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Adaptable leaders needed in future, says Media24 CEO to new MBA students at USB academic opening

The future will be characterised by increasingly rapid change brought about by, among other things, technological innovation. The irony surrounding new technology, however, is that it can also be disruptive – which means leaders must have “the ability to adapt” to the challenges inherent in the process of change, Francois Groepe, CEO of Media24, told the new intake of MBA students at the academic opening ceremony of the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB).

Groepe, an alumnus of the USB, was the guest speaker of the academic opening ceremony held last week. (Thursday, 22 January 2009). He told the group of about 150 students, as well as academics and staff, that a certain type of leadership is needed to deal with constant change and chaos.

Groepe said “The ability to adapt is the singular most important trait of a leader.” Other traits he deemed important are the ability to inspire people, personal honesty, and the ability to look beyond the visible and to see the big picture when faced with an issue.

Change manifests itself in various ways, the first being through networking and technology which is often disruptive and unsettling, said Groepe. “In the digital age we are connected wirelessly to a network 24/7 and communicate across time zones all the time. This has fundamentally changed social behaviour patterns.

“There is, of course, a price to be paid ... and this includes consequences like a deterioration in social and inter-personal skills, arthritis of the thumbs and possibly being dumped [as a suitor] via sms, to name but a few,” he added in lighter vein.

Groepe said another big shift is the migration away from physical assets to intangible assets. “The shift has accelerated as a result of technology and financial engineering.” Evidence of financial engineering is the large – “often exotic and complex” – derivative instruments that evolve continuously. However, he says that financial authorities are “notorious” for failing to regulate these derivative instruments effectively – playing a part in the implosion of financial markets worldwide.

“What is therefore very evident is that as we move forward the ‘booms and busts’ will be far more accentuated because of this inter-connected world and the fact that much global commerce is in the form of financial transactions.” He said “regrettably” there will be no respite from these changes or from severe systemic shocks.

Groepe’s words of advice to the group of MBA students were: “Once you have completed the course and achieved success in your life, remember your roots and plough back into your family, community and this university – you owe it to both yourself and those who have contributed to your success, often at great cost.”

Prof Eon Smit, director of the USB, talked about the future of business education amid constant change.

“Continuous renewal has to be built into the processes of business schools – after all, the world of business is continually morphing into something different. I believe the answer lies in creating a business school culture which resembles that of a merchant bank. Some older investments (programmes, activities) are producing consistent returns and require only a minimum of upkeep. The market will inform you when their lifetimes expire. Some newer programmes and activities may still need active management to bring to fruition, while there is also a portfolio of programmes and activities in a design stage,” said Prof Smit.

With this year’s intake of full-time, part-time and modular MBA students, the USB, as an internationally accredited business school, attracted more than 200 students not only from all the provinces in South Africa, but also from other African countries such as Malawi, Rwanda, Lesotho, Namibia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. A fair number of students from countries such as India, Austria and the Netherlands joined the full-time MBA class, along with exchange students from the USB’s partner business schools in France, Sweden and Germany.

End

Photo caption:

Attending the USB academic opening: Francois Groepe, Media24 CEO (middle), Prof Wim Gevers, USB associate director: Academic (left), and Prof Johann de Villiers, dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences of Stellenbosch University (right), with students (from left) Mpho Selikanie from Lesotho, Belinda Mula from Kenya, and (front) Erin Walker from Cape Town, Theckla Kangueehi from Namibia and Gino Smith from Cape Town.

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