughts-how-divine-ndhlukula.html>

simply strive to fulfil this role. So at the end of the day it's our society that mostly militates against the development of women entrepreneurs.¹⁰

SECURICO's success has been achieved in the midst of an economic crisis in post 2000 Zimbabwe. This crisis was characterised by high inflation, business closures and increased informalisation of the economy, high formal unemployment, cash and food shortages. It was thus a difficult time to start a business especially for someone without access to capital. In Box 5 below Divine narrates how she took up the challenge of starting a business in a difficult economic environment.

Box 5: Starting a business in a difficult economic environment

I am a firm believer of the philosophy that there is no easy road to anywhere worth going to, especially business, in particular in Africa. The Zimbabwean business environment has been very difficult in the past ten years, however, at the same time, this presented opportunities for those with a good entrepreneurial flair. The record inflation, lack of consistent power, the uncertain political environment of 2007 to 2009 presented unimaginable challenges. We managed to pull through due to tenacity, creativity and determination. Zimbabwe still boasts of abundant opportunities to do business. The environment has not reached expected levels necessary for ease of doing business but there is great progress. We are one of very few countries with potential for greenfield opportunities across all sectors. Competition in some of them is low and scope for maximizing profits exists. For those with little hesitation to plunge....this is the time.¹¹

Her success shows that even in crisis situations, entrepreneurs can thrive and make a difference. She did not accept the conventional wisdom that argued against investing in Zimbabwe but rather charted her way through the challenges and found success.

Lessons Learned

In noting the lessons to learn from this case study, there is need to invoke the words of Mrs Ndhlukula who outlined ten important things she has learnt over the years. Box 6 below highlights the points she gave at the 2014 Anzisha Prize awards ceremony, where 12 of Africa's top young entrepreneurs were being honoured in Johannesburg.

1. The customer is always king

"I always knew that treating the customer as the boss was the key thing," she began. "And creating value, giving the best value... is the way we built loyalty." She added that the amount of money an entrepreneur or business makes can be directly related to the amount of value they provide for their customers or clients.

2. Look after your staff

"Success depends on employees. For me knowing and connecting with my employees is very important. I have done that very well." Ndhlukula explained that by connecting with her employees, she was able to create a "sense of belonging" for them in the company, and ensure they bought into her vision. "I have ensured that I aligned their personal goals with their business goals and that makes everybody go in tandem with each other. I try to know almost all my 4,000 employees: their families, their aspirations, their worst fears and so on."

3. Success comes with hard work

"I have learnt that earning by working hard is the way to go," she said, adding that the magic formula for success is always simply: "The right attitude, plus hard work".

4. Embrace new technologies

According to Ndhlukula, Securico is constantly adopting (and adapting to) new technologies and she advises entrepreneurs to always keep an eye open for new technological developments in their industry.

5. Executing a plan needs discipline

¹⁰<http://businessstarafrica.com/divine-ndhlukula-queen-of-the-security-industry-in-zimbabwe/>

¹¹<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2012/01/20/africas-most-successful-women-divine-ndhlukula/3/#65f54dd86c8c>

“One of the key features in any business leader is execution... and it is a critical block in building a successful enterprise.” She quoted Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan in their book *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*. “Leadership without the discipline of execution is incomplete and ineffective. Without the ability to execute, all other attributes of leadership become hollow.”

6. *Always be frugal*

“Pay it off, don’t pay it forward. Or put simply: be frugal,” she continued. To build a business, entrepreneurs will need to ensure they have strong financial discipline in their management, she emphasised.

7. *Never stop learning*

“The seventh lesson that I learnt is to always keep on learning. I believe in learning all the time, I’m a life-long learner... I also believe in re-learning, because there are always new things coming out. My kids are teaching me things today.”

8. *Celebrate success*

“In our company we believe in celebrating success because it creates, and maintains, momentum,” she noted. “Everyone celebrates even the little things that we succeed in doing, and we have a jolly good time. That is how people look forward to winning and being successful. Because they know there are rewards of celebration.”

9. *Failures can be valuable*

Acknowledging and accepting failure is part of the entrepreneurial game and Ndhlukula said she has had her share of failure. However, failures have taught her valuable lessons that made her into a stronger entrepreneur today. “For me, failure teaches self-confidence and tenacity.”

10. *Use your business ‘to do good’*

“What Africa requires are entrepreneurs that start up and create not just wealth for themselves, but employment for others, because that is what is vital for sustainable development.”¹²

What is clear is how hard work, preparedness, courage and never-say-die attitude are important if

one is to make it in business. Becoming an entrepreneur is difficult in Africa and for women it is worse because they have to deal with multiple and intersecting forms of structural inequalities. Mrs Ndhlukula acknowledges these challenges that women face but argues that it is possible to succeed. Her advice to aspiring entrepreneurs especially women is outlined in Box 7 below.

Box 7: Advice to female entrepreneurs

My advice to aspiring entrepreneurs is start with an end in mind, know exactly what you want to achieve and start to work systematically towards the goal, exercising some patience. Know the industry you want to get into, its internal and external environment. Work your plan with passion, determination and diligence, and when a bit of cash starts rolling in, have the discipline to know that it is not your money yet. My advice to women all the time is: If you want a certain future, go out and create it. Conquer your fears as that is what enslaves most women. Opportunities are now galore. We just need to roll up our sleeves, lift our feet, and walk through the door as no one will carry us, have a game plan and execute it with passion, determination and focus. Never mind that you are a woman. Do not think about that except as a competitive advantage. No one is going to give you anything on a silver platter. You have to work twice, thrice, five times as hard and do not lose focus. Work with your passion, it will keep you going and once you have a footing in your business, make the most of it and create the momentum and that will get rid of all the little challenges that may bog you down. Lastly, choose your team carefully and get rid of non-performers soon enough.¹³

Conclusion

What we learned from this is that quality and professionalism will at the end prevail and sustain success. Female entrepreneurs need to be tenacious and dedicated to quality. Your products and services speak for themselves and challenges are important because they build character. In terms of policy, this

¹²<http://www.newzimbabwe.com/business-18076-Ndhlukula+How+to+grow+successful+enterprise/business.aspx>

¹³<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2012/01/20/africas-most-successful-women-divine-ndhlukula/4/#1ea7487c34ea>

story highlights two critical issues. Firstly, it shows the need for governments to work towards removing structural barriers for women entrepreneurs through increasing access to finance, knowledge and markets. Secondly Divine's story can be used to promote more widespread mentorship sessions for young women with such luminary businesswomen to act as motivators and examples of what could be possible with perseverance, preparedness and hardwork. In conclusion, the story of Divine Ndhlukula provides inspiration and hope to both men and women struggling to build their own business in Zimbabwe and Africa at large. It is about never accepting defeat as Divine notes:

The market was not receptive to me as a woman without any background in the security sector. But if you work as an underdog, you always do your best – and become the best. The challenges eventually turned out to be the best thing as it brought out the best in us. The clients realised soon that we were ahead of everyone else and could deliver better services.¹⁴

Her story shows it is possible to succeed and overcome insurmountable challenges. As a widowed woman she showed that it is not your circumstances but your determination that leads to success.

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¹⁴<http://www.sida.se/English/press/current-topics-archive/2014/she-transformed-the-male-dominated-security-industry-in-zimbabwe/>



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