

Blewett has a story to tell to our souls

First 2 000 copies of inspirational book sold within two months

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SINCE launching his third book in April, Stephen Blewett has sold 2 000 copies. Blewett is the 40-year-old managing director of Altech Autopage Cellular, the largest mobile service provider in South Africa.

After only a week on the shelves, his book *3D View: Living Your Successful Life Story* had sold more than 800 copies. Durban-born Blewett was the chief executive of M-Cel (Mozambique) before being appointed MD of Autopage in 2003 at the age of 34.

The book uses African stories of tribal chiefs, kings, pharaohs and warriors to teach important leadership lessons gleaned from his life experience.

"I wrote the preamble to this in 2001," says Blewett.

"That one was called *3D View: Business and Life Strategies*. In 1999, while lecturing part time at Damelin, I wrote a sales and marketing book. In those eight years I was gathering information and formulating my thoughts.

"All countries use story-telling to convey wisdom, but in most countries the tradition has been modernised or just disappeared. I believe that in Africa, more than any other part of the world, the use of stories to convey messages and wisdom is still very prevalent.

"When you tell a story, people stop to listen. If you have a bunch of children running around and I say: 'I want to tell you a story,' they stop and sit to listen.

"It's the same with adults; they'll focus in and listen. It's deep within us. When I tell a story, I talk to your soul. It hits you and you absorb it. It's a key thing that we

don't lose that art. I think many people don't realise how powerful it is.

"Every single person has a story to tell, and you may not think your own story is interesting, but others might find it amazing. The only problem with most people is that they tell the story up to today. The story doesn't end today. The idea is to envision how it's going to end."

Blewett doesn't attribute the lessons he writes about to a marketing guru or great philosopher. "I learn from bad leaders as well. The best leaders are those who serve rather than rule. Humility is very important. You don't need to be in any particular position; you can lead in your own family, at work or just in your own daily life decisions.

"The problem with leadership in this country is that there are not enough people who are willing to lead, and we have too many old-school autocratic leaders.

"I'm not a perfect leader, but I learn from my mistakes. That makes me perfect to write this book," he adds.

While Blewett is hesitant to say how happy his 817 employees are, he describes the company as a family. "I surround myself with leaders who live the same philosophy. Every person in the company is a leader."

The attention he's received for his book has been overwhelming, but he says it has not taken away any attention from his running of the business.



ENCOURAGING: Stephen Blewett says the best leaders serve rather than rule

He says Autopage is "doing well" and meeting all its targets despite expectations of a tough year.

"I just did a talk to 130 business people," he says.

"It wasn't really a deviation, because it was a business breakfast with MTN.

"I felt it was a good opportunity to share some of the concepts in the book.

"I received a lot of feedback about the book, with some people saying that it's changed their lives."

He's been asked to speak to the Gauteng provincial government's senior managers at an event to be attended by Premier Nomvula Mokonyane and will appear at the Hyde Park Exclusive Books to speak at an Author's Evening.

He was in the news several weeks ago when he found R500 000 in cash in his Port Elizabeth hotel room, but turned it in to the management, owing this to his own sense of integrity.

"Leadership is not something that is judged by what we say publicly, but by how we act privately," he explains.

"The hotel said there's not much they could have done if I'd taken the money but I had no desire to keep it."

The company went head to head with the Department of Communications in the High Court last year, winning the right for hundreds of small service provider and resellers to build their own infrastructure. The company also signed a deal with Neotel last year that would see it being a

channel for the second network operators' bundled Internet, data and voice products.

While he doesn't have a technical background, having previously worked for Shell as its brand manager in Cape Town shortly after completing his commerce degree in 1993, he has helped Autopage surpass the billion-rand turnover mark.

He's since worked as Vodacom's retail portfolio manager, as well as lecturing marketing at Damelin Business School, where his first book *Practical Sales and Marketing for SA Business* (2001) was allocated as a prescribed textbook.

In this fast-changing and increasingly competitive landscape, Blewett has managed to write two books on leadership, one marketing book; learnt to fly a helicopter; kept up with his mountain biking, get married and have two children.

"I believe in balance. I don't believe you need to measure people by the number of hours they spend at the office. I'd rather look at output.

"I like to challenge myself, but I also make sure I spend quality time with my children. It's the same with them; I'd rather spend one or two hours with them than six hours watching TV," he says.

During the economic downturn when several companies lost as much as half their value on the JSE from a year ago, Altech Group is relatively stable.

This year, Autopage — a mobile services reseller — was one of the best performers in the Altech Group for the year ended February 2009, pushing its subscriber numbers by more than 150 000 to cross the 1-million mark.

Autopage contributed more than 70% to the group's 11% jump in revenue to R9.16-billion for the year.

