Fables of connection for tough economic times

New book asks leaders some hard questions, writes Edward West

STEPHEN Blewett, MD of Altech Autopage Cellular and author of The 3D View: Living Your Successful Life Story, replies to queries from new staff about how to get the top job with the questions: "Do you really want it? Is it part of your life's story?

The book is Blewett's third and follows The 3D View: Business and Life Strategies, published in 2002, and his first book, Practical Sales and Marketing for SA Business in 2001, which is a prescribed text for Damelin marketing studies.

He says his experiences over the past six years at the helm of Altech Autopage Cellular, and as MD of Mozambique Cellular for two years, provided the inspiration for this third book.

He says it is essentially about the idea of leadership, and shows people that they have the ability to be leaders in the fields they choose, whether in their family, social or work lives. It is no ordinary book about leadership studies. Blewett discards conventional business and self-help writing and illustrates his points through African fable-like narratives.

For instance, the first chapter concerns the Batoba tribe living around a large baobab tree.

Blewett says he cannot write "without seeing it" and remembers the baobab tree in the book from his stint in Mozambique.

He says he chose to use fables because everybody has a story, and we all relate stories to each other. The storytelling tradition is also particularly rich in SA. Part of being a community, in any environment, is the sharing of stories.

The books aims to provide tools and techniques to which successful people attribute their success.

He advocates a more holistic approach to personal and work life.

Blewett is passionate about the notion that not enough people stop to consider how they would like their life stories to continue, or end, and instead let their lives slip away without direction, complaining instead about the lot they have been dealt.

When asked what makes a good leader, he says it is the ability to connect. You can feign confidence or ability, he says, especially during times of economic prosperity and growth, but no leader can fake their ability to connect with people.

He admits it is tough to connect at a personal level in the work environment, "but leaders have to put the effort into it. You can't do it with everyone.... You have to look for opportunities to do it one on one."

He tells of the weekly directors' meeting at Altech Autopage Cellular where they stand outside on the balcony, meeting other staff while the meeting is being conducted. He spends 30 minutes a week sitting with the call-centre staff, looking for opportunities to connect with them, too.

The second attribute that a good leaders needs, Blewett describes as "servant leadership". The old, arrogant-type leadership style is gone, and leaders that will succeed in these difficult times are the ones willing to serve their people.

The tightening economy will sift out the resilient and inspirational leaders.

He says that in the past four to five months, SA's corporate world has experienced more changes in its leadership structure than at any time in the past five years, and the global financial crisis means that the business world is crying out for leadership.

"Part of the reason is that companies are realising they need a new kind of leader, one who is inspirational and prepared to challenge the status quo," he says.

On the style of SA's political leadership, he says that the politicians who appear to be succeeding are the ones connecting with the people.

Blewett and his wife Tracey have two children, a girl and a boy. He enjoys mountain biking and has a helicopter pilot's licence.

For his next writing project, Blewett says that he would like to gather modern-day stories and wisdom from Africa and the rest of the world, and put it together in one book.