

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Honorary Doctorates in Philosophy from University of Johannesburg (UJ) (2006) and University of Pretoria (UP) (2007)
- Working in leadership positions at two top global companies: South African Breweries (1998 – 2004) and BHP Billiton (2004 – 2008)
- Fellowships at Oxford (1983 – 1984), Harvard (1988 – 1989), Princeton (1989) and Stanford (1995) – all world-class universities

## DEFINING MOMENT

When Vincent Maphai was in primary school, one of his teachers would say to him every day, 'My boy, you are going places in your life'. Looking back, he says it was through her encouragement that he discovered the power of affirmation; even in the midst of abject poverty, the teacher instilled positive personal values in him. "I wish she were still alive today," says Maphai. "I would tell her she was a good prophet and motivator."

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

As much as Maphai's career has revolved around working with people, he is happiest on his own: "If I had my way, I would prefer to be reading and reflecting. It's heaven on earth for me." He loves fiction because it gives the reader a wider scope to understanding humanity, and recently he has been revisiting the literature that inspired him as a child.

## MASTERING VARIATION

Vincent Maphai describes himself as an opportunist and a rebel. The philosophical maverick credits his distinguished and remarkably varied career to his ability to spot opportunities and act decisively when they arise. Over the course of his 44-year career in academia, business and public service, Maphai's background in philosophy prompted him to ask fundamental questions of himself and of the world: "I always said to myself, my university education is not there to frame my career; it's there to train my mind."

In 1955, when Maphai was just three years old, his family was forcibly removed from their home in Bantule location in Pretoria under the Group Areas Act. Atteridgeville was his first conscious home, a tightly knit but poverty-stricken

community where he played happily in the streets. Maphai describes his primary school years as miserable; he became aware for the first time that his family of five was desperately poor, and it was not uncommon for them to go without money or food. "The sense of poverty became inescapable," he says.

To help support his family, the young Maphai took on multiple roles: He was a school pupil, a part-time worker, and a beer-taster and barman at his family's home-run shebeen. "I was taught how to make and sell home brew; obviously our quality control was tasting, so I started drinking as an 8-year old," he jokes.

As a teenager he would do homework by candlelight, inspired by several excellent and supportive high-school teachers. When Maphai was in Standard 9, a small group of highly politicised students joined the school and through them, he became increasingly aware of the injustices of apartheid. "At first we thought they were crazy," he recalls, "but they shattered our comfort zone."

After matriculating, Maphai registered for a part-time BA degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa), majoring in political science and philosophy. "To be honest, I did both courses for the wrong reason – because they sounded sexy," he quips. "But I did well, and I thought 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'." In 1975 he was offered a prestigious scholarship to study philosophy at Belgium's Catholic University of Leuven. The opportunity gave Maphai a taste of freedom and adventure, and the chance to escape the grim realities of apartheid. "It was a total change from the dust of Atteridgeville to one of the capitals of Europe." He obtained his Bachelor of Philosophy degree *cum laude* and his MA *magna cum laude* before returning to South Africa in 1978.

It was a very difficult time to realise one's academic potential as a black South African, yet Maphai forged a path for himself. He began lecturing in philosophy, first at the University of the Transkei, now the Walter Sisulu University, and then at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). He was also invited to the North Eastern University in the United States as a Visiting Professor. In 1989, Maphai was given the opportunity to combine his love of political science and philosophy at the University of the Western Cape's (UWC) Political Science



Department, first as a senior lecturer, then an associate professor and finally, Head of Department. He also obtained his PhD from the then University of Natal, now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and was appointed a professor at the University of Cape Town in 1995.

## INTO THE PRIVATE SECTOR

As South Africa began to chart a new course after democracy, so did Maphai. He joined the Human Sciences Research Council as an Executive Director and taught as an extraordinary professor at the UP before an unplanned pivot to the private sector in 1998, when he was approached by South African Breweries (SAB). "To be honest, I wasn't really interested – but SAB was very, very insistent," he laughs. "I told myself, if I don't like it, I can always go back to teaching." In fact, it turned out to be an exciting opportunity that further broadened his horizons.

Maphai didn't hurry back to academia; instead he reinvented himself and stayed in the private sector for 15 years, working for two high-powered global companies. As a Director at SAB, he spent eight years helping to develop its strategy with a particular focus on dealing with the socio-political environment. He left that position to head the Southern Africa business resources group BHP Billiton. "This also was not a result of planning – I was just responding to the demands of the moment," he says. Maphai was Chairman for five years before returning to the rebranded and expanded SABMiller as its Corporate Affairs and Transformation Director.

He looks back at his career in the private sector with great satisfaction. "There was a very different emphasis: University is about asking good questions, while the private sector is about giving good answers."

Ever the multitasker, Maphai also took on a host of other challenges during his academic and private sector careers. He was also made Chairperson of the Presidential Review Commission on Reform and Transformation in the

public service by then President Nelson Mandela. Their goal was to evaluate government performance and map out what the public service should look like and how it should be structured.

In 1999, then President Thabo Mbeki appointed him Chairperson of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, a challenging post he held for four years. Maphai pushed his board to be decisive and accountable; he was nicknamed 'Mr Buffalo' for his consistent appeal to fellow board members to ignore the small stuff he termed 'the rats and mice'. Under his stewardship, the public broadcaster made a profit for the first time since 1994. "It was an honour to be on the SABC board," Maphai says, "but it was not the kind of position where you want a second term."

Maphai moved from one challenging environment to another when he took on the role of Chairman of the council of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). He successfully shepherded UKZN through the complex merger of two seemingly incompatible institutions: the Universities of Natal and Durban-Westville (both incorporated as part of UKZN). Next, he was seconded to the National Planning Commission, an independent group of respected thinkers charged by then President Jacob Zuma with generating fresh ideas and insight into South Africa's long-term growth and development: "It was the most pleasurable and least difficult of experiences. We debated robustly at times, but I do not recall any really stressful moments."

Maphai was appointed to the Presidential Remuneration Review Commission in 2014. Two years later he left to take up a position as a visiting professor of Global Studies at Williams College in Massachusetts.

He is grateful to have been called on to serve South Africa under three Presidents, despite his lack of political affiliation: "Madiba, Mbeki and Zuma were all very generous in giving me the opportunity to be part of the country we are trying to build, particularly because I have never been a member of their party."

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# Legends of South African Science II

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