

# | WISEMAN NKUHLU |



## TOP THREE AWARDS

- The *Ordre National de la Légion D'Honneur, République Française*, 2005
- The Grand Counsellor of the Baobab National Award, 2008
- Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of the Free State, Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Pretoria, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan, Witwatersrand and Fort Hare

## DEFINING MOMENT

When his father intervened to send him 250 km away from home to a school where he could study mathematics and science.

## WHAT PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW

... is that he'd love to work more with his hands, and know more about electronics.

## A LIFE OF PURPOSE

If business leader and University of Pretoria Chancellor, Professor Lumkile Wiseman Nkuhlu, could have his way, a much greater chunk of South Africa's annual budget would be allocated to science and technology matters. Schools would become centres of science and villages would award prizes to stimulate scientific thinking. Greater attention would be given to developing rural and township schools into educational havens for South Africa's poorest communities; and teachers would be retrained to ensure a world-class schooling system.

"We are not prioritising matters surrounding science and technology as we should," he reflects on progress over the past two decades. By 'science' Nkuhlu does not only mean the natural, physical or health sciences, but the organising of any body of knowledge such as business, economics or literature.

Nkuhlu's continent-wide take on these matters has been shaped since his youth by an almost obsessive belief that science, technology and innovation will help Africa become a major world force.

"Colonialisation and perceptions of inferiority were fuelled when a big gap opened between Europe and Africa in the field of scientific and technological advancement between the 1500s and the 1900s," explains the man who in 1976 became South Africa's first black chartered accountant (CA), and who has deeply influenced the fields of commerce, education and development since.

"You need science to get long-term benefits and to have the confidence that you will change something," highlights Nkuhlu, who has worked in the development field since his early activist years, and describes himself as a "developmental economist".

He does not take the world around him lightly, but purposefully makes an effort to understand and influence it where possible. He therefore also takes matters such as transformation and policy reform seriously.

## IN SERVICE OF NEPAD

Nkuhlu could put many of his ideas and idealisms regarding an African Renaissance into practice when he became the first Chief Executive of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Secretariat between 2000 and 2005. "These years I will always cherish as the highlight of my career," he says.

He was handpicked for the position after being appointed as economic advisor to former President Thabo Mbeki in 2000.

Nkuhlu still remembers how he never dared go to Mbeki with "half-baked stories or ideas", but had to be well-prepared, well-read and informed to escape a challenge from the President.

The 2012 book *A Decade of NEPAD: Deepening Private Sector and Civil Society Ownership and Partnership* by the Economic Commission for Africa, sums up the Nkuhlu years: "During this early period of NEPAD's existence, the initiative captured the imagination of the developing world and was hailed for the fact that it marked the first time that African states had forged a common initiative to change their relationship with the global community – toward partnership, and most importantly, African-led partnership. By the end of Prof Nkuhlu's tenure, strong roots had been planted with external partners, and the beginning of concerted effort to strengthen and rationalise the continent's regional economic communities had begun."

His involvement in NEPAD led to his presidency of the International Organisation of Employers from 2008 to 2011 in Geneva. He also served on the Global Financial Crisis Advisory Panel that advised on the accounting standards setting implications of the worldwide 2009 financial crisis.

Nkuhlu cites another first that he achieved as a career highlight – being the first Chairman of the Council on Higher Education, between 1998 and 2002. He looks back fondly on this time, although he realises that the outcomes of the Council's first term "did not satisfy everyone" in terms of how it could restructure South Africa's universities and technikons.

## EARLY YEARS

In the 2014 biography, *Wiseman Nkuhlu: A Life of Purpose*, author Luvuyo Wotshela tells the following story: “After considering the family legacy, as well as the contemporary challenges facing the family, the parents decided to call their firstborn, Lumkile. When Lumkile’s parents were asked to add a Western name to his traditional name, they decided on the English translation of Lumkile, namely Wiseman. Wiseman Lumkile Nkuhlu is thus, in mathematical terms, Wiseman square! This name encapsulated the wishful catchphrase at the time of his birth: ‘This is a wise child, who would devise strategy to deal with hindrances such as those confronting us’.” He has lived up to his name ever since.

Over the years, he has learnt from people like business icon Dr Sam Motsuenyane of the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Nafcoc) about the value of black entrepreneurship and enterprise. His outlook on African politics and development were shaped by leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah and Thabo Mbeki. These days he is inspired by young people of all walks of life who care about South Africa.

“I value the exchanging of ideas, and learning from the leadership styles of others,” he adds. It was however his father who had the first formative influence on him.

“The length to which he went to give me an education!” he remembers gratefully, “and that on the salary of an agricultural extension officer with only Grade 8!”

Books about European history, Napoleon and the French Revolution jump-started his thoughts about Africa’s own continent-wide transformation, the need for scientific reawakening and the policies needed to bridge the knowledge gap.

“I had a strong belief that Africans, given opportunities, are equal to any other human beings in the world,” he said in his biography.

At the Dutch Reformed Church’ primary school of Arthur Tsengiwe in Cala, he already displayed an aptitude for arithmetic and numbers. He started attending Lovedale College near Alice in 1962 during politically tumultu-

ous times, and aligned with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) as well as the African National Congress (ANC). In his matric year in 1963, Nkuhlu and other classmates were expelled during student unrests, and subsequently the 19-year old landed up in prison on Robben Island for sixteen months.

In prison, he decided that he wanted to do something with himself, to be skilled and to prove a political point or two in the process. The ‘how’ was not yet clear, but he did imagine himself as the chief economist of the then Organisation of African Unity (today the African Union, in which NEPAD plays a role).

To fly under the radar of the Eastern Cape security police, he sought a position as clerk at the Loraine Gold Mine near Allenridge in the Free State. He also pursued his academic ambitions and finished matric part-time through Damelin College with economics, accountancy and mathematics as subjects.

By 1967 he had saved up enough to study at the University of Fort Hare, and in 1970 he earned a BCom degree. A Certificate of Theory in Accounting through the University of Cape Town followed in 1975, and in 1982 an MBA from the New York University.

It is however his qualification as South Africa’s first CA – obtained one month before the June 1976 student uprising – that set the stage for his further endeavours. He pursued this milestone with great care and deliberation.

“I said this must be the challenge that I should conquer; it was almost an obsession,” Nkuhlu acknowledges years after he first served his articles with an Afrikaans Mthatha-based firm, Hoek Wiehahn and Cross. “It was my way of showing how much African talent there is, and that such talent is just as randomly distributed as it is among other races.”

He admits that although it gave him much pleasure when he reached his goal, it was even more so when young people started coming to him for guidance.

“I realised I had a responsibility to fulfil towards others,” he adds about the self-imposed obligation as role model he takes seriously to this day. “Leading by example” became one of the mottos he lives by.

This set in motion a string of events that saw Nkuhlu for more than a decade fulfil the dual roles of practising auditor and lecturer.

He started teaching at the University of Fort Hare, and by 1977 had set up an accounting department at the then University of Transkei. From 1987 to 1991, he also led this tertiary institution as Principal and Vice-Chancellor. In 1978, he not only became Head of the University of Transkei's Department of Accountancy, but also set up his own firm, WL Nkuhlu & Company in Mthatha – the first black-owned auditing firm in South Africa. In 1982, it produced two of the country's first five black CAs. During this decade, he also became involved in the development of black entrepreneurship in the Eastern Cape, under the guidance of Nafcoc's Dr Motsuenyane.

"These experiences taught me what it means to work for others," acknowledges the man whom the *Finweek* credits as the force behind the transformation of South Africa's CA profession. "I've never been able to work only for myself or my family."

"It is humbling to meet younger people who have gone on to have success tell stories about how I have influenced them," notes Nkuhlu, who has since 2004 been the Patron of the Nkuhlu School of Accounting at Fort Hare.

## IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

In 1984, he rejoined his old firm, now Wiehahn & Meyernel, as audit partner, and worked there until 1991, two years after it merged with Price Waterhouse (these days PwC).

His service to the business sector also includes being economic advisor to the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce, President of both the Black Management Forum and the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants, and being an independent non-executive Director at JSE Limited.

"Understanding finances, the management of resources and internalising the values of being an auditor helped me to be a successful manager," reflects Nkuhlu.

He bid professional auditing farewell in the early 1990s to join the Independent Development Trust. As its Chief Executive Officer between 1992 and 1995, he made people-centred development the mantra of the Trust.

In March 1993, the *Christian Science Monitor* described him as "the country's most powerful player on the socioeconomic development scene". This was because Nkuhlu was also Chair of the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), a position he held until 2000. As the first person to hold both positions simultaneously, and the first black South African to occupy both hot seats, he commuted weekly between Cape Town and Pretoria in a juggling act of responsibilities.

"They are the country's two major development agencies and command access to some \$3 billion in resources," wrote the *Christian Science Monitor's* John Battersby. He added that many of Nkuhlu's colleagues felt he was taking on "a superhuman workload", but that he had a "remarkable ability to deliver".

Tasked by the Minister of Finance he led the team reviewing the DBSA's mandate and core business. Their mission soon changed to reforming, rather than replacing, the development agency, and the team's June 1995 report became the basis for the new DBSA.

In the same interview Nkuhlu said: "I don't care what the political orientation of people is. The only criterion in evaluating a project is whether it makes development sense."

## FORGING AHEAD

Nkuhlu has been Chancellor of the University of Pretoria since 2007.

"One needs to read widely to make sure that one stays on top of the subject or current thinking," emphasises Nkuhlu.

"Work hard, be disciplined, but have the humility to understand that you cannot succeed on your own. You need the confidence and support of others," he summarised the principles he still lives by, and purposefully so.

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# Legends of South African Science

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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