



The power of relationships

Building bridges in the bushveld

reconciliation is not always a simple undertaking. The wounds of the past often mean that there are stumbling blocks towards actual progress. So, are we resigned to simply 'getting on with it' in the workplace, or is there an attempt at a conscious and deliberate healing?

Alex van den Heever studied business management and has the ability to socially engage a Sandton crowd, but he can also speak Shangaan, a dialect of XiTsonga, and is one of Africa's most surefooted wildlife trackers.

Renias Mhlongo, 13 years Alex's senior, was born under a jackalberry tree and has a total of three years of formal education to his name, but he is an internationally sought-after motivational speaker who has lectured in the USA, England and Kenya.

Together this South African duo co-created a tracker training school, based at Londolozi and Samara Private Game Reserves. They also conduct leadership presentations at seminars in Johannesburg's JSE-listed boardrooms.

Interestingly, Van den Heever and Mhlongo have cattle ranching in common, although you would describe the

former's heritage more as 'ranching' and Mhlongo's more as 'herding'. Husbandry aside, when you spend some time with these unassuming expert trackers, you cannot help but come to the realisation that their successes have been driven by a special kind of curiosity.

"I arrived at Londolozi in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve a year after the 1994 democratic elections and soon became a ranger," says Van den Heever. "Mhlongo – a man who had grown up protecting his family's livestock from lions – was the tracker I was teamed up with and his tracking abilities had me mesmerised. I didn't care that Mhlongo couldn't read or write. Here was a man who could discern where a leopard was from the pitch of a nearby shrike's song."

Patience reaps rewards

"It's natural to form judgments about other people," says Mhlongo. "When Van den Heever arrived at Londolozi as a ranger, I thought he was just another guy from the city looking to become a big shot guide for a couple of years. But he was so interested, and more than that, he had respect for my skill. I taught him how to read the bushveld and he taught me how to communicate my stories and my passion for tracking in English. We had patience and we understood each other's limitations."

Understanding each other's limitations is one thing, but respectfully trying to defy those limitations is another. Early on in his partnership with Mhlongo, a gung-ho Van den Heever found himself face-to-face with a female leopard in one of Londolozi's dry riverbeds.

Under different circumstances, the meeting would have resulted in a dignified and mutual retreat, but this particular animal was hiding her newborn cubs in a den site nearby, and so her reaction was to charge, vocalising her displeasure and 'containing' the threat. In the young Van den Heever, who had accidentally dropped his rifle, was the instinctual urge to hightail it up the steep bank nearest to him.

It was Mhlongo who locked eyes with Alex and softly issued instructions from the sideline: "Hold your ground. Do not make eye contact. No sudden movements, Alex."

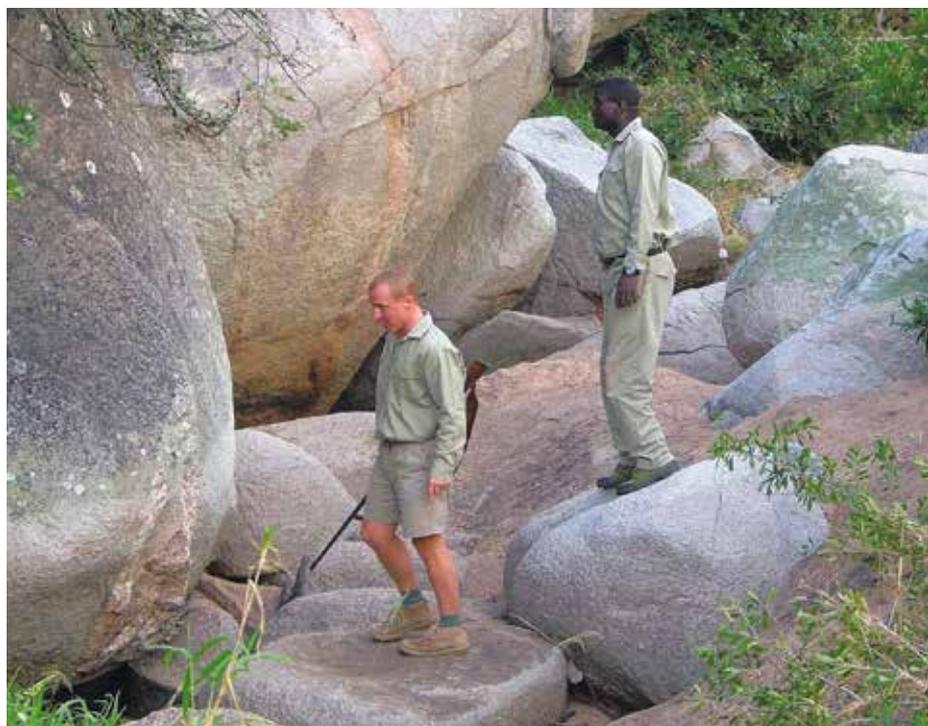
Van den Heever recalls how – based on that trust – he loved his time in the bush with Mhlongo, but "what frustrated me was not being able to follow the story when all the trackers got together and started solving a tracking puzzle in Shangaan."

And so he asked Mhlongo to teach him Shangaan. This is not just basic Shangaan; ask any Shangaan-speaking person in the greater Sabi Sand area which white man speaks their tongue the best and they will tell you "Majombane does." Majombane is Van den Heever's

Shangaan name, and means 'small boots'.

While others might take offense at the name, Van den Heever is unperturbed, testament to his strong sense of self. That sense of self, in both men, has been challenged by the novelty of their relationship.

"To make good relationships, you have to take risks," says Mhlongo. "And it was a risk for me to bring Van den Heever home to my rural village for the weekend. No one had ever done that before." Mhlongo has a photograph of Van den Heever washing in an old tin



bath. "I had to work for the privilege of that bath," says Van den Heever. "Collect the wood, start the fire, heat the water, and then afterwards, recycle the water."

In hindsight, Mhlongo did not have to invite Van den Heever to his village. And Van den Heever did not have to go. Admittedly both men were a little anxious beforehand, but it was a bridge that needed to be crossed, and they needed each other to do it. It took consciousness, sensitivity and courage. Most importantly, it took curiosity.

"One thing is for sure," says Van den Heever. "We both enjoy sitting around a campfire and reminiscing. Down tools, turn off the technology, and allow the firelight to take you to a place of real communication. Laughing, listening, sharing stories and opinions and most importantly, being curious," he concludes.

Text | **Ryan James** Photography | **Supplied**



Time in the wilderness has forged an eternal friendship