Connecting the dots...

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Putting together a winning team...

Armed with the invaluable insights that we had gathered on the funeral assurance and services industry, while also having developed what we thought were innovative products in which we had a certain level of confidence, my attention shifted to putting together the nucleus of the team I believed would help me navigate the waters of uncertainty.

Of all the things that we had done; from registering the business with the Registrar of Companies; having it licensed with the Insurance and Pensions Commission and securing beautiful offices on the Ninth Floor of Livingstone House, the one thing I knew to have the potential to destroy the dream if not handled properly, was staffing.

To guard against potential miscalculations in this critical area, I had told myself that everyone whom we were to get on board had to join us on merit and that they needed to consistently perform to expectation to justify their inclusion and continued stay in the team. It helped that I didn't have to look over my shoulder for the slightest conflict, even at shareholder level.

Finding the right team players to get Nyaradzo off the ground turned out to be some piece of cake as most of the people I approached to join us were excited to participate in a new project, even though they knew there was a good chance of failure. I pretty much knew whom it was I wanted as members of the team from the get-go as I had the roles they would play clearly mapped out in my mind. In addition to not having a traceable track record of paying salaries on time, we also couldn't afford jaw-dropping salaries and perks. Those who joined us from the beginning did so from a place of faith and conviction, more than on track record and facts. Nonetheless, not one of those whom I approached turned me down.

Besides not wanting to pay an arm and a leg in salaries for a start-up with little in its coffers, I also didn't want to have a big headcount on the payroll.

To begin with, I had individuals within my family and business circles who had demonstrated their loyalty and commitment towards growing with me in my entrepreneurial journey and had contributed immensely to the overall success of some of the side hustles I had been into.

That list included my wife, Mavis, whom I wrote about in one of my previous instalments, and my younger brother, Donald, whom I took on board to manage Nyaradzo's finances.

Born on the 17th of January 1970, Donald had proved to be a steady hand when it came to figures, and I knew our books would be safe in his hands. He had done his "O" Levels at Harare High in Mbare, passing his examinations with flying colours, before proceeding to do his "A" Levels at Marlborough High School.

Donald would start off his accounting career at Cochrane Engineering Group as an Accounts Clerk from 1991 to 1993. Whilst at Cochrane – one of the country's largest boilermakers at the time – he enrolled with the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (United Kingdom) studying for a diploma as a Chartered Secretary. Thereafter, Donald would join Seed Co in 1993 as a Credit Controller. He had risen to become an Assistant Accountant by the time he left Seed Co, founded in 1940 as the Seed Maize Association, that was in 1996.

He moved to Cresta Hospitality Group in January of 1996 as an Assistant Accountant and held the position until September 1998 when he got the opportunity to become Innscor Fast Foods Group Management Accountant until 2000 when he was elevated to the position of Group Assistant Accountant.

With the invaluable experience acquired during his time with big corporates such as Seed Co and Cresta, which started off in 1958 when it began running the Jameson Hotel in Harare, Donald didn't think twice when I asked him to join Nyaradzo as Head of Finance in 2001, heading the department in its formative years.

I found Donald to be strategic in his thinking, analytical, honest and adept to changes in our operating environment, with strong leadership skills. Never one to stop learning, Donald would become one of the central figures in driving the growth of Nyaradzo.

Because of his vast experience, I would assign him to set up NFACO Financial Advisory Services (UK) in 2004. In later years, Donald would build and run the hospitality concern; Mudziyashe Group, which he established in 2012.

Apart from Donald, my elder brother Johane, who had previously worked for ZUPCO as a bus driver, would join us as our first bus driver. Johane had previously worked with me as an undertaker when we bought two brand new trucks that we used as hearses to transport the deceased.

In my elder brother, Johane, I found a driver who was familiar with all the country's routes and terrain which helped a lot, given mourners had to be transported to places far and wide. Traditionally and culturally, we prefer the burial of our dead in the comfort and safety of our rural homes, some of which are barely accessible due to the poor state of the roads in our country.

My reasoning in bringing Johane into fold was driven by two imperatives. Firstly he would not hold it against me in case we failed to pay his salary in an effort to manage our cash flows. Secondly the expertise and reputation he had gained of taking good care of equipment in his charge while working for previous employers would give our assets longevity. We knew that from the moment our bus left the company premises, Johane would make it his sole duty to keep it in good care while also doubling up as an undertaker, helping the hearse driver when the need arose. True to form, he was able to uphold the company's good name by exercising utmost care, caution and excellent customer service, in line with the high standards we had set for ourselves.

Born in August 1962 as the first born in our family of six boys, Johane had followed our father's footsteps through and through, career-wise. He became a driver at an early age, acquiring classes one, two, four and five together with a Defensive Driving Certificate. Outside of ZUPCO, Leonard Basiyawo, was the first to open an opportunity for Johane when he offered him a job to drive one of his delivery trucks at LB Timbers (Private) Limited.

For the two years that Johane worked at LB Timbers, which competed favourably with some of the big brands of the time in the timber space, Johane would acquire valuable customer service skills, which would prove vital for Nyaradzo once he joined us.

While working for LB Timbers from 1986 to 1988, he also acquired valuable insights on the workings of a delivery business; how important it was to deliver the correct goods at the expected time and the relevant documents to go with the delivery.

He would leave LB Timbers in 1988 to join Musabayeka Bus Services, owned by former Mutare Mayor and businessman, Enoch Musabayeka. At the time, Musabayeka Bus Service was one of the most sought-after public transport operators in Zimbabwe, particularly dominating the Chipinge and Chimanimani routes. Dealing with passengers daily meant that Johane's customer service skills only got better. At this time, he was also exposed to different far-off places as the routes would take him to places deep in rural Manicaland.

Most importantly, Johane was also exposed to many different cultures that came with each place he drove to. But before long, he would leave Musabayeka Bus Service to join the Zimbabwe United Passengers' Company (ZUPCO) in 1989, which at the time, had the largest fleet of buses in the country. Ironically, our father had also worked for ZUPCO while it was still the Salisbury Bus Company. And just like Father, Johane had travelled far and wide, making his knowledge about the country's different routes invaluable to Nyaradzo.

Johane would resign from ZUPCO in 1996 after serving for seven years to work as a personal driver for Uncle Tim Chiganze at Bartim Trading.

As a Personal Driver, one is expected to have a certain skill in discretion and understanding of their duties and responsibilities. To anticipate their needs adequately, one must be in tune with their bosses' everyday moods, at any given time. This was one of the most important characteristics I would find in my elder brother – the ability to be sensitive to the bereaved and anticipate their needs long before they voiced them.

When I bought the two trucks marking my journey into the funeral services space, Johane would leave his post to work with me. By that time, he was working for one of Uncle Timothy Chiganze's companies, Rosemarket Investments, where he was a driver. In total, Johane had more than sixteen years of experience as a driver in different sectors of the economy before joining Nyaradzo.

While at Nyaradzo, he would receive in-house training as a Mortician so he could become the consummate funeral services company employee. Twenty one-years later, Johane has risen to become a Workshop Supervisor with a lot to give to our younger crew.

Uncle Edward Musasa with whom I had stayed at Mbare Musika and worked with for years, would become our first hearse driver. I had no doubt that Sekuru Edward would be an invaluable addition to the team due to his tenacity, inventive mind and incredible work ethic.

By the time we put Edward on the Nyaradzo payroll as our first hearse driver, he was thirty-eight. He immediately proved me right, working long hours driving the deceased from one part of the country to the other without complaint. As the organisation grew and we could afford to hire more hearse drivers, Edward would take advantage of the opportunities the organisation presented to go back to school.

He decided to pursue his "O" Levels by enrolling with the People's College, an independent private college established in 1983. In addition to academic studies, the college offered technical courses such as Motor Mechanics, Electrical Engineering, Garment Construction, Hairdressing, Baking and Culinary Arts. Edward would pursue both academic and technical studies enrolling for a course in Motor Mechanics. He would graduate as a Motor Mechanic. After working for three years as an undertaker, Edward would become one of Nyaradzo's Motor Mechanics from 2004 to 2010 before becoming a Workshop Supervisor, a position he holds to this day.

Sheila Mutongwizo (nee Musasa) was another vital team member I took on board. After almost a decade of working as a teacher in two different provinces, Sheila needed a career change and she found Nyaradzo the perfect place for her. Having finished her "O" Levels in 1984, Sheila secured a place at Masvingo Teachers' College from where she graduated in 1990; for most women at the time, the most popular and accessible professions were teaching and nursing. Sheila would teach at different schools which included 1.1 Infantry Battalion and Mabhukundwana Primary schools in Bulawayo before moving to Harare where she taught at Mabelreign ZRP Primary and later Southerton Primary School before resigning at the level of Senior Teacher to join Nyaradzo.

The skills she had acquired as a teacher interacting with fellow teachers, parents and students would help us immensely in the areas of marketing and customer service. She had the ability to unpack our products, simplifying them so customers could understand, which helped us to grow our policy book.

The fact that she had a driver's license, a feat that was still not very common at the time, especially for women, also helped a lot. Sales Representatives who were mobile were very much in demand as they would cover more ground moving from place to place. In some cases, they helped drive teams from the sales and marketing departments to different meetings.

Because she has always enjoyed this role in sales, Sheila has been a mentor to several of our Sales Representatives who have since joined the company, holding their hand when times are hard. She remains as dedicated to her work today as she was from day one and has grown professionally and personally just as the company has grown.

Besides Mavis, Donald, Johane, Edward, and Sheila, I needed more people that I could trust with my life and who would have my back in good and bad times. To keep our headcount and overheads low, I went for a small team of multitalented individuals who were flexible and ready to take on their assigned roles immediately while outsourcing those specialist roles I felt needed to be subcontracted.

I was particularly keen on having staff members with behavioural traits that merited inclusion in the team, such as being ethical, passionate at what they do; and playing to win. I also wanted individuals into whom I could drill a set of values to live by and get them to understand our service culture and standards.

It was also crucial for me to get individuals who, as the organisation expanded, would be competent enough to take up opportunities within the company. Naturally, I settled for individuals who were easy to inspire to do work they had never thought they could do and who could lead multidisciplinary teams.

Each new position had to be justified and whoever was coming in to fill it had to be selected on merit, as we sought to grow the business organically. In that list were my all-weather associates such as Webster Chikengezha, Brighton Chinyere and Larry Tsikada. Also deserving of special mention was my go-to person for many years, Innocent Mutusva, who is now late.

Webster Chikengezha joined Nyaradzo from the United Methodist Dental Clinic where he had worked as an Administrator and Accountant from 1994.

Born in 1966, Webster did his "O" Level studies at Seke 1 High School in 1983, from where he joined the Ministry of Education and Culture as an Administration Clerk. It was during his time in government service that he discovered his love for accounting. He decided to enrol for a Pitman Level Four Accounting Course and went on to achieve other accounting qualifications, such as a Zimbabwe Accounting Technician Certificate, ICIS Diploma and a Bachelor's degree in Business Management with the University of South Africa, otherwise known as UNISA. Webster would also study for a Masters in Leadership, (MBL), graduating in 2019.

Webster's journey with Nyaradzo began with him taking up the position of Marketing Manager, with cross-cutting responsibilities that placed him in charge of market penetration and business growth. Having served in that position for two years, he rose to become the Divisional Director (Funeral Services) with the mandate of spearheading the setting up of the services division. Thereafter, he moved to Calundike Exports as the Managing Director in 2004 with the overall responsibility of running the manufacturing arm of the budding group. In 2006, he became Projects Director with overall responsibility for business development projects before becoming Head of the life business. Webster is currently Managing Director of our SA operations, which he was instrumental in setting up.

From my former employer, Old Mutual, I got Brighton Chinyere and Larry Tsikada.

Brighton joined Old Mutual as an Administration Assistant, with responsibilities that included assisting district managers in recruiting Sales Representatives and preparing their commissions and salaries, amongst others.

He would be promoted to an Administration Clerk, whose duties included receiving and processing policy applications from Sales Representatives, vetting proposal forms and issuing policy contracts, handling enquiries from representatives, clients, and related departments.

Born in Bindura in 1967, Brighton completed his "O" Levels in 1986 and decided to pursue "A" Levels, though it was only reserved for a small percentage of students who had completed "O" Levels, as limited schools were offering "A" Levels to black students at the time. With the University of Zimbabwe being the only university, enrolment came at a premium, such that Brighton decided to go into employment straight after his "A" Levels while he studied part-time at the Harare Polytechnic, from which he qualified with a National Intermediary Diploma in Information Processing and went on to study and complete a Diploma in Marketing Management.

All this experience would become handy after Brighton joined Nyaradzo in 2001 as a Financial Advisor before becoming Operations Manager in 2004. In 2005, he headed the company's marketing division and was promoted to Assurance Division General Manager in 2007. Over the years, he would go on to add more professional qualifications that included a Diploma in Insurance with the Insurance Institute of Zimbabwe (IIZ) in 2008, an Executive Development Programme with the University of Zimbabwe, also in 2008, and a Project Management course with the same institution in 2016. His current posting as General Manager for the Business Development and Projects portfolio commenced in 2010. His role includes overseeing and coordinating group construction projects, spearheading the Group expansion through identification and acquisition of suitable land and properties, appointment of contractors and Engineers for construction projects and supervising the projects among others.

Larry Tsikada was in the Information Technology (IT) Department at Old Mutual, and we onboarded him with a mandate to manage our IT infrastructure. His focus was operating our custom-made operating system, NYASyS or Nyaradzo Administration System. NYASyS was a bespoke administration system developed from scratch by Kumbirai Dube and Fungai Mandizvidza, to whom I had been referred by their workmates at Old Mutual to assist us with developing the system.

I shall be devoting space in my next instalment to talk about NYASyS and how we ended up migrating to Easy Policy Administration (EasiPol). All that would not have been possible without Larry who, at some point, would decide to leave Nyaradzo to work in South Africa where he has remained pretty much part of the Nyaradzo family through his directorship at our subsidiary in South Africa.

Currently, Larry is an IT Infrastructure Specialist at City of Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa. Apart from being a Non-Executive Director Nyaradzo Funeral Service (South Africa), he is also an Independent Director at IT-Savanna, also in South Africa. An alumnus of Prince Edward High School, Larry studied towards an IT Diploma with CITMA College; Organisational Leadership Management with the University of the Free State; Project Management with UNISA and Information Technology, Networks and Optimisation with the University of Zimbabwe.

I will conclude this chapter by acknowledging a number of individuals who were armour bearers in our infancy, namely Stanford Kawara, Cecilia Chifamba (nee Mandidewa), and Fadzai Manyimbiri. Stan Kawara was amongst the youngest people working at Nyaradzo in its early days. At just twenty-two years of age, I took him on board as an Office Orderly who also stood for any role that he was needed in. Like everyone else at the company, Stan was trained in-house as both an undertaker and a mortician.

Because of his endless energy, he would find himself carrying out most of the company's errands as he was also super smart and streetwise. Stanford also went through the staff development mill and currently heads operations at our Zvishavane Branch. Cecilia Chifamba worked as my Secretary during my Old Mutual days, from 1999 and maintained the same role when we moved over to Nyaradzo in 2001. In 2003, she joined our team of Field Sales Representatives and has remained an Insurance Advisor of note.

Fadzai Manyimbiri was our first Receptionist, starting work in March 2001 and later becoming Personal Assistant (PA) to Donald, who was heading our Finance department. She is currently the PA to the Managing Director of Calundike Exports and had prior stints in the Sales department as well as being PA to the Company Secretary and Legal Advisor. These armour bearers have stayed the course and been the business' mainstay in their different assigned roles.

The other early pioneers included the late Innocent Mutusva, Benny Mukusha and Shupikai Benhura whose contributions to the business made Nyaradzo what it is today. I am glad we are still very much in touch with most of these pioneering staff members even when they have since left the employment of Nyaradzo. I am also happy that the decisions we made more than two decades ago to bring these amazing men and women on board were right.

One of the local businesspeople who inspires me a lot, Strive Masiyiwa, made an important point in one of his Facebook posts to the effect that, "Ultimately it is the battle for talent and skills that will decide whether your organisation will be a success or not, and ultimately whether your country will succeed to deliver prosperity for you in the twenty-first century or not." He went on to say, "With access to the right skills and talent, no problem will arise in your business that cannot be solved...Nothing, absolutely nothing!"

That the pioneering men and women who joined us twenty-one years ago have consistently demonstrated having what it takes to prepare the way for others to follow is something I will always cherish for the rest of my life. From the beginning, these legends knew they had their work cut out – unknown, challenging, and ambiguous and that while it was going to be frustrating, it was nothing compared to the joy of winning.

Regardless, they had to think big and work as one united team which has remained guided by Nyaradzo's culture and values. Even as we were working hard to shape Nyaradzo into what it is today, we never ran short of opportunities to have fun, play golf, and go out as a team. Throughout my interaction with them, I have always considered myself as one amongst equals whose vision is still unfolding.