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Begin

USB audience hears from Seseli about building trust and using networks

People should be more trusting of each other and not only trust those who look like themselves or share similar backgrounds – because they might miss what a wider spectrum of people have to offer their business. This is one of the main lessons Mothobi Seseli, MD of Argon Asset Management, has learned since building his business from scratch to managing funds in excess of R6 billion in four years.

Seseli was speaking at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) Leader's Angle talk, on the topic *building trust and using the power of networks: lessons from the first 1 000 days of a black investment manager in South Africa*. His audience was business people, alumni of the USB, academics and students.

"We easily trust family and friends and people who have the same education or profession as ourselves. But we have to question our own views. This will help us to understand the person on the other side," explained Seseli.

Hearing Seseli's experience of starting an asset management business in 2005 after a track record of more than a decade in the asset management business was sobering. "When you were in a company people acknowledged you, but when you venture out on your own, suddenly you are considered not capable and you lose your networks. A lot of stereotyping occurs. People ask: 'What do you know about money management?'

"I thought I was South African, but at that time I was just another black man. White people distrusted me, while even black people said: 'What, me give my money to you?' I was stuck between the two and not even banks wanted to help me.

"When you start out in the asset management industry you do not have a product track record, so you need to work hard to gain the trust of people.

Seseli had to slowly gain the trust of consultants who provide valuable endorsements for firms. "There will be suspicion and mistrust as well as market resistance because of poor brand awareness. Starting out own your own requires a lot of capital and competent staff, and you have to be seen to have all the trappings of a plush office even before you have any clients."

Seseli said he built trust through building brand awareness. He sees communication to all stakeholders as essential, because reputation and how others perceive your business is crucial.

"In order to understand the person on the other side you have to exercise self-mastery and emotional intelligence. You also need to live your values even if it means turning a business opportunity away. Community responsibility is critical. We seek to be a positive role model by creating black role models in our communities. We have to build into that space and be a place where black children who graduate can come," said Seseli.

The USB's Leader's Angle talks on all aspects of leadership, presented in association with Finweek and PSG Konsult, are an outflow of the school's focus on leadership development in its MBA, its executive education programmes, and its research on leadership.

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Photo caption

At the USB Leader's Angle: speaker Mothobi Seseli, MD of Argon Asset Management, Wendy Ngcangca, an audience member from City Mission, and Dr Johan Smith, senior lecturer in financial management at the USB.

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