



# Pursuing diversity

Expert tracker highlights the trail employers should attempt to follow

**Renias Mhlongo was born** in the greater Kruger National Park. As a boy, he was responsible for 17 cattle, protecting them from the lions, hyenas and leopards resident in the area. His father's rule was simple – come home with all the cows or not at all. Today, Mhlongo is recognised as one of the best wildlife trackers in the world. Alex van den Heever, his friend and colleague of 23 years, sat down with Mhlongo to hear his thoughts on diversity and transformation in South Africa.

*Diversity in the workplace is an achievable goal.*

Mhlongo suggests 10 practical ways in which business leaders can improve intercultural relationships.

## 1. Demonstrate a willingness to engage

Sometimes we need to go out of our way to demonstrate, in practical terms, a willingness to engage someone

from a different culture. Learn to greet people in their language. Managers should know the important ceremonies held by their staff, such as the *hluwula* ceremony that marks the end of a mourning period. Seek to sincerely understand. You'll be surprised at the response to showing genuine interest in people – their jobs, their children and their particular life situations.

## 2. Make use of public transport

This provides an informal opportunity to understand people's challenges – and, for example, why people who use taxis are often late for work. Unless you have travelled on a train or taxi, you don't have the moral high ground to make comments about those who do.

## 3. Share knowledge

In this competitive world, there's a tendency to hold onto knowledge and skills. If we're to build a transformed country, we need to share. South Africa needs ordinary citizens to be active in developing the skills of those less fortunate.

## 4. Learn the language

You cannot hope to fully understand a person from another culture (or language group) unless you learn their language, or at least attempt to do so.

## 5. Visit their homes

Try to visit and stay at the home of a person (work colleague or associate) from a culture different to yours. This is simple but profound. Productive relationships are

formed when you understand the life story of the person you're dealing with. The power of solidarity that comes of this simple act cannot be underestimated.

## 6. Share meals

It is a globally recognised fact that sharing food and drink brings us together. This is fundamental in developing relationships in Africa.

## 7. Share the company vision

Few managers and business leaders take the time to share information of the company's performance. Many workers want a greater understanding of how the business functions, the challenges it's facing, the successes, the shortcomings, its financial situation, and the company's vision. Again, the act of sharing these insights causes staff to feel validated and important.

## 8. Don't generalise

South Africans love to assign a label to someone they do not understand. Generalisations are borne of fear and intellectual laziness. Remember that everyone has a unique set of life experiences that shape their behaviour.

## 9. Personal conduct

We often estrange people unknowingly. Learn what is considered to be disrespectful in the various cultures with which you interact. Don't be ashamed to share the same of your culture. Learn what is culturally respectful, not just politically correct. Your office cleaner may be a respected member of his or her community and therefore should be greeted with a certain reverence. Find out. Speak up if there are issues to be dealt with. Even the most sensitive, difficult conversations can be held if the message is delivered from a position of "I want to help this relationship", as opposed to "I want to be right". We all have the right to air our views, but do it with calmness, respect and factual accuracy.

## 10. Search yourself

Take a moment to delve deep into the shadows and find where you hold prejudiced thoughts and feelings. We all have them. If not acknowledged, this hidden intolerance will become evident when you least expect it. And people notice the very subtle, yet obvious, acts of bigotry.

Text | Renias Mhlongo, translated from Tsonga by Alex van den Heever



*Renias Mhlongo and Alex van den Heever offer presentations on 'The Power of Relationships'. For more information, go to [motivationalspeaker.co.za](http://motivationalspeaker.co.za).*

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