

Succeeding in the face of adversity

Jacques Marais, the founder of Integrated Performance Management Systems (IPMS) Global and the creator of eCALA Life, is a beacon of inspiration and a true embodiment of what one's choices, hard work and unwavering determination can achieve

Without a trace of self-pity, Marais has described himself as being lucky enough to begin his career with absolutely nothing. Growing up in a broken home, he says the instability taught him the valuable lesson of being ready for everything.

At the tender age of five, his mother absconded to Swaziland with her Catholic priest, and with him and his sister in tow, leaving his older brother behind to be raised by his grandmother.

"At age 13, they decided we were all moving to England forever. This lasted four years before they moved back to Swaziland with their two new sons, leaving my sister and me behind. People make choices," he says emphatically.

"I had just turned 18. I felt confident because as a kid in the UK, I had to switch school three times in three years due to their inability to settle, yet I managed to get 10 good O levels in one year (everyone else takes two years) and four UK universities offered placement based on my first-year A-level results," Marais adds.

When his family decided to return to Swaziland, he was partway through his second year of A levels but decided to quit and find a job immediately.

"I had no ambitions to be a poor, foreign student; studying a subject I had zero interest in just to please someone else. I made choices," he says.

He was fortunate enough to receive a very good job at a UK bank, this gave him a wonderful sense of being in control of his life.

"I lived with a local family in their spare room and within six months, I had my first apartment and I paid the local family back every penny



they had spent plus much more over the following years. They supported me and, thus, I was able to take care of myself, my sister and to plan for the future," Marais explains.

He adds that he continued his studies once he felt mature and ready enough. Courtesy of the bank he worked for, he mastered systems thinking, process engineering and macro-change. At a later stage, he was trained as a Management Trainer, Course Writer and Assessor.

"Finally, courtesy of me, working for myself, I trained as a Goldratt Jonah in New Haven,

Connecticut, in study and domain expertise, I believe," he recalls.

"Starting with a zero base taught me to take control, think, plan, take action and move fast. Waiting grows weeds and self-pity is worthless. Despite your personal circumstances, never lose your compassion and ability to love, and remember, 'you are the architect of your life,'" Marais says.

The keys to success

Marais enjoyed a prosperous career in both banking and insurance for 18 years. He



attributes his success to his thirst for knowledge and his desire to become adept at all he does—a philosophy which underpins the management of his teams.

"I succeeded because I studied everything more than anyone I knew; I mastered all the means and aimed to become the domain expert. I was highly disciplined, focused and I found that success comes from looking over the horizon, defining direction and knowing 'why', setting clear goals, 'what', and training teams to find the solutions to 'how'," he explains, adding, "My teams knew to come to me once to learn how to become a domain expert and all the time to be coached and mentored. I trained and aimed our teams at our business purpose and they determined their own life purpose. Note: you need both."

"My teams did the same with their teams and each individual got individual attention because no two people have exactly the same life purpose and values. If you want to succeed, you need to learn how the 'system works', then 'work the system'. This is very difficult work, so you better know 'why' you are doing it," Marais says.

The challenges encountered

Marais, who holds the importance of knowledge in the highest regard, believes that ignorant, untrained leaders who use their authority and not data are dangerous, and they pose a big challenge.

"Trust is earned from others through your ability to and attitude in serving their needs, not your authority. Always ask for help, whether you wish to learn something or you cannot carry the load alone, and show respect to those who cut the path you are on, for they can teach you much if you will listen," he says, adding that if you find yourself on the wrong path, there is no shame in admitting to it, stopping and forging a new one.

"Making assumptions guarantees you learn nothing because you think you already know. Worse still, if you are wrong, you don't know it!" he exclaims.



The formation of IPMS Global

It's while Marais was working at the bank that a turning point in his career occurred and the inspiration for IPMS Global was born.

"I was frustrated by how managers were being trained to lead and manage. It was all theory and it had little relevance to the work they did or the way the business operated. I was given the opportunity to run management development for two years and I trained over 400 managers.

"I found my passion for teaching tools and methods and testing the application. I developed a deep love for learning and teaching," he says. Once more, he reminded himself that he was the architect of his life, and he established IPMS Global, an organisation that provides integrated tools and programmes for leaders at all levels around the world. Within three short months, they were busy.

"All IPMS trainers are trained in systems thinking, process engineering and behavioural change. This means we can teach leaders and managers anything across their 'value chain' from vision, through strategy to operations and into organisational design.

"We use and train with toolkits—we have 72 different toolkits and can train any 'level of leader' or fix a particular need, with a new supervisor or the CEO," Marais says.

IPMS Global's learning programmes

Marais says that, essentially, every leader or manager at their particular level must 'look ahead', know their purpose, 'why', develop the domain expertise to set ambitious goals, 'what', and train their teams to deliver the 'how' on these.

- IPMS Global delivers this either through:
1. A full programme of deep learning (if they need it). This can take three to nine months, depending on their level. They offer these to all six levels of leader, from the manager of the group to the supervisor or
 2. They deliver a specific programme to address a specific need, which could take just three days. Again, this is pitched at the level of leader.

Since its formation, IPMS Global has attained a first-class reputation and, in the 20 years, they have trained thousands of leaders and managers. "Undoubtedly, the greatest success has been the rate of adoption of the IPMS toolkits we give them and teach them," Marais adds.



They have a 99.99% adoption of the toolkits, measured by the audited application and their operational, organisational and personal performance results. They focus on the competencies leaders need in order to use the toolkits.

"A great example is coordination—this is a core competency and without it, God help your operations. IPMS has an extensive competency library. Our constant teaching goal is: 'Glue our students to the Tools NOT to the Teacher,'" he says.

As with any new endeavour, difficulties arose and Marais admits they experienced issues initially.

"We had issues with: 'You aren't a business school', 'We don't score NQF or SETA points', 'I want my rebate'.

"So, we offer pilots to show how a 'return on investment' on performance scorecards," he explains.

In 100% of the cases, they went from a pilot programme to a full programme, and many times across the whole organisation, he adds.

Despite the challenges, Marais remained focused and motivated to succeed, saying, "You need resilience because change comes all the time, so you better know why you do what you do. In my case, I passionately believe the world needs leaders who are capable, confident, compassionate and will do something useful with it all."

The creation of eCALA Life

While training senior leaders and all other levels of managers globally, a problem was identified: a lack of concentration. This inspired the concept for eCALA Life, a wellness and leadership retreat, situated on the Greek island of Patmos, and the first of its kind.

Marais says the ability to concentrate exclusively and for long enough to breathe, think, listen, challenge, assimilate and learn is crucial.

"You do not become a concert pianist by practising in a pub while people ask you to play their favourite tune, nor do you run a business like this," he muses. eCALA Life learning village provides this 'place of concentration'.

"The name eCALA is; Europe, Central Asia and Africa Learning Academy (eCALA). We are, by conscious choice, at the bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe and we will draw students from all three continents," he says.

This private village, located in a bay by the sea is exclusive to its students—there are no

outside interruptions, only utter serenity in a place dedicated to your wellbeing.

"Our ethos is 'breathe, laugh, learn' because, without learning, we will not resolve, solve or evolve. We are equally as passionate about the whole person—mind, body and spirit. Our learning philosophy is 'planet, people, profit', which infers a direct and conscious awareness of the consequences and implications of everything we decide, do and repeat. We just gently raise awareness of choice and consequences," Marais enthuses.

He is immensely proud of eCALA Life and likens it to the heart and home of all their learning. "We welcome you into our heart and home," he says.

Future aspirations

Up until 2020, Marais says they will concentrate wholly on the quality and delivery of their current programmes to students, both at eCALA Life, and in the client's respective country.

In 2020, they will introduce a range of global leadership programmes called Planet. These will focus on delivering trained leaders, project managers, engineers in water, waste, energy, habitation, forestation and food management, and in 2021, they will decide when to open a further six eCALA Life learning villages across the three continents.

What it means to be a leader

Marais believes a good, effective leader will look over the horizon at what is essential and needed, and develop a strategy to realise it.

Leaders should work on the 'why' and 'what', and should train their team to work on the 'how'.

Additionally, he says it's important to know whom you serve and to do it with passion and humility. In terms of role models who have inspired him throughout the course of his career, he mentions many noteworthy individuals, including Marie Curie, Maya Angelou, Angela Merkel, Socrates, Nelson Mandela, Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk, to name a few. ▲

eCALA Life offers all IPMS Global's leadership programmes as well as other esoteric and skills-based learning programmes—26 in total. Please visit www.ecalalife.com for details.

