

Audacity, perseverance and inspiration: The secrets to entrepreneurial success

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Miles Kubheka's entrepreneurial evolution is a story of audacity, perseverance and inspiration - and it all started with one daring idea. He recently shares his story (and some tips) with aspiring chartered accountants at the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants' Trainee Summit.



Miles Kubheka

Miles explains that his idea was sparked after watching a SAB ad featuring Vuyo, an entrepreneur who went from making boerewors rolls to flying around the world on 'Air-Wors one'. Like many South Africans, Miles wondered if the ad was based on a true story – and when he found out that it wasn't, he decided to 'become' Vuyo himself. "So many people have told me they had the same idea, but they didn't act on it. I think the reason I made it happen was because my mother always urged me not to be an 'also-ran' in life; she said you should stand for something. That sense of purpose stuck with me. You only live once, so you have to make it count."

This raises a point: surely, there are many other people who want to realise their dreams and ambitious ideas, or take advantage of an opportunity, but don't know how to. Miles' advice? "Start small" – as he did, with a stall at a farmer's market that cost only a few hundred rand every week. A big goal can

be very overwhelming, he points out. He adds that it's important not to overthink your plans. "Often, we don't act on an idea because we worry that it's stupid or won't work – but, actually, it might be a great idea. You'll only know once you take action."

Miles's own story is a case in point: many people would have questioned the wisdom of his decision to leave his job at Microsoft to set up a boerewors stand, but that choice led to the establishment of Vuyo's Restaurant and, ultimately, the founding of Wakanda Food Accelerator, his latest venture, which supports small businesses in the food space. He justifies his decision thus: "Starting a business is all about faith. There's no evidence that your idea will work; all you have is your belief in yourself and your mission, and the problem you are trying to solve." That faith, he adds, is critical, because it's what will see you through the tough times. In fact, that faith needs to be so strong that it drives you to become an evangelist for your own business, enabling you to convince other stakeholders – from customers to staff members – to believe in the business just as much as you do.

What stands out most about Miles's story is how he came to sell a product initially priced at R30 for R115.

The secret, he reveals, is a trick he learnt while at Microsoft: when launching a product, build an early version. It doesn't have to be perfect; it merely needs to be good enough to get people interested in trying it. Their reaction to that early iteration will let you know how you need to change it to be more attractive. In other words, you get to use your customers' money to conduct your research and development. Not only does this save you time and money, says Miles, but it's also the basis of innovation. "Far from inventing something new and previously unimagined, pure innovation often simply means taking an existing object and repurposing it for a customer base who didn't know they needed it," he explains.

In his own case, the first boerewors rolls on offer were fancied up with a splash of chakalaka; by the time he was ready to move on from the farmers' market, he had introduced three different options and added a variety of toppings, all driven by the feedback he received from buyers.

Upping the prices of his product took courage and conviction, Miles admits; qualities any entrepreneur will need – and which he is fortunate to have in droves. When he decided the time had come to establish a more permanent store, Miles set up shop in Braamfontein, launching the day after Christmas in 2012 with a manmade snow storm. The hype created by the launch lasted only so long, though; by the second day, customers were conspicuous by their absence. Miles tried to drum up interest by phoning the Sunday Times, asking them to report on the story – but when the journalist turned him down, he penned the story himself and submitted it to the newspaper. Although he didn't think it would be published, it made front page news – and provided another learning lesson. “The journalist asked SAB if I had requested permission to use Vuyo's name, and the spokesperson explained that if I had, they would have turned down my request – but since I hadn't, good luck to me. That showed me that it is sometimes better to ask for forgiveness than permission.” There's a caveat, he adds quickly – obviously, your actions should be intended for good. Plus, you need to be prepared for the possibility that they will backfire. You can't let that stop you from making decisions, though – in fact, bad decisions can turn out to be valuable, because they teach you how to make good ones, and they're the best teachers.

The publicity generated by the *Sunday Times* turned Miles into a regular on the media circuit, and the brand doubled in value – and yet, the Braamfontein outlet was only limping along. To help it, Miles took his product to his buyers with carts situated outside retailers in key positions. This helped him empower staff, while also raising brand awareness – until, ironically, the success of the carts meant that retailers wanted to set up their own boerewors stations. Undaunted, Miles took his next step: setting up Mothertruckers events where food was provided by food trucks.

The business was finally sold in 2015, after he had established his first restaurant. By this time, Miles had realised the power of social entrepreneurship, and that doing good makes for good business. Eager to use the lessons he had learnt during his journey, Miles created Wakanda as a platform to 'pay it forward' to other entrepreneurs. Today, the organisation supports a number of start-ups whose operations have a significant impact on their communities. During lockdown, the accelerator shifted focus slightly, turning into a kitchen which provided meals to the hungry. By partnering with appropriate stakeholders, Wakanda was able to feed just under six million people, proving Miles's belief that “the world's problems are often caused by issues that shouldn't exist in the first place. Starvation isn't caused by a lack of food; it's caused by a lack of access to food. It's vital that we address this, because if we don't solve hunger, we won't be able to solve any other problems.” This is why Wakanda focuses on hunger as the leading challenge to address. “Entrepreneurs need to solve problems, but they need to realise you can't do this by following a top down approach. You need to immerse yourself in your community rather than imposing solutions – and you need to take action, because talking about something never made any difference.”

Learning from Miles

As a final takeaway, Miles shares some of his key learnings that entrepreneurs should take to heart:

- Failure is not something to fear. Rather, it should reinforce success: if you got 49% for a test, it's a sign that you have the capacity to learn more. See fear as a muscle; the more you do the things you are afraid of, the easier it becomes to do them.
- It's hard to tell which dream to pursue – so try to pursue them all. I believe in range. Don't feel that you have to apply the knowledge you learnt about a specific field to that field – apply it to another area, and you'll be surprised at the amazing insights you come up with, simply because you are seeing things from a different perspective to everyone else. Try lots of different things to find out what you're good at.
- Avoid echo chambers, or surrounding yourself with people who think like you. Growth and scale can happen only with diverse views – that's the sweet spot where innovation happens.
- Remember that credibility requires a track record.
- It takes humility to be quiet and learn from others, but you need to do so in order to gain insights. This is especially important when you are just starting out.

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