



# UNLIKELY INSPIRATION

The path to entrepreneurial success is often clearer once we look to the people who awoke our ambition and have preceded us. Three hard-working entrepreneurs discuss how their role models helped strengthen their standing in the business world

**MONGEZI MTATI (31)**  
**FOUNDER AND MD: WORDSTART**

I've started quite a few businesses and always had a leaning towards entrepreneurship. WordStart was inspired by my lack of interest in traditional marketing and advertising. I realised that people influence their friends' lifestyles and that authentic conversation with people whose opinions we trust builds credibility around a product.

At WordStart, we build on the word-of-mouth marketing model. We have a

client base who are looking to create buzz around their new products and a network of “WordStarters” or influencers (90% of whom are young black, Coloured and Indian South Africans) who begin conversations on various social networks and blogs about a product that interests them. We run and track these conversations, thereby generating insights for our clients.

In the last few years, I’ve been fortunate to have DESTINY MAN columnist and founder of presentation firm Missing Link, Richard Mulholland, as a mentor and role model. I met him when a previous business partner and I approached him for help with a business we ran at the time. I was immediately intrigued by him: he was sitting on a bed in his office wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a robe. He broke the norm of what a businessman or entrepreneur was supposed to look like.

Today I run WordStart from Richard’s funky 21 Tanks offices in Jo’burg. Over the years he’s taught me many things about starting a business and he helps motivate me and build my confidence, though I remain humble around those who know more than I do. He taught me the importance of having an innovative business concept and building something of value with a unique selling point. Once you provide value, money will follow.

Mentors are important because they offer greater perspective than you have, as they’re on the outside looking in. They’re also able to help you wade through the pitfalls that cause businesses to fail and they show you how your business can reach a better place.

Along with meeting Richard, the other turning point in making WordStart happen was when I approached the Branson Centre of Entrepreneurship, to help turn my idea into a business model. I was subsequently selected by the centre as one of four companies to participate in Sir Richard Branson’s book launch in the UK and SA. The centre also provides entrepreneurs with training and facilitates connections with companies like publisher Jonathan Ball, for whom we ran a campaign at the time of Gareth Cliff’s book launch.

The best piece of advice Richard ever gave me? “In a start-up, turnover is irrelevant – only profit matters.”

For further information, visit: [www.wordstart.co.za](http://www.wordstart.co.za) and follow Mtati’s blog at: [www.mongezimtati.co.za](http://www.mongezimtati.co.za)



## ANICE HASSIM (45)

FOUNDER, CEO AND LEAD STRATEGIST: IMMEDIA

I’ve always been entrepreneurial. I realised I’d achieve more if I followed my instincts. I wanted to be in charge – I enjoyed the satisfaction of finding and meeting a challenge. I studied computer science, but there was always tension between my interest in that and in the arts, so I did journalism for my post-graduate degree.

I worked as a journalist and then ran a factory with my father Aziz, making workwear. I learnt how to approach challenges and he taught me that you’re either suited to business or you’re not – you need to decide early on how far you’re prepared to go in pursuit of your passion.

Through this, I realised I needed to make a change, so I told my dad I couldn’t continue working at the factory. That made him, in turn, realise he didn’t want to carry on working there either and he subsequently closed the business, wrote a book and won a Sanlam literary award. He’s now writing his third book and is a huge source of inspiration to me.

I then started a Durban-based communication agency with a friend. In 2001 the business became purely digital and immedia, which focuses on online integration, >>



was born. Today it's an app development and software agency for iPad (tablets) and smartphones. We're digital transition consultants who respond to fundamental technological changes in the way we live and work, and help our clients make sense of these shifts. Although there are many companies like ours, I've learnt that succeeding is about how far you're willing to go.

Role models don't prepare you for everything in life, but they do give you context. They provide accelerated wisdom about the pressures you'll face and share the hard-won knowledge they've accumulated over time. They provide a template for action. Many of my choices have been informed by my role models.

My dad wasn't a great businessman by classical definitions, but he taught me many valuable lessons. By observing the way he dealt with his clients, built his career, cared for his family and then quit in his 60s to write something so powerful, I learnt a great deal. You need to have persistence and grit like his to be an entrepreneur. The best piece of advice he gave me is: "Money doesn't talk; it sits on the roof and sings." You need resources as a launching pad, so you have to acquire capital before you can tackle a business on your own terms. I'm also inspired by former President Nelson Mandela, who encouraged men like my father and me to respond to make SA a better place. The late Apple founder, Steve Jobs, is also a role model. What he said echoes my struggle between science and arts; he taught us that the world's potential lies between humanity and technology, and that technology can change the circumstances of our surroundings.

I also consider the Beatles, particularly Sir Paul McCartney, as role models. McCartney described the band as "four corners of a square". This made me realise the importance of operating in a collaborative, rather than a competitive space – something we're moving towards in today's interconnected world. The Beatles succeeded because of what each member brought to the group. This taught me, as an entrepreneur, to root people in a sense of collective purpose.

For further information, visit: [www.immedia.co.za](http://www.immedia.co.za)

## TOP TIP

Taking your enterprise to the next level is never easy. Learn first-hand from those who've done it successfully. Get whatever knowledge or assistance you can from every available resource – like the Eskom Business Investment Competition, which provides opportunities for black-owned enterprises to cross the next major hurdle in business development. Apart from significant cash prizes for winners and runners-up in the agriculture, manufacturing and trade/services sector to be put towards the enhancement of their businesses, all finalists are given the opportunity to exhibit at the annual Business Opportunities and Franchise Expo in September.

For further information, visit: [www.eskom.co.za/csi](http://www.eskom.co.za/csi)



## **NQOBILE NKOSI (28)**

**JEWELLER AND FOUNDER: CORNERSTONE**

I was tired of being unemployed, so I enrolled in a college to train in jewellery design and manufacture. I graduated in 2007 and started a business, NQ Jewellery, the same year.

I met award-winning British jewellery designer Paul Spurgeon in 2009 during jewellery manufacturing training he facilitated in Germiston, Gauteng. We both recall the encounter as an instant bonding of "creative hearts and minds". We discussed the possibility of designing and manufacturing jewellery that would appeal to the global market. In 2010 we opened Cornerstone, the first jewellery brand to be designed and produced in Soweto, selling to retail shops in London's high streets.

Although my designs had received attention before, having a role model like Paul changed my business completely. Having someone to look up to spurs you to do your best. I was blessed in that he also became my business partner.

We see Cornerstone as a vehicle to create employment for South Africans. Paul's also introduced me to the global market and we hope that in the future, local prime retail shops can partner with us too.

Success is never just an individual effort. As the wise African saying tells us: "If you want to get somewhere fast, go alone. But if you want to get far, go together." Paul, myself, our staff members and the support from the British and South African jewellery trade have made Cornerstone a sustainable, rewarding business.

I believe in helping others, which is why I'm also inspired by Madiba and German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who saved the lives of hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust. Such people humble me and I try to emulate them by creating opportunities for others. I provide poverty-stricken people in my community with skills and jobs in the jewellery trade and they work as artisans in our business. Uplifting others should be important for everyone. It's our responsibility as humans to do so.

If you can provide skills and jobs for people, do it. Don't hold back. If you can make a difference to just one person's life, you've achieved something great. **DM**