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FM LIFE

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MEN'S ISSUES
Mobilising male energy

How do SA businessmen relate the holistic, nurturing concepts of the ManKind Project with the hard-nosed practices of the corporate world? By Hilary Prendini Toffoli

The ManKind Project (MKP) came to SA from America eight years ago. It was one of the men's movements spawned by *Iron John*, the bestseller by American poet and activist Robert Bly that promoted nurturing brotherhoods and got Bly on to the cover of *Newsweek* in the 1980s.

Behind these networks lay what one reviewer described as "a brooding conviction that the emotional isolation and violence of American men masks a hunger for fathering and male mentoring, lost in a time of soaring divorce rates and single-parent households".



Andrew Page Wood

Since MKP's launch in SA in 2001, 958 men have undergone one or more challenging weekends of initiation and self-examination designed to develop mature masculine selves. They range across the board from the unemployed to captains of industry.

"Every man going on an MKP weekend does so for his own reasons. It's all about taking account of your life, acting responsibly and being in touch with yourself and others," says Andrew Page Wood (48), MD of VideoIQ Africa, a CCTV surveillance company. "For me it was a near-fatal car accident. Before that I'd felt invincible. I'd worked and travelled extensively, earning big bucks in IT. But after the accident I began to ask questions I never had before."

Benjamin Kodisang - Life is about being authentic, being who you are

He went on an MKP weekend after seeing the profound impact it had on a friend's life. "The challenge of facing my deepest, darkest self was absolutely terrifying, yet doing this with a group of men who have done the same themselves was a beautiful experience.

"There were twice as many facilitators as delegates - 40 of us and 80 of them. The youngest delegate was an 18-year-old Xhosa man, the oldest a 76-year-old English speaker - and there was everything in between. Christians, Jews, Muslims, black, white, rich, poor. I got to know all of them better than I know my mates. I left knowing where I belonged and what I had to do. And I now have a group of men I can trust and reach out to anywhere in the world because MKP is international.



Andrew Fulton - MKP accelerates the ability to trust and share

"It's all about taking account of your life, acting responsibly and being in touch with yourself and others. My problem in business was always that I was never hard enough. MKP gave me the ability to say No' with confidence, to access my feelings about something or someone, and tell them. This is powerful. Also, I have managed to balance my life."

He's since moved to a small farm between George and Knysna, where he's started a business school for the poor, grows veggies, spends time with his family and travels on

business to Jo'burg.

"I left knowing where I belonged and what I had to do... It's all about taking account of your life, acting responsibly and being in touch with yourself and others" - ANDREW PAGE WOOD



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"We are a diverse society with deep wounds," says Rurik McKaiser (40), CEO of The Phoenix Group, a Cape Town-based marketing and distribution company for food ingredients. "The black-white divide of racism and internalised oppression is very real. But what is beautiful about the MKP brotherhood is that we have these hard conversations in a fierce yet loving and healing way. The issues relating to money, privilege and sexuality are also real, and I must honour the men of MKP for the constant appetite they/we demonstrate - by fiercely facing up to these conversations."

McKaiser has been involved in MKP since 2004 and done more than 30 training weekends. "My first training was definitely not pleasant, but it eventually grew on me. I am constantly experiencing emotional and intellectual growth because of my exposure to amazing men.

"The weekends allow me to weave the theoretical concepts of living and of leadership into my psychic DNA. For instance, a core pillar of the MKP ethos is related to living an accountable life. I have walked away from many deals and clients, and recently dismissed two of my colleagues for lack of accountability and unethical behaviour."

The challenge for him is that MKP is voluntary. "We do not have a fat bank account and offices, and we have zero employees. All is done by us for us."

Benjamin Kodisang (38) is MD of Old Mutual Investment Group Property Investments, the largest real estate company in Africa. He's only done MKP's initiation weekend. "Time to be committed to MKP processes is a challenge."

He heard about the network through his coach on the UCT Graduate School of Business's Emerging Leaders programme. "Her husband had done MKP and she had witnessed what good it did for him. She advised me to be open, non-judgmental and trust the process. It was with this attitude that I arrived for the initiation weekend and the experience was life-changing.

"But facing your demons is never an easy task. The main thing I learnt was to unlearn the lesson that expressing my feelings was a sign of weakness, and to learn that life is about being authentic, being who you are and having the courage to show it, regardless of the consequences.

"Business leaders who utilise only the hard-nosed intellectual part have been found wanting. Today business requires leaders who are connected to their customers and their stakeholders at the emotional level and who bring their being to every engagement."

One of MKP's main goals is to attract men from all race groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, says Craig Carter (48), who has staffed several weekends. He's the chief operating officer and director of JSE-listed Purple Capital financial services company and its subsidiary Global Trader.

"We have been successful in attracting men from varying backgrounds but have struggled to keep them involved in the MKP community on an ongoing basis, largely because of transport and communication difficulties. The Soweto iGroup trainings are our most recent attempt to bring MKP to the men we are trying to reach.

"SA is a particularly patriarchal and male-dominated society. Many men took part in the bush war, either for MK or the SADF, and still carry the baggage of their traumatic experiences. In addition we have the burden of apartheid which most of us still carry. In MKP we help men look at these shadows and to try to lead more conscious lives. For me, interacting with men from all race groups and economic backgrounds has fundamentally shifted my world view."

Andrew Fulton (38), director of Eighty20, a management consulting and data analysis company, has staffed 10 weekends, and facilitates group work after the weekends. He says MKP is not about trying to change others, but about "living with yourself in light of the decisions and choices you've made. So I try not to get too upset when people act without integrity. I think a lot of people who do the weekend come back with an over-exaggerated sense of accountability that just doesn't work in this world. You have to temper it.

WHY NOT JOIN

The ManKind Project's next training programmes take place on August 14-16 at Habonim Camp in Onrust near Cape Town, and August 28-30 at Magaliesberg Retreat near Johannesburg

www.mankindproject.co.za

"For me MKP's greatest gift is just making it possible to sit in a group of men and share something deeper than how I felt about last night's soccer match. Women will tell their deepest secrets to their hairdresser. Men sometimes take decades to move beyond basic grunting with each other. MKP accelerates that ability to trust and share."

He found trusting the hardest part. "I was so jaded and cynical. And men in MKP let me down regularly. We aren't perfect. But I would say they're usually aware enough to acknowledge it."

In one of the groups he recently facilitated, he briefly involved his neighbour's four-year-old son. "It was incredible to see how a nervous four-year-old came out of his shell and felt safe in a group of male strangers. For the men it was a visceral reminder of why this work is so necessary - to get an opportunity to be the father/uncle/friend you would have liked to have in your own life when you were younger.

"My company deals with statistics daily, and with more than half of all mothers in this country being single, and some of the highest murder and rape statistics, SA men certainly need something more than they have."

- The cost is R3 800/weekend. But since MKP don't turn anyone away, there are scholarships for those who can't pay.



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