



THE DOCTOR IS IN

Despite the weighty demands of a business empire spanning healthcare, technology, logistics, mining and energy, Dr Anna Mokgokong is dedicated to uplifting other women as well

Written by Mariam Isa

South African women haven't managed to seize the opportunities offered to them by official empowerment policies and have simply "made a little corner" for themselves in a room dominated by men, declares Mokgokong. "If you aren't in the driver's seat, you'll get bones. Women must seize power and know what to do with it," she says. Ironically, this woman - who launched herself from a medical career to the pinnacle of the business world - believes the biggest competitors faced by both black and white women in the workplace are black men. A handful

of top names who benefited most from empowerment deals struck soon after democracy continue to dominate the corporate landscape and the system still conspires to maintain the status quo, she maintains. "Our own black brothers left crumbs for us - they took the lion's share," she says. Women are still being marginalised in empowerment deals and even once they've achieved status, they don't get enough publicity or make exciting news," she adds. Mokgokong is one of the founding members and Group Executive Chairperson of Community Investment Holdings (CIH), a leading black empowerment

company with an annual turnover of more than R18 billion. With an estimated worth of more than R100 million, she's one of the wealthiest businesswomen in SA, as well as one of its most active philanthropists. Known as "Dr Anna" due to her medical background, Mokgokong's also the Chairperson of Jasco Electronics Holdings, Executive Chairperson of the Afrocentric Investment Corporation and Air Liquide Healthcare and serves on the board of a string of companies, including Malaseba Tshane Electric Cable, Community Healthcare Holdings, Conglog and Nulec SA. She was SA's Businesswoman of the Year in 1999 and was honoured by the USA's Star Group as one of

COVER FEATURE

the 50 leading women entrepreneurs in the world in 1998 and 2002. Her warmth, dynamism and enthusiasm are contagious. "I had this itch in me - I thrive on challenges and that adrenaline rush is what stimulates me," she says.

Born in Soweto and raised in Swaziland, Mokgokong's entrepreneurial roots date back to her childhood, when she sold sandwiches on the school playground to make pocket money. "I was very clear about my life - I wanted to be famous, I wanted to be rich, I wanted to be a film star. I can truly say that I'm living my dream," she says.

Her business career had to wait, as her mother was determined to see her become a doctor. However, even in medical school, she displayed a flair for commerce, persuading a producer of exotic leather handbags in Botswana to provide her with consignments which she sold in a retail store she'd set up. "That's what kick-started my entrepreneurial life. I sold handbags to doctors, students, nurses and teachers," she says.

Nonetheless, Mokgokong launched herself wholeheartedly into medicine when she qualified as a doctor, starting a practice in a town near Brits that served eight villages and ending up with 40,000 patients from surrounding communities. However, it was the support of a group of "grannies" who became loyal patients that paved the way for others to follow suit. She went on to run a variety of community programmes, such as baby welfare classes for working mothers. "They taught me humanity and humility," she says.

The medical work also provided the springboard for the next phase of Mokgokong's life. After eight years of service, she decided to establish a pharmaceutical wholesale business. With the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1994 and the dramatic political changes accompanying it, she was able to register the company in SA.

It was at this stage that her innate business acumen came to the fore. She acquired business partners, including current partner Joe Madungandaba, and approached the Sanlam Development Fund for finance. "We had no money, but a vision which we sold. They took it and funded us with nearly R1 billion," she says. "It was a bold step, but we had a

coherent story. They didn't want passive players borrowing to buy shares, they wanted people running the company and managing it from day to day." Her company, initially named Malaseba Holdings, invested in many different organisations and grew exponentially.

However, with the global stock market crash in 1999, Malaseba Holdings found itself "under water," she says, adding: "I was the scorn of the business community." Nevertheless, she didn't concede defeat. Instead, she teamed up with Netcare, rebranded her company as CIH and transformed it into a successful hospital group. "When you've built something from scratch, you fight back. You become

"When you've built something from scratch, you fight back. You become tenacious."

tenacious," she says. Gradually CIH branched into many sectors through its investments. Why did Mokgokong favour this strategy? "It's fun to be diversified and it mitigates risk," she smiles.

Her investment advice is succinct and straightforward. "Healthcare's a very good stock. People will always require specialised treatment, no matter what happens or what government rules." The eventual establishment of National Health Insurance would benefit the sector, as government would have to pool its resources with private companies, she adds.

She acknowledges that one of the big challenges in starting a business is finding financing. "Banks are attracted to people with assets. If you have nothing, they don't want to talk to you, but when you've got

something, they can leverage - then you're the favourite."

The financial system doesn't give as much support to women as to men, despite the good example set by government, she says. Nevertheless, this could change. "Policy exists that's enabling for women, but we haven't really taken advantage of it. We haven't been assertive enough."

Mokgokong believes a 10% ownership target for black women in the corporate world isn't high enough. Bonus points for companies which exceed that goal should be awarded.

She also stresses that women in business should support each other. She walks the talk during what she describes as an "annual crusade" every August (Women's Month), when she takes a group of female managers to the Mount Grace Hotel in Magaliesburg for a weekend with speakers "to get them pumped up". She also invites aspiring female entrepreneurs to her home to network and debate issues.

One of the most basic rules for earning respect in the workplace is power dressing, particularly for women in senior positions, says Mokgokong. "You should dress in a respectful way - don't have your boobs all over the place if you're a manager or men because they'll poke fun at you. Don't arrive at work wearing a micro-mini dress - when you're sitting and people can see everything, how can you take charge? You're weakening your position. And don't show your underwear when you bend down, because by doing so, you disempower yourself!"

Appropriate attire notwithstanding, Mokgokong concedes that it's still often challenging for women in senior positions to gain males' acknowledgement of their authority. She recalls the first time she chaired a board meeting for Jasco, when the men in attendance paid her no attention and continued chatting among themselves while she spoke. At the second meeting she chaired, she decided to assert herself in what she describes as a "very nice way, because if you confront them head on, they'll fight back 20 times as hard".

She began by saying: "Gentlemen, I have something funny to tell you before we start this meeting. The last time we met, there were meetings within the

meeting, I don't know if that was because I'm a woman, but today I expect you to show your best behaviour and boardroom etiquette." This forthright approach worked like a charm.

This example is one of many she believes confirm the perception that the corporate world isn't for faint-hearted women. "You have to put up a fight and be thick-skinned. Sometimes men will say things that make you want to cry or make you angry, but just step over them and focus on your ultimate goal. There'll be many distractions to sway you, but just stay focused and deal with

"You have to put up a fight and be thick-skinned. Sometimes men will say things that make you want to cry or make you angry, but just step over them and focus on your ultimate goal."

them," she advises. Another cause Mokgokong is passionate about is giving back. "Business and philanthropy are very much intertwined - we see it worldwide. It's like having many garments that you never wear. You reach a point where you say: 'I need to clear my closet because there's someone out there who needs and deserves these clothes.'" Among other initiatives, as Chairperson of Afrocentric Health, she's encouraged the company to fund a school and playground at the Johannesburg General Hospital. Unsurprisingly, Mokgokong has no intention of retiring. But when she has the time, her dream is to establish a TV programme which discusses entrepreneurship. Ideally, it would focus on issues which are often overlooked, like

Photographer: Julian Dreyer; Hair & make-up: Fuli Steiner; Top and jewelry: Mokgokong.com; Skirt: D'Oré

Photographer: Julian Dreyer; Hair & make-up: Fuli Steiner; Top and jewelry: Mokgokong.com; Skirt: D'Oré



the importance of having a will or how to approach a bank for vendor finance. "I'd want to discuss actual cases, rather than give lectures, because real stories remain embedded in people's minds," she says. Ultimately, she'd like to expand the programme into Africa and incorporate another language so that many other viewers could benefit, she adds.

She'd also like to establish a maths and science academy in memory of her mother who was one of SA's first black female mathematicians, which children from nearby townships could attend on Saturdays to help address some of SA's

educational shortcomings. "It will take maybe 30 years for us to get things right, but in the meantime, let's find temporary solutions," she says.

This successful dynamo has only one regret: not having spent more time with her two children. "I never saw them grow up. They seemed to become adults in no time. I was amazed," she says. But a comment from her son on his 21st birthday assuaged her guilt. "He said: 'Mom, I know you've sacrificed your own life to give us a better life - and I want you to know that we appreciate it.'"