

Friendship Tracking

Alex van den Heever and Renias Mhlongo take motivation from the bush to the boardroom

In centuries past, when humans roamed the earth freely and lived among the animals, they had no need for motivational speakers. Their only motivation was to eat, mate and survive.

Enter Alex van den Heever, an animal tracker extraordinaire and an exceptional motivational speaker whose passion lies in encouraging a sense of humanity and understanding. He holds one of the highest qualifications for a safari guide in South Africa.

Alex and Renias Mhlongo are not only helping others to unlock the power of relationships and to preserve our precious natural heritage, but are also using their friendship and their shared knowledge and skills to help save from extinction the ancient art of tracking.

The Waiting Room spoke to Alex about why it is so important for people to simply “get along”.

Tell us about your childhood.

I was born on a cattle farm outside Plettenberg Bay. But, for as long as I can remember, I have wanted to live in the bushveld.

As a young boy I was taken on a lion hunt by my grandfather. Seeing the animal die appalled me, but observing the tracking skills displayed by the tracker both impressed and intrigued me that day.

As soon as I finished my marketing studies, I started at Londolozi game reserve as a nature

guide. The very nature of guiding requires one to tell stories continuously. This I enjoyed tremendously! Lucky for me, I was paired with one of the greatest storytellers and traditional trackers of our time – Renias Mhlongo. Renias is one of the last people alive today to have been raised in the original tradition of a Shangaan hunter-gatherer. He has become my best friend. In our formative years, however, we might as well have lived on separate planets.

What were your goals as a teenage boy?

I wanted to play rugby for the Springboks, and although I had the heart I probably didn't have the skills, or the size! That said, I knew I wanted a life in nature.

It was never really a conscious decision, being a game ranger. From the time I opened my eyes, I wanted to live and work in nature.

I inherited my mother's love for nature. It was by no means an easy road but by age 24, I had become head ranger.

How did you become involved in motivational speaking?

Over a period of 15 years of taking safaris at Londolozi with Renias, we accumulated many great stories of our lives in the bush. In 1999 I took Renias to London; he had never been outside the Kruger National Park, flown in an aeroplane or seen the ocean.

This and many other stories were regaled around the campfire in the evenings at Londolozi. One day a guest of ours invited us to come and tell our stories at his company headquarters in New York – that marked the beginning of our speaking careers.

Why is it so important to motivate others?

People become bogged down by the routine of life. We need motivation in order to reach our goals. Simple, honest stories of success can be very powerful.

Our presentation, *The Power of Relationships*, is not theoretical analysis of how we can all work better together – an ABC of relationships. No. Rather, it is an honest account of how two people from polarised backgrounds managed to break through the barriers that keep most of us apart, resulting in unbelievable success both personally and professionally.

How do motivational events inspire employees and improve their work ethic?

Over 90% of managers misunderstand what motivates their employees. They think what motivates people is making money; getting raises and bonuses. In fact, the greatest motivator is emotion. It is the feeling of making steady progress toward a personally meaningful

goal. Managers need to get to know what their employees' goals are. We need to walk in the shoes of the other.

In 1996 I visited Renias' rural home village for the first time. The four days I spent there with him taught me a great deal about the man – for the first time I walked in the shoes of Renias Mhlongo.

From that day on he started to teach me to speak the language of the Shangaan, which I can speak well today, and which has given me valuable insights into his life and culture.

Do you have any advice for people who want to get involved in motivational speaking?

It is important to believe 100% in your message before you begin to attempt to inspire others. If people start to see that they can personally benefit by hearing your story, then you have a winner.

It is important to carefully craft your message. Get people to help you. There are many speakers' agents who one can approach with your message of inspiration.

What about your love for animal tracking and the outdoors? Tell us more.

For the last 20 years Renias and I have travelled the world tracking wild animals in remote locations, such as jaguars in the Amazon jungle. Renias taught me the traditional skills of tracking, just like his father had taught him.

We currently spend time teaching young men from rural villages in South Africa to track

animals for employment in the eco-tourism, anti-poaching and wildlife monitoring sectors of the conservation industry.

Is there a way we can combine motivational talks and the outdoors?

Animal tracking carries a powerful metaphor. We are all tracking everyday – tracking the weather, the stock markets, our spouses and friends! Sometimes we lose track.

The skills required to successfully track down a wild animal can also be used in our daily lives. Most of us need to practise being more aware of our surroundings, predicting the moves of other people based on the evidence we have seen, anticipating potentially dangerous situations – these are all things a tracker does unconsciously while tracking in the bush.

Renias and I enjoy taking people tracking to show them how the lessons of tracking can be applied in their business and personal lives.

I attribute much of my success as a safari guide and naturalist to my relationship with my mentor, Renias.

A deficiency in skills due to inferior training and the lack of quality mentoring leads to mistrust and breakdown in relationships.

South Africa, in both its state and private sectors, has a responsibility to create a secure environment for the transfer of knowledge and values, if it is serious about transformational success.

Nadia Gamielien



The purpose-driven friendship: Renias Mhlongo and Alex van den Heever