



## My Brilliant Career

# Developing leaders to become dealers in hope

Tracey Swanepoel is the founder of consultancy Thinkspiration – her favourite question is ‘What do you think?’

By MARGARET HARRIS

### Tell me about Thinkspiration.

We focus on developing leaders and helping them, through training, to get their corporate strategy understood – which results in improved engagement, motivation and performance.

### What makes a good leader?

There are many definitions, but one of my favourites is “A leader is a dealer in hope”.

Practically speaking, good leaders are able to paint such a compelling picture of the future that their followers feel it is attainable. Other key leadership skills are: the ability to really listen, not just wait for the other person to reply; being comfortable in your own skin; and being prepared to use stories to make your message stick.

### What do you do each day at work?

No two days are the same, and I love the variety. Some days are filled with listening sessions. These are one-on-ones with clients’ employees where I get to ask my favourite question, “What do you think”, and hear their views on their corporate strategy.

I also spend time conceptualising clients’ corporate strategies into a relevant analogy, and working with leaders to help them craft a compelling story.

Finally, it’s about working creatively with artists to visualise a story. Then there are the workshops that we deliver to develop the practical skills of leadership, one of which is based on my book, *The Leadership Riptide and How to Escape*.

### How did you end up doing this work?

After graduating with a BA communications (honours), I worked in the advertising industry as a strategic planner. I quickly realised that most companies claim their “people” as one of their key differentiators, and this intrigued me.

This curiosity was the driving force behind my MBA dissertation, in which I explored how to apply marketing principles to the internal communication space.

This idea found traction in the mining industry, and I spent five years at Harmony as its internal strategy executive. Harmony at that time was an ideal environment for innovation and creativity, and many of the principles that drive Thinkspiration today are based on ideas incubated there.

Today, it’s all about helping companies to get their strategies understood internally, enabling leaders to give their employees a purpose and solving the biggest workplace problem – the unengaged workforce.

### What do you find most meaningful about the work you do?

I live for that moment when I see a miner, an accountant, an engineer, an actuary, a lawyer, even a CEO, “get it” – when it dawns on them where they fit in in terms of the corporate strategy and what contribution they can make.

I’m passionate about bringing humanity to an often soulless environment, and I love it when I see people driven by purpose and passion.

### What did you want to be when you were a child?

When I was 10, I dreamt of winning Wimbledon. I never did, clearly. But I did spend 10 years chasing a ball around the tennis court, ending up with a tennis scholarship at a US university.

Tennis taught me you don’t have to be bigger to be better, that you can outwit rather than outwit opponents, and that to chase a dream you have to visualise it so clearly that it fuels your daily routine.

### What makes you well suited to the work you do?

I believe that work, rather than being a four-letter word, should be the place where individuals get to live out their purpose, fulfil their destiny and play to their strengths.

I naturally look for and focus on other people’s strengths, and the work that I do enables me to use my own strengths (generating creative ideas, writing, teaching and coaching), with the result that I truly love what I do.



Tracey Swanepoel advises companies on how to get their strategies understood internally, enabling leaders to give their employees a purpose.

## How to . . .

### Be more productive at work

To be productive, you need to put in time planning your work and then be willing to work hard. And even then it is not easy, says Richard Andrews, MD of office furniture company Inspiration Office.

Many people leave work dissatisfied at the end of the day because they have not achieved as much as they had hoped. He has this advice to boost productivity:

- Ask for help. You don’t need to do everything on your own;
- Meetings can be a huge waste of time, so try to avoid them. “Time is the most important currency in your work life. While it may be tempting to meet as many people for the benefit of networking, the time you get at your desk is extremely valuable,” he says;
- Make a list of what needs to be done, and keep it updated. You can break up larger projects into many smaller tasks;
- Try to schedule particular times during the day to check your e-mail, rather than checking it continuously;
- Set realistic goals, but push yourself a little, too. And they need to be specific – how will you know if you have reached your goal when it is vague and incomplete?; and
- Keep your workspace neat and organised. — Margaret Harris