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## RAINBOW NATION IN BLACK & WHITE

LUCY KENNY TALKS WITH TONY MANNING



## QUESTIONS: TONY MANNING

PROFILES CAN BE PAINFULLY PREDICTABLE. TOO MUCH FOCUS ON THE PAST, A BRIEF LOOK TO THE FUTURE, BUT A SCARCITY OF WHAT REALLY MATTERS - LIKE WHAT OUR INTERVIEWEE IS ACTUALLY THINKING, SAYING AND DOING FOR SOUTH AFRICA TODAY. SO WE'LL CUT TO THE QUICK. IN THIS MONTH'S Q&A WE TAKE SA'S TOP STRATEGIST, TONY MANNING, TO TASK AND STEP HIM ONTO HIS SOAPBOX TO WAX LYRICAL ABOUT WHAT REALLY GETS HIS GOAT.

**Q So Tony, blondes or brunettes?**

My wife's a gorgeous brunette.

**Q Moving on swiftly. The Manning approach includes asking tough questions that force executives to test their assumptions and challenge their sacred cows. How does your understanding of the new business environment help them confront reality and improve performance fast?**

I spend a lot of time watching what's happening in the world. Many executives are too busy to do that. So often I can alert them to issues they haven't considered or haven't taken seriously. Then, they can start thinking about how to respond.

**Q What has been your most embarrassing consulting moment ever?**

Nothing comes to mind. Maybe I just haven't noticed when I've goofed.

**Q South Africa appears to be in a "virtuous cycle of growth" and prospects for 2006 are looking positive. What are the key industries that are best placed to leverage this growth?**

Generic medicines, construction, financial services, education, commodity minerals while China keeps buying, tourism if avian flu doesn't hit SA, Sasol (it's a one-player industry and its prospects are extraordinary).

**Q Which profound piece of advice has shaped your business vision? Who offered you the insight?**

Many years ago, I was trained as a facilitator by the famous psychologist Carl Rogers. He used to say, "I can't change you, but I can give you the space to change yourself."

**Q In your management toolkit you speak about diversity. What are the current problems surrounding improving the number of women in the workplace? What does the future hold?** South Africa is actually doing very well when it comes to advancing women. And while women do have special challenges in organisations, surely it's time to stop treating them as a separate species. Helping them move up requires exactly the same strategies as helping men move up. A solid grounding. Long experience. Coaching and mentoring. And opportunities to learn.

**Q If you could be President of South Africa for one week, what one change would you make?**

I'd get up on my soapbox and say, "We're all in this together. Every South African has a place here, and there's a role - and an equal opportunity - for all of us. Let's make this country an economic champion." And I'd keep repeating it, so the message got through.

South Africa might be, as the national marketing slogan says, "alive with possibility" but we lack a shared sense of purpose. There's too much sniping, too much blaming, too much toxic comment. We have a crappy history and we can easily set ourselves up for a crappy future.

South Africa is a more divided place than many people like to admit. There is a potentially dangerous clash of values in this society - which has been highlighted by the tragic death of Brett Kebble. Many important black people acclaimed him as a hero; hardly any prominent whites have come out in praise of him.

At the moment, there is a sense that whites have a very limited future here. Too many very skilled, talented, and experienced people have hit a ceiling in their organisations and know that they will never go any further.

These are exciting times. We have unlimited opportunities. But if people don't feel they have a role and a future here, they will leave or slow down. This small country can't afford that cost.

**Q In South Africa today, empowerment is the big goal for everyone, whether you are a factory worker or an MD. However, there are many people with no experience and limited ability being placed in management positions. What are the consequences of this major problem?**

Read the papers ... watch the news ... delivery problems everywhere! And this is just warm-up time.

By now it should be clear that transformation is vital to the future of SA. I have long said that it needs to be accelerated. But much of what's happening right now under the mantle of "transformation" is going to have a terrible future cost. We have developed a view in this country that anyone can manage anything. This is utterly ridiculous.

Recent research shows that the average CEO of a big US corporation gets the job at the age of about 49 (and it takes longer in Europe or Japan). Given that they probably start work in their mid-20s - MBA graduates, for example, tend to be younger there than in SA - this means they've spent about 25 years working their way up the ladder. According to advocates of the "leadership pipeline" development process, leaders need to grow through six critical passages, so simple math tells us that each of these takes about four years.

Now consider what we're trying to do in SA. For some crazy reason, we think we can short-circuit a very arduous and tough learning process. In too many cases, we're putting people into key posts with little or no experience. We're trying to defy logic, trying to defy gravity. And these people will be the mentors and coaches of the next generation.



**Q** Without looking it up, give your definition of the word verisimilitude ...

What the hell are you talking about?! It's big words like this that cause trouble in organisations. One syllable would be good.

**Q** In your paper "What's next for SA ... And your business" you comment that developing tomorrow's workforce and specifically tomorrow's leaders is a matter of extreme urgency. How can firms participate in making this happen successfully?

First, recognise that this is a crisis issue, not just a nice-to-do. Second, put in place a systematic, deliberate process for making it happen. And third, get going. Invest in people. Do whatever it takes to grow them.

**Q** The poverty gap remains dangerously wide in SA. You write that even though corporate social investment (CSI) is higher as a proportion of total business turnover than in many other countries, it's nowhere near enough. How can companies intensify their efforts to help?

Well, they can begin by accepting that they have a powerful role in shaping the world they will operate in tomorrow. And by understanding that the future is a matter of choice, not chance.

**Tony Manning** describes himself as the "objective outsider" who sounds the wake-up call, challenges entrenched ideas, provokes fresh thinking, and provides the tools for doing it. His aim is to leverage clients' knowledge of their industries and markets, and equip them to think and act strategically, whilst at the same time ensuring they are future focussed. Tony has developed world class tools which help top management teams to make sense of what's happening around them and what they need to do, and to reach their growth and profit goals.

Tony Manning is an independent consultant in competitive strategy, leadership, and change management. His latest book is *Tony Manning's Management Toolkit*, (ZebraPress, 2004). He can be contacted at [strategist@tonymanning.com](mailto:strategist@tonymanning.com) or visit his website [www.tonymanning.com](http://www.tonymanning.com).

**Q** Which talent would you most like to have?

My wife's way with people. She's extraordinary. Everyone loves her. I'm dreadfully shy, and have to work hard in social situations. Some people might think I'm arrogant, and I've had a few say I'm intimidating, but that's not me at all. I'm just an introvert.

**Q** What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Dinner and a good red wine with my wife and daughter.

**Q** In South Africa, we're faced with the challenge of rapidly bringing together people from very different backgrounds, with very different world views, different experiences, and so on. How best do you get them to work together?

You said it – just get them to work together. We spend too much time harping on about our differences and trying to patch them up with flaky interventions and "spanbou" activities like drumming, paint ball fights, canoeing down the Orange River, or sitting around spilling our guts to a shrink. But the best place for you and me to learn about

each other is in the workplace. That's the arena for change. We're not using it.

**Q** If there was one piece of advice you would give a young person about to enter varsity, what would it be?

Learn to think. It's great to discover a subject that fascinates you, and of course some of what you learn may be invaluable. But if you can think, you can do anything. My daughter's a great example. She has a master's degree in archaeology, but is a project director for a major branding consultancy in London, and travels the world advising multinational clients. She has a wonderful, trained mind, so she could add great value in many situations.

**Q** Mugabe was a liberation leader who oversaw a phenomenal period of growth and economic success in Zimbabwe followed by a catastrophic fall into their current position. What do you think was the turning point in Zimbabwe's demise?

The land issue was on the table for a long time, but it's been used to serve an appalling political agenda.

**Q** Do you think SA will have similar land redistribution problems to Zimbabwe?

Very unlikely. But if politicians let their mouths run away with them, they'll sow seeds of trouble. If they make big promises and fail to manage expectations, they'll not only provoke a backlash from people who are desperate for land and houses, they'll also scare off investors.

**Q** What is your greatest extravagance?

Eating out. I don't play golf, own a boat, or have kids at private schools.

**Q** As both a behavioural scientist and a strategy guru, you must have encountered some unpredictable behaviour. Tell us about the most surprising management behaviour you've ever witnessed?

After almost 20 years as a consultant, not much surprises me any more. Except that most managers haven't learned the value of simplicity, or that people make the difference.

**20. What are your plans tonight Tony?**

Dinner with my wife.