

3 ways SME owners can cultivate a culture of human-rights in their businesses

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Human rights may well be the last thing on a stressed and busy entrepreneur's mind, but there are surprising advantages in thinking about a business' role in the free world's governing doctrine. This is the opinion of Kgomotso Ramoenyane, executive general manager for Human Resources at Business Partners Limited.



Kgomotso Ramoenyane

As Ramoenyane suggests, “Despite their small size, owner-managed businesses are very active members of society, and as such have a real human-rights impact on the people around it, not only on its workers, but also on its customers and the public in general. But these relationships are already heavily governed by all sorts of laws and regulations that flow out of South-Africa’s human-rights-based constitution - why spend time and energy on yet another set of rules? Because if a business owner consciously embraces human rights as a general approach and philosophy, several good things can happen to the business.”

Firstly, she argues that it **makes legal compliance easier**. Regulatory red tape that businesses are subjected to becomes particularly burdensome when a business’s stance is at odds with human rights. For business owners who exploit their workers and customers, for example, Labour Laws such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and Consumer Protection Act become a minefield that will sooner or later damage the business, especially when they start growing.

“On the other hand, if a business owner adopts a human-rights stance, the laws and regulations become a useful tool for measuring and managing the impact of the business in its community,” says Ramoenyane. It is important to think of human rights not as a box-ticking exercise or another set of rules, but rather as a general attitude - an approach that can become a guiding light in the chaos of the business world.

Secondly, she suggests that a business with an entrenched human-rights ethos **will gain the benefits of staff retention, productivity, and increased profitability**. The levels of respect in any organisation is always apparent to those who work

there - it cannot be disguised. "A business committed to human rights will inevitably gain a reputation as a good place to work at allowing them to recruit and keep the best workers."

Thirdly, a true commitment to human rights is an excellent way for a business to **differentiate itself from the competition in the eyes of the public, and therefore its clientele**. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights calls for businesses to make a public commitment to the promotion of human rights. As Ramoenyane asserts, "If this commitment is sincere, business will certainly gain a positive reputation in the market over time."

Having recently celebrated Human Rights Day, Ramoenyane also provides entrepreneurs with three ways in which they can cultivate a human-rights culture in their businesses:

1. The first step for business owners who want to cultivate a human-rights culture in their business is to become knowledgeable about it. A huge number of resources in the form of books, websites and video clips are at the fingertips of any business owner who choose to look in that direction.
2. The next step is to evaluate the human-rights impact of your business. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights calls for a due diligence process, but you don't have to hire expensive consultants to do so. Ramoenyane recommends some basic practical exercises, such as thinking how your business practices measure against the two dozen or so rights listed in the UN's human rights declaration.

Focus on the most common rights that businesses impact: The right to fair workplace practices, equality, dignity, privacy and safety. Then, make it practical by checking how your business practices measure up against the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Consumer Protection Act. "These are the most practical manifestation of human rights in the South African business world. Once you are fairly familiar with how your business measures up - and you don't have to be perfect - you can prepare a public commitment to human rights for your business. If you don't have much time or resources to draw up your own, there is nothing wrong with emulating one from another business," she says.

3. As Ramoenyane concludes: "Next comes the slow work of sticking to the commitment, continuously evaluating, and improving your business practices. In time, human rights will become embedded in the company culture, and your business will be stronger for it."

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