

Shoes become so much more valuable when empowering youth and employees

By [Kerry Dimmer](#), issued by [Bata](#)

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Tomáš Baťa, the founder of the world's leading shoemaker by volume - 220 million pairs of shoes sold annually - set a core value that still drives the company he founded more than 125 years ago: "In order to do a job well, we must lead by example."



Alberto Errico

This resonates particularly in SA where Bata SA has been driving empowerment programmes that have some unique elements. The Bata Youth Board of Directors, for instance. When the global company called on its subsidiaries to drive customer satisfaction as a priority, Bata SA saw it as an opportunity to tap into the vibrancy and creativeness of the youth, and to provide them with entrepreneurial skills that they can use now, or in the future.

After a national call for entries, 21 school-going youth were selected to join the first Bata Youth Board of Directors meetings hosted in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg, in July. "They were selected for their eye for design and out-of-the-box thinking," says Alberto Errico, president of the Bata Africa region and country manager for Bata SA.

"The youngest is eight years [old]; the oldest 16 - each a trailblazing trendsetter with an excellent take on the shoe market. They are mandated to guide Bata SA in its fashion philosophy and what constitutes youth appeal, and unpack for us what the youth really want and need from a pair of shoes."

Facilitated by the CEO and founder of Dreambuilders, Patrick Coetzee, and monitored by child educational psychologist Steven Mack, the first Bata Youth Board of Directors meetings resulted in the 'directors' conceptualising key elements for the future of the brand. But this wasn't just a one-sided result.

"We so wanted to give back to these incredible, dynamic youngsters that we aligned with Young Entrepreneurs, an organisation that provides children and young adults with skills required to become entrepreneurial," says Errico. "They were exposed to financial literacy, employability and workplace-readiness programmes that give them a base platform to start and grow their own micro-enterprises if that is what they wish to do."

"The type of skills they are exposed to through the programme are designed to make up for gaps left by an education system that ill prepares students for the world of work and business. We believe that these 'new directors' are directors of the future. All we are really doing is inspiring and encouraging them to develop their leadership potential."

Bata SA employs more than 500 people, who collectively helped the organisation produce 4,432,000 pairs of shoes in SA last year. Among its exclusive brands, most of which are household names, are North Star, Bubblegummers, Tomy, Bata Industrials and, of course, the ever-popular school shoes, Toughies.

There is an underlying depth to Bata SA's focus on children and their potential, which is played out through the Bata Children's Programme (BCP), launched in 2010 to unite all the global subsidiaries' child-focused initiatives under one umbrella. Because education is linked to sustainability, that being one of the key development areas that the BCP is focused on, Bata SA felt one of the biggest differences it could make was to assist families to meet school-uniform requirements by protecting their children's feet.

"Last year, for our annual Mandela Day initiative, we gave 10,000 pupils a pair of our branded school shoe range, Toughees, bringing the total we have donated since 2010 to 25 000 pairs," says Errico. "This responds directly to BCP's mission in creating a brighter future for needy children in our communities, and society in general. We call this the Bata Life effect, and is part of our long-term strategy that we must make sustainable differences. Our staff are also actively involved, volunteering their time to all BCP activities."

In addition, a sustainable difference has been made to the lives of employees who work at the Toughees factory in Loskop, at the base of the Drakensberg mountains in KwaZulu- Natal. Errico explains that 90% of the staff complement at the factory are women, most of them mothers. 'The biggest worry for any mother is the safety of her children, and in a rural area, creches are a luxury and beyond the means of our employees.

"There is a real danger of children losing their lives when left unattended owing to their parents' work commitments. Considering this, we have adopted Ithembe, a local creche strategically located just 200m from our factory premises. It's become a safe haven for children whose parents work for us, especially because there is no charge for this care.

"These children are the leaders of tomorrow. We see it as our responsibility to ensure that their future is secured, be that in the provision of care at an early age, or even in just providing a pair of shoes that allows them to walk to school and participate in activities where their feet need protection.

"Right from creche age, knowingly or not, children of employees are being exposed to some of the best shoe brands in the country, inclusive of Tomy Takkies, a unisex sneaker that is so popular that to not have owned a pair in a young child's life would not make them a 'cool kid'," says Errico.

Annually, Bata SA sells hundreds of thousands of Tomys, which come in multiple styles. Named after the founder's son, the Tomy has not changed its design since created in 1964, still having the same inner and outer soft rubber sole pattern, and upper canvas material. With innovation at the core of product development, new ranges of Tomys are being introduced with reflective strips and extra cushioning support for added comfort and long wear.

The popularity of the Tomy is further propelled by Bata SA's internal empowerment programme, which allows its staff to buy Tomys at a lower margin, so that they can start their own businesses selling the range.

"Empowered employees are loyal, committed and more productive," says Errico. "The benefits are endless when employees are given the tools and resources needed to successfully manage their own projects and work towards shared common goals. It also gives them the opportunity to drive their own career paths."

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