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GOOD TIMES ARE AS CLOSE AS YOU MAKE THEM

Tony Manning

So the war in Iraq is pretty well over. Thankfully, it was a lot shorter than anyone thought, and with fewer casualties. Chemical and biological weapons weren't used by Saddam Hussein. There was no major retaliatory attack in a western city. The troops are heading home and we can get back to business as usual.

Or can we?

Most of the global economy is in a dismal state. Firms are under pressure to deliver profits, yet prices and margins are being squeezed by intensifying competition for reluctant customers. The terror threat is still there. SARS is scaring travellers. The yo-yoing rand is causing mayhem for exporters. There are plenty of reasons to feel glum.

But precisely because this is such an unusually volatile and unpredictable time, it's also a time of great opportunity. And it's a time of special opportunity for South Africa and for South African business.

Consider why.

First, in moments of extreme uncertainty, there's great value in focusing on your business basics and executing meticulously. Breakthroughs – which may be harder to hit upon and implement – may be far less important. Making a difference that matters is probably much easier than you think.

Second, for all the real and perceived problems there may be in this country, we do have some serious advantages.

Democracy is entrenched. The local economy is showing remarkable resilience. Things work. And with all that's going on elsewhere, being far away at the southern tip of Africa turns out to be a big plus.

There's a long list of other good reasons to be pleased with ourselves. We should think about them more, and spend less time beating ourselves up.

This isn't to suggest that everything's rosy in the garden. Clearly, it's not. But if it's a mark of effective leaders that they look the future straight in the eye, and deal with things as they are rather than as we would like them to be, then surely, it makes sense to acknowledge what we have going for us.

Yet a lot of managers are in a panicky state. They won't acknowledge the good news. They can't see anything obvious to do, so they're doing nothing. Both behaviours are daft and irresponsible.

Others are searching desperately for a new silver bullet – a training programme, a way to change their company culture, a quality initiative, or a CRM system – that will save their bacon. This is equally foolish.

The way to turn the tide is not to embark on some new initiative that'll cost a fortune and take ages to plug in. Nor is it to flood your firm with so many new concepts and tools that people don't know what to tackle first.

Instead, the answer lies in applying a healthy dose of common sense and in doing some very basic things.

Take, for example, the now all important hospitality industry.

There are any number of good restaurants in SA, and hordes of new arrivals. With all that competition about, why can't more of them be better?

There seem to be many institutions training chefs and other staff. There's a lot of hoopla about "the warmest welcome", "delighting customers", and so on. But what's missing in action is management. Why else should service be so spotty, and food standards so unpredictable?

Until recently, my favourite restaurant in SA has been Bukhara in Cape Town. The north Indian food is always outstanding and the service is excellent.

Fortunately, Bukhara is now in Sandton, just outside the entrance of the Michelangelo Hotel. My wife and I have eaten there numerous times, and recommend it to everyone. The impeccable standards of food and service have been perfectly transplanted.

If Bukhara is my number one dining choice, my favourite getaway is Cybele Forest Lodge in the mountains outside White River. We began staying there about 25 years ago, when Barbara and Rupert Jeffries had just bought the place and were struggling to make beds, cook, and be nice to guests – while roofs leaked, the plumbing kept conking in, lights failed, and staff didn't always turn up.

Cybele's location is perfect – just three and a half hours from Johannesburg and forty minutes from the Kruger Park, and it has endless views and magical gardens. The rooms are gorgeous, each furnished in its own eclectic style. And the food, of course, is to die for.

Bukhara and Cybele could not be more different. But each succeeds for a simple reason: *they are managed for their customers. And they are managed with an iron rod.*

Each place has its own offering, its own standards. As a customer, you know what to expect, and you get it.

Bukhara's food has hardly changed since I've been a patron. But customer feedback is carefully listened to, and shared. Staff are evaluated every few months. Training never stops.

Cybele's basic formula also stays constant. But the place is constantly refreshed and there are always new touches. Every customer whim is dealt with as if it were a matter of life or death. Management is ever present and training is by example.

So what about your business? How clear is your value proposition? Is it what customers want and will pay for? How consistently do you deliver? How tough are you about spelling out and sticking to your standards? Are you involved in the detail of your business? How much training do you do? Are you a hands-on, passionate manager?

All this sounds terribly obvious. But think about it. If this is just "what everyone knows", why isn't there more of it? And how would your customers rate *your* company against Bukhara or Cybele?

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