

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO ESTABLISH A LEADING BLACK COMMERCIAL LAW FIRM IN SOUTH AFRICA?

When Lungile Mazwai and Metja Ledwaba set out to do this in 1996, they knew that the challenge would demand hard work, selfless sacrifice, a powerful partnership and an appetite for excellence. The rest is now part of South African legal history.

Ledwaba Mazwai: A HABIT OF EXCELLENCE

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

In 1996, entering the legal practice as a motivated young black attorney was a choice marked by particular challenges. Establishing your own firm would prove to be even more difficult. “The most challenging part of the journey was securing the initial corporate and commercial work, turning away the legal work we had elected not to provide,” recalls Mazwai.

But this dedicated duo shared a vision and inspired each other to get there. It was a path marked by hardships and sacrifice. “At first, we had to work without earning an income. Our limited funds were prioritised for payment of running expenses and staff salaries,” says Ledwaba.

Well-earned successes soon followed, as the firm played a key role in the restructuring of state-owned entities and later on complex infrastructure projects - most notably the Gautrain Rapid Rail Link project. “Riding the Gautrain for the first time was a particular privilege and thrill,” recalls Mazwai.

A TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Ledwaba Mazwai is built on a rock-solid partnership, which began as a varsity friendship in KwaZulu Natal. As bright-eyed students nothing was going to stop young Lungile and Metja.

“That was a good period,” Mazwai remembers. “Formulating what we were going to do and how we were going to do our bit to change the world for the better.” The era holds special memories for the two, who would later become proud founding partners of one of South Africa’s leading black law firms. Ledwaba explains: “The pillars of our partnership developed in those years. It became our practice that at least one of us must attend a lecture and make sure that the other has notes. When preparing for exams, my notes were half in my handwriting and half in Lungile’s handwriting. So we very soon learned to consult and look after each other.”

It is in those years that the seed was planted for some of the critical values of their partnership. One such value being always selfless and being strong where the other is weak, for their weakness should be your strength and it should never be a reason for criticism.

CHANGING THE GAME

As young black commercial attorneys in a traditionally white industry, Ledwaba and Mazwai had to leave no stone unturned to earn the trust and respect they enjoy today. One of the hardest parts of the journey was gaining the confidence of commercial and corporate clients who historically favoured established relationships with more experienced firms.

“As a young black attorney, you really have to prove yourself in the face of constant doubt about your abilities,” says Ledwaba. “It feels as if you have to work twice as hard, because any failure on your part will confirm the expectation that you can’t do it.”

“We soon realised that this challenge should inspire excellence on our part. Here he quotes Aristotle, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”



Metja Ledwaba Corporate and Commercial Attorney



Lungile Mazwai Corporate and Commercial Attorney

AN INTEREST IN INFRASTRUCTURE

As the backbone of any developing or developed economy, infrastructure seems to be embedded in the firm’s DNA. In particular, Ledwaba Mazwai specializes in, amongst others, rail, transport and energy.

The firm’s relationship with Transnet began in the late 1990s. Transnet was one of the first corporate clients to entrust significant commercial work and transactions to Ledwaba Mazwai, including the corporatisation of SAA when it was a division of Transnet.

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Today, Ledwaba Mazwai takes procurement, transaction agreements, construction and operation of infrastructure projects in their stride. The firm’s extensive experience in infrastructure and other private funding initiative projects

span over many sectors including rail transportation, power sector (IPPs), office accommodation, hospitals, schools, housing, prisons and information technology. They also provide regular advice relating to constitutional and administrative law, particularly on the public sector side.

FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

Looking back at the tough road to success, there’s little to stop Ledwaba Mazwai now. With a touch of nostalgia, Lungile Mazwai sometimes wishes he could share a few words with the young law student he once was. “I would tell him that all things are possible and achievable for as long as you remain focused and stay true to the aspiration.”

Metja Ledwaba agrees. “The law is not an easy area of practice. You must be willing to learn new things everyday, have an enormous appetite for research and a huge quest for gaining knowledge. Every other lawyer is intelligent - the difference lies in your own discipline, approach and ability to enterprise your skills.”

Looking at their enviable track record it’s clear that for Ledwaba Mazwai, excellence has indeed become a habit.

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