

Willing & Abel podcast: Taking Unexpected Turns with Takealot Group CEO Mamongae Mahlare

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Mike Abel:** Trying to get to a better place, have a robust conversation.

[00:00:05] **Mamongae:** I remember actually a couple of years ago coming across a TED talk that was about how you must get more deliberate about engaging with people that have a different point of view from you. And a lot of it was about, you know, testing your reason why you hold your point of view.

[00:00:23] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel. I'm a business, marketing and communication specialist and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, and an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Abel, the home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Abel, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis.

My guest today is Mamongae Mahlare an executive with extensive experience building brands and businesses across 12 African countries. Since October 2021, she has been the CEO of the Takealot Group and prior to that filled the role of Managing Director of Elovo Sugar South Africa and various positions at SAB Miller and Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa.

She's a qualified chemical engineer from Wits University and holds a prestigious MBA from Harvard Business School. Welcome Mamongae, so great to have you here today.

[00:01:30] **Mamongae:** Thank you, Mike. It's good to be here.

[00:01:32] **Mike Abel:** So I've just rattled off a whole list of your very impressive professional qualifications. Leaving all of those out, how would you describe yourself?

[00:01:42] **Mamongae:** Gosh, that's a, that's a hard question. I'm a, I always say I'm a simple girl from dusty cocoon land that had just the privilege of opportunities throughout my life and have landed up in spaces and places doing things I never would have had even the capacity to dream of. So, yeah, I think it's, uh, it's about hard work, dedication, and, uh, having the courage to, to do the stuff that scares you, uh, is how I would describe who I try to be.

[00:02:21] **Mike Abel:** I love that word opportunity that you just mentioned because I'm never sure if it's, uh, heaven-ordained or serendipitous or planned. When you talk

about opportunity and you think about those opportunities, would you say those were things that you worked towards or things that just came out of the blue? How would you define those opportunities?

[00:02:39] **Mamongae:** They differ. I mean, if I think about, The first, what I think was one of the big opportunities, definitely in my education career, was when I was, I guess in those days it was standard four, it's grade something today.

[00:03:00] **Mike Abel:** Six, plus two. Plus.

[00:03:02] **Mamongae:** There was, um, there was an Anglican school next door to my primary school that had been, closed for a couple of years. And in that year, they happened to actually reinvigorate it. They found a new headmaster and the church reopened the school after many years of it being closed. Now, why there was a big opportunity was that, you know, the teachers there were from, um, you know, various backgrounds. They would, um, I think the initial headmaster was like a priest from, I don't know what they call them, but it was like a priest, and then there was, it was very multicultural. So there were like. You know, white volunteers from Europe and U.S. And local South Africa and also, uh, African, African teachers. And it was also the curriculum didn't follow the Bantu education. At the time, they believed in providing you know, an open-minded education that was comparable with what they would teach, uh, white kids in South Africa. Um, and that was the beginning of, I guess, uh, not just my opportunity, but the heritage that St. Mark's College, which was in Secun which is what the school was called, is called, um, really opened up. Um, so, that is something that I could not have planned. I thank my parents for even having the willingness to try something new. You can imagine, it's a new school, it's church, you don't really know whether it's going to be any good and all the Schools you have around you have a history already, but it was just, I guess, the faith that church schools definitely had a good reputation. And so it was the hope that this would be a great school, and it was next door, and if it wasn't any good, I guess they could move, move me afterwards. But I think the timing of that was, was something that was fortuitous. Um, and, um, and I didn't have anything to do with it. I had to write an entrance exam. So I guess that was my, my, my role that I played in all of it. Um, and, uh, And then from then on, it was about what I then did with opportunity I had.

[00:05:30] **Mike Abel:** know. Well, I think to, to an extent, I think what you've, uh, described is always an ability to lean in, I guess, and seize the opportunity and to see. The diversity of the teachers that you had and influences as a strength, uh, and to absorb that, you know, rather than, than reject it. I mean, it's to me so interesting that while you're talking, it reminds me actually of my great grandparents who came here from Russia. They were Russians, and my grandmother was born here in South Africa, and at the age of five, they sent this young Jewish girl off to a convent because nobody could educate like the nuns could, according to my Russian grandparents. And then, you know, she, she matriculated as the head girl of the Yeoville Convent, and she could say all of her little rosary prayers and everything. I was always impressed. I think people don't understand how important Embracing opportunity in childhood is. So you've spoken about a school aspect. If you had to

talk to your home life when you got home, what do you think the biggest influences were that have shaped you today during childhood?

[00:06:40] **Mamongae:** I think there are two things. One was all of the chores that I had to do in the house. There was never any assumption that you're too young to do any kind of like chores or whether it's doing dishes or cooking or doing laundry on the weekends. It was, you know, you got your hands dirty.

[00:07:01] **Mike Abel:** From being little?

[00:07:02] **Mamongae:** Yeah, probably since I was nine, ten. Um, that's, that's, that's what you did. That's what everybody did.. Um, I mean, there were kids that had to go fetch water. A couple of K's away. So, you know, there's some, some things that I was spared from, but there was, that was one thing. It was You know, you, you learned at the time, obviously I resented it. All I wanted to do was play, but you know, um, but what I have, the discipline and the, the empowerment now, no, I can always look after myself. I know how to clean. I know how to wash my, hand wash clothes. I know how to iron all those kinds of things that you take for granted, right? Life skills. So that was, that was one. And the second was just, um. I mean, I always saw for all of my time when I was at home, while I was at school, my parents also studied, uh, they finished, you could in the, in, in their generation start qualifying for work. I think when you did standard six or grade eight or standard eight, uh, it was a particular, you didn't need a metric necessarily to train as a nurse. I think maybe you did for teaching.

I don't recall, but, um, I remember that, you know, they all finished, my mom definitely, you know, got her matriculation as a, as a parent, got her first degree and a second degree, um, while, you know, raising kids and working. Um, my dad also studied. So I think it was always seeing them invest in their education, even if it didn't mean that they were not going to be paid more, because they didn't get paid more. Because during, uh, Apartheid times, it was like, you're a nurse, you were paid X, and that was it. You know, whether you have just a diploma, or you have a PhD, it didn't matter, you know, um, you just got paid the same.

But what it allowed them to do is to be Abel to, you know, always enrich their minds and, um, invest in themselves. And also, you know, have the opportunity to be Abel to move to different, you know, levels within the organization, even if it didn't necessarily come with more money.

[00:09:22] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that you raise a very important point there, because I think that ultimately, this journey of life is a very personal one, and it shouldn't even be, well, obviously, one wants the remuneration that comes with the academia and the hard work, but ultimately, the reward is one's own journey, what you pick up and what you learn yourself. You know, when you were talking about your early childhood and learning to cook and to clean and to do those things, and people fetch water. Whether one likes her or not, uh, I was reminded of Margaret Thatcher who said she was born with two distinct advantages. They were poor and

she had good parents. And I think that, uh, a lot of people underestimate, uh, the importance of learning life skills and, uh, you know, that the notion of privilege or of having stuff, uh, can often be more of a curse than a blessing in terms of living a rich and fulfilled life.

[00:10:18] **Mamongae:** No, you definitely have, you know, a deeper hunger when you have less, right? Because there's something you want to I guess, um, work yourself away from, um, and you also know what it's like if you don't do anything about your, um, you know, improving your livelihood. You know what it's like and what, what awaits you. It's not, uh, it's not an unknown. So, you know, so I think it is, it is a good motivator and that's why sometimes you find that in the advent of trying to spare our children the things that we hated to do as kids, we sometimes forget some of the benefits of having had to do those things.

[00:11:05] **Mamongae:** So it's, it's about, you know, managing. You know, um, the privilege that you enjoy now versus the lessons that you, that you learned then. How do you navigate that transition?

[00:11:18] **Mike Abel:** Yes, well, you're so right. I'm feeling very guilty now because I might be doing a disservice as a dad, raising my children because they've never had to scale a fish, uh, before preparing it for supper like I had to and they've never had to mow the lawn. And they've never had to wash a car and they're going to have to do all of those things now. So thank you for a reminder. They won't, my children don't thank you. So after high school, you entered a program where you explored various careers of people who are actually working in those jobs. What kind of work did you learn about in those experiences? And I guess, where did you think your career was going at that point?

[00:11:56] **Mamongae:** Well, I'll tell you what, the interesting thing is, when I was, um, like the last few years of high school, you had to think about what, what do you want to be when you grow up? Or what do you want to study when you leave school? Cause school is coming to an end. Where to from here? And, um, I really didn't have like a specific idea at the time. And as I was, um, reading a career book in, um, in the library, there was, um, you know, chemical engineering stood out for me and I thought, wow, this looks great because it talked about how it's a great platform, you know, as a qualification, because you were not constrained to any particular path, but you could go into many different directions. And given that I wasn't very specific about, you know, what I wanted to do, um, I thought that was a great, that was a great qualification to actually do because then I didn't have to close doors, but I could open doors with, with something like that. But, you know, you can imagine, I actually never met a chemical engineer. My parents had never met one or heard one. Um, and in those days when you were even remotely, um, intelligent, they would, say you've got to be a teacher, no, sorry, no, you've got to be a doctor. You know, that's what, if you're good at science and math, it was like, you be a doctor. And it was known and, you know, could have a comfortable life, open your private surgery there and life will be great. And I had zero desire to be a medical doctor. And once I latched onto this idea of chemical engineering, I couldn't let it go. So I did eventually manage to, um, convince my parents to let me do this program, which was, um, I

guess it's what we used to call it form six, which was a year in One of the private schools that offered mostly kids that wanted to play rugby or cricket for one more year.

[00:13:59] **Mike Abel:** I think we called it a post matric.

[00:14:01] **Mamongae:** Post matric, that's right. That's exactly what it was. Um, so during one of the big benefits of that, uh, program was you, you had a deliberate, uh, exploration of all the careers you ever thought you could do. So, you know. You know, I looked at stuff like, uh, you know, dietitian, I looked at being a, I think something like biomechanical engineering was like, you know, the people that design, you know, orthopaedics and prosthetics and those things.

[00:14:33] **Mike Abel:** prosthetics and those things.

[00:14:34] **Mamongae:** Yeah, that's right. Um, so thank God I didn't do that. I can't even tell you what they did.

[00:14:39] **Mike Abel:** You might have met Oscar. God help us.

[00:14:45] **Mamongae:** And, and all the, I mean, they were like, you know, physiotherapy. Um, you know, and I really try to kind of like think, you know, what are the other things I don't know about that I might be interested in? And to be honest, after all of that, I circled back to the same point. And, and then I just knew that I just needed to, to follow through with it. Um, and, uh, yeah, after a bit of, uh, 'snot and trane', I managed to convince my parents that it was a good idea. And the reason it needed convincing is because You know, um, all the scholarships for degrees like that had a surety assigned to it. So if I failed a year, they would need to, to fork out for me to repeat, you know, that year. Or if I drop out completely, they'd have to pay it back.

[00:15:36] **Mike Abel:** They kind of knew you weren't going to.

[00:15:37] **Mamongae:** They're just like, Oh my God, like, you know, um. You know, because I mean, but it was a risk to them financially, it didn't, wasn't a risk free, but, uh, so that was another key motivation for being very, uh, you know, diligent at university, you know, because, yeah, uh, yeah.

[00:15:59] **Mike Abel:** Well, an engineering degree, certainly chemical engineering is a, is a massive achievement. At which stage did you realize that you weren't going to become a chemical engineer, or did you actually start off becoming one? I mean, I know you've got the qualification, but did you ever work as one?

[00:16:13] **Mamongae:** I did. I mean, um, I did two years at Unilever, um, as a project engineer, and then also a process engineer in the, in the factory making margarine for a couple of years for probably, actually for about two and a bit years. I knew

probably around the tail end of the third year that I didn't really want to do the very deep technical engineering. I was far more interested in kind of operations and, um, you know, um, and so I wanted what I would call the more process engineering rather than, uh, you know, um, The deep chemical engineering, like you get in Sasol and that kind of stuff. I was really not interested in that. So I knew then that there would be, I wouldn't stay a technical chemical engineer for too long, but where to from there, I wasn't particularly sure. So I did, I knew that I wanted to actually. Um, you know, give it a shot working as an engineer and discover what it's like. Um, and yeah, so it was just from that experience that, you know, you then kind of ask different questions and that leads to a different, uh, career opportunity. And you just. navigate following what I was particularly interested in discovering or learning and doing.

[00:17:44] **Ad:** Mike Abel's book, *Willing and Abel, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis*, captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins, losses, and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration to learn what it takes to disrupt industries. or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:18:18] **Mike Abel:** So in terms of then moving away from, I guess, engineering to a different aspect of, uh, I guess having a great background and a great education, to then moving to a different, uh, area, what was the catalyst or what was the thing that made you then kind of take a different path.

[00:18:38] **Mamongae:** Yeah. So, I mean, I remember working in the, in the factory. And, um, we had to figure out how to pack margarine blocks in, in those, uh, tin jars. Because, you know, marketing would run these campaigns that, you know, I love as a consumer. But I hated as a, as a, as an engineer that was in charge of making sure these things were packed. Because the machines are not created to do those things. So you'd have to hand pack these things. And it's added cost. And, you know, you all sit there thinking who on earth had this bright idea to, to do this. And, you know, there'll be a couple of things that you'd experience on the production floor, which was the tail end of, you know, other people's decision making, and then I, I'm used to kind of had the, you know, the curiosity to understand, like, how do these things get arrived? Why is this important? How does it actually even add value to the business to do all of these things? Yeah. And that was in that, uh, in that experience, that's what, that's what triggered the interest in trying to understand, like, you know, how business decisions get made, understanding business, like, what are all, These people doing, um, you know, why do you have, you know, all these functions and what, what's the role. Cause you know, I mean, one of the things as an engineer, you're like, you know, we're the ones that make the stuff. Everybody else is just getting in the way, you know? Um, and, and so it was, it was the curiosity and the, really actually wanting to, to, to understand, uh, the why that, uh, I ended up, uh, deciding that I will move more onto the business side.

[00:20:21] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah. Well, I love that because, uh, you know, So many people have their path set for them, you know, you were encouraged maybe to look

at medicine, you said, and you chose engineering, and then you get a degree like that, which is, you know, a very, uh, respected qualification and one that's going to guarantee a decent income throughout your career, and you're still curious enough to say, Well, maybe business is more for me. Maybe that's a better area to go into because I think so many people that will be listening to us today will be at that point in their own lives where you feel you've made a decision in your life and you'll doggedly stick to that decision, realizing you've just got one life. Yeah. And if it's not working for you, or if you think there are other more interesting aspects, to explore those. So, I think that's a really, really important insight, um, that you've given, you've given people there. Look, I mean, you've had a, you're young, but you've had a remarkable career so far. If you had to think back and say, This was the most fun moment in my career so far. What would you think back and think, yeah, that was great, that particular, is there anything that stands out as being a moment?

[00:21:35] **Mamongae:** No, not a single moment, because I think in every single job or organization I've worked in, I've had tremendous experiences. I mean, both challenging and wonderful. Um, so, I mean, I, and you always think, I mean, the one thing that's common, it's, it's, it would be, you know, either when I went, you know, straight into the deep end when I had no cooking clue what I was doing and thinking like, how on earth do I think, how do you do this? I was like, well, we'll just figure it out. And then you don't die. You know, it's like you dive into the deep end and you don't drown. Um. Um, that always was just like, you know, it's just like unbelievable,

[00:22:20] **Mike Abel:** The thrill...

[00:22:23] **Mamongae:** The thrill, the confidence, um, and, and you know, it gives you the license to, to take other bolder deep ends, um and then the other thing is always the people. So it's like some of the social moments, the laughs, um, you know, I mean, uh, I remember in the old days when I was in consulting, one of the things we would do after. Because, you know, when you're on assignment, you're literally working round the clock. And when an assignment ends, they always put the budget aside to go and play. And so the team would go off on an off-site, and I think once a year we went to Mauritius or something like that, when we were still a small office. And the kind of troubles we, we got into, I mean, we're never invited back to any place we went to. And so, you know, those kind of things were fun, you know, it was fun. Also. Getting to live in, in, in Tanzania and realizing that, you know, um, I'm, I look like everybody else but I don't understand a thing anybody's saying. Yeah. And so having to learn a language. Um, and what was the thrill about it? What is the

[00:23:32] **Mike Abel:** What is the native language of Tanzania?

[00:23:34] **Mamongae:** Swahili.

[00:23:35] **Mike Abel:** Oh, okay. Swahili. And you speak Swahili?

[00:23:37] **Mamongae:** I, well, I speak, now I've been out of practice for a while, but I do understand and speak Swahili.

[00:23:43] **Mike Abel:** Wonderful.

[00:23:44] **Mamongae:** And, um, and it is quite, um, interesting. It was quite fun actually when people would start, um, you know, they'll talk about you not knowing that you can understand what they're saying. It just would be fun when you just would then answer back in Swahili and then you see everybody scuttle around. It's like really fun

[00:24:00] **Mike Abel:** You're gonna have to teach me some Swahili swear words after this. Just one or two. So there's a lot of innovation, um, that one sees coming out of, uh, universities and graduates, you know, you. Your time at, uh, at Harvard business school. And they're not many people that I sit down and talk to that have been to the mythical Harvard business school. Um, and, uh, and, and you've followed a very innovative career. So I'm going to ask you a little bit about Harvard. Were you based in Boston? Did you go there full time?

[00:24:34] **Mamongae:** Yeah, absolutely. Two years. Two years.

[00:24:36] **Mike Abel:** You survived two Boston winters.

[00:24:40] **Mamongae:** Oh, I remember my first one very vividly. Um, walking out in jeans? It's just a short 15 minute walk. Sure we'll make it and then within five minutes your jeans are frozen. You literally are like walking and then inside an ice pair of jeans and you've never been so cold in your life.

[00:25:02] **Mike Abel:** Um, it's only about minus twenties and that. So if you think back to your MBA and uh, and innovation and fresh thinking and ideas, what would you say were different ah, case studies you're exposed to or thoughts or philosophies or ideas that maybe got you to view the world slightly differently. Because I know that MBAs can be, teach process extremely well, but in terms of, uh, teaching you fresh ways of thinking, could you unpack that a bit?

[00:25:30] **Mamongae:** Yeah. Look, I think one of the things that was great about HBS was that you, it wasn't a lot about necessarily the specifics of the content or process. You know, the case method was about actually, um, learning through debate, uh, and challenging, um, what other people's interpretations of the case might be. Um, and, and that's how you got the richness of the diversity of the students that were within, within the school. And I think that was, one was just the method. You don't get there to be taught content, you know, because the assumption is that content would be available to you in today's age, but it's about interpreting, uh, forming a point of view, challenging other's point of view and having your point of view challenged and how do you take on that new information and build on it? So it's not about necessarily who's the smartest person in the room trying to kind of kill down ideas. It's like, you know, can you listen? You know, taking new data and then interpret it into and take the argument or the, you know, the conversation to a next or a different, uh, direction. Um, so I think that was, there was one key innovation, you know, having, and you get practice in, in thinking on your feet because usually, you

know, we're all different, like, you know, I, you know, there's a level of reacting to the conversation and I'll always kind of like percolated later. And then you, you come up with, um, You know, more perspectives after that, but you definitely learn to kind of, um, you know, practice being quicker on your feet because that's, that's what, you know, you get marked on, you know, the, one of the things that stood out is, you know, you learn to, that you're an African because you imagine you're like, you're South African. Remember like for many years, it was South African and the rest of the continent, right? And so when you are off the continent, you're, you're all African, right? And that was a wonderful revelation because, you know, it allowed me to interact with people from, you know, the, the, the diaspora, understanding all of, you know, people's, um, you know, heritage, um, and their stories, um, which, which was incredible. And then the other thing was also. The focus on like, um, a social enterprise, you know, um, because I think if I remember correctly, like, you know, the, the, the mission for the school was, you know, creating leaders for the world, right? And so that meant that it doesn't, it didn't say creating business leaders for the world, you know, it was leaders for the world, right? And so, you know, there was a lot of encouragement for, um, people that would, uh, use their talent in, in the social enterprise world. So how do you impact real social, um, you know, challenges or opportunities or businesses or solutions that had a, a much more social, uh, lens to it or environmental lens to it. And also in, in entrepreneurs, it wasn't about. Building people that will plug into, uh, just organizations and build, um, career ladders. It was also very encouraging of, you know, people to innovate, people to start businesses, um, and to basically dare to believe you can solve the problems. Um, of, of the world and see some of the problems as, as opportunities.

[00:29:21] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's so interesting with what you're saying, a couple of things. One is creating leaders of the world. Leadership is action and not position. And I think that, uh, I wish I'd coined that, it's not my saying, but it's a goodie, uh, because I think so many people aspire to a leadership position as opposed to being in a position to make a difference in the world. To drive something, to do something, and the other thing that you said that jumped out at me in a very powerful way was, um, Rigor and argument and different points of opinion to get to a better place. And if you look at the world today, that's all being shut down. You know, having a difference of opinion is actually regarded, particularly within the woke cultures or cancel cultures, you may not have a different opinion. So how do you get to a better place? You know, our good friend, Greta, who wants to save the planet. I mean, you know. I don't think she's ever had an academic discourse around the environment because she's never studied anything about the environment, despite being, you know, a potential Nobel laureate on the subject. So I think that it's really important that our listeners engage, I guess, in that wisdom of keeping an open mind, being Abel to hold a few truths at the same time, you know, and then, um, I guess trying to get to a better place, have a robust conversation and when you disagree on something, it doesn't only have to be an argument. It's an exchange of ideas.

[00:30:57] **Mamongae:** No, absolutely. I remember actually, uh, a couple of years ago coming across a TED talk that was about how you must get more deliberate about engaging with people that have a different point of view from you. Mm. Um, and, and a lot of it was about. You know, testing your reason why you hold your point of view. What is the, what are the factoids that are driving your perspective? Yeah. What are

your blind spots? What are your biases? And you want, if you only engage. With people that agree with you or see things your way. Yeah. Then you will never have the, the opportunity to be Abel to, you know, see things from a different point of view. You may still end up with the same point of view, but it's actually making sure that when you arrive at your point of view, you also have explored a different perspective and can then decide that actually I'm choosing to go this way rather than That's just the way it is. I know I'm right, you know, because I decide I'm right, you know what I mean? And it is not, it's usually not comfortable, uh, particularly when it's like, you know, usually, uh, whether it's topics about race, gender, politics, all the hot, hot topics, or sometimes even, you know, cultural or sports. Um, in my day selling a beer, it was also which brand is your favourite is the best beer in the country. People would get into fistfights about that. Yeah. But so I think it is uncomfortable, but you always come off having learned something. Even if your point of view doesn't shift significantly. It will, you'll be a little bit more nuanced in understanding, um, actually why you hold the views you do.

[00:32:53] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:32:55] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think human progress largely depends on it, you know. I'm reminded of that, uh, great Apple ad of, here's to the crazy ones, the square pegs in the round holes. You know, it ends off a line, something like, because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do. And for a Galileo in his day, and people that were, you know, believed the earth was flat, it was a very unpopular thing, but he wouldn't have rallied against that, you know, if, uh, if there wasn't an existing perception, you know, and I think that that's the point here is that, uh, don't give up. If there is a strongly held belief by the majority, it doesn't mean No, it's right. And I think too many people these days give up quickly because of maybe social media or pressure, as opposed to fighting through to get to a better place.

[00:33:44] **Mamongae:** No, look, it's, I mean, it's not easy being a minority or a rebel in any kind of context. So, you know, you really have to just, you know, also, um, you know, trust in, in, in that, in that instinct because, you know, it's not always That you will have like, you know, a long list of facts for why your point of view is right or why you are challenging a particular point of view. Um, but I think as you get to explore and you, you want to figure out, you know, is this direction necessarily the right one? It's just asking the question and not always being, you know, putting a full stop to everything. It's like, you know, what if? What if I'm wrong? Or what if I'm actually right? Uh, let's, let's figure it out.

[00:34:43] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's interesting. Uh, and I don't know if may, I've made a, this observation in a, in a previous podcast, but it's worth probably raising again. But when I was talking to a very successful, uh, businesswoman the other day, she asked me, what are the known unknowns? And I thought that was, you know, a really powerful question, the known unknowns. What is it that we know we don't know? And I think that, uh, that people don't ask themselves that question often enough. Um, because if you don't ask yourself that question, how do you know you're solving the right answer? If you don't understand the exact problem, you can't, you know,

you've got to verify the problem. Uh, as you often say in meetings, what are we solving for here? You know, but now you are, I guess, in many ways, uh, the Jeff Bezos of South Africa. No. You're a pioneer.

[00:35:38] **Mamongae:** No, we need to correct that. I think the founder of Takealot.

[00:35:43] **Mike Abel:** but I think there are a lot of, yeah, I agree. I mean, obviously Kim, you know, brilliant, uh, brave man, uh, to have started that company, but you know, uh, you are one of the great leaders of the company. Um, let's not shy away from that. And, uh, so e-commerce, uh, takealot.com group, you know, the pioneers of e-commerce in South Africa, and if not the pioneers, certainly the ones that got it right when other people weren't, we now find ourselves in this kind of like Instant economy, where people, you know, want stuff they want it now, uh, a convenience economy, um, How do you think that plays out in the everyday world? I mean, I love, oh, obviously I love takealot.com. You know, it's given me hours and hours more to read books rather than being shopping centers. And when I know what size uh, tekkies fits me, I can just keep on tekkies for those of you that aren't in South Africa are sneakers. That's our word for sneakers. Uh, you know, once you know what size you are, you never need to go back into a shop. Although some people do, do, do, uh, love shopping. But. South Africa is also a market that loves shopping and enjoys shopping and the experience of shopping. Can you share a little bit of insight with us around, uh, maybe if you see patterns and behaviours changing of getting whatever you want in a convenient way and then engaging with maybe more traditional bricks and mortar retail in a, I guess, experiential way or in a hospitality way or what are the trends you're seeing?

[00:37:18] **Mamongae:** I think, um, you know, there are a couple of things that I personally found quite powerful about e-commerce and, uh, particularly the, the platform, um, Takealot.com, Mr. D, and Superbalist provide. One is, um, the, You know, I believe it, it democratizes access to quality retail, uh, products and services by that, I mean, you know, on the platform, regardless of whether you're in, in Bantry Bay or Morningside in, in, in Sandton, or you're in Sacuna land or Lusikisiki, you know, you are seeing the exact same products at the exact same price and they get delivered, right to you, you know, with the same conditions, right? So, um, that unlocks huge opportunity for people, both, you know, in rural areas, as well as in, as in urban areas to be able to, to, to access these, these quality products. The, the second thing is around the, um, The empowerment nature in terms of, um, SMEs, you know, because on the, on the takealot.com, uh, you have marketplace sellers where you're able to list your products, uh, on, on the platform. Yeah. So immediately, you know. Uh, entrepreneurs, whether they're also in Lusikisi, Sucunda land or Bantry Bay, um, are Abel to actually list their products on the website and immediately have access to like millions of, of, of customers. So you have a route to market that is taken care of. You have, um, you know, no, no big capital outlay to be Abel to establish a store and, and, you know, the huge investment that usually comes with establishing a business. Yeah. So that means then that, you know, you know, you need, there's very low barriers to accessing economic, uh, opportunity. And I think for a country like ours, where, you know, unemployment is so high, where the economy is, is not really in a position to be. Creating the traditional jobs in the form that, that

we're used to, it is important that, um, you know, you know, young South Africans be Abel to have access to being Abel to, to have economic freedom, you know, you know, to be to be able to make their own money, uh, create and be their own job, because that's the reality of what we, um, that we live in is in the world where you create your own jobs. You don't, You should, you know, I think the generation, um, that is in high school today or in high school in the next 10 years, you know, must expect that your job you're going to need to create, it is going to be in some form of either, um, you know, digital economy, um, where the opportunities are not just local, but they're global. Yeah. And when it comes to, to the consumer side, I think. You know, a lot of times, you know, yes, the early adopters tend to be, um, the time starved or the, um, the high income or middle to high-income individuals that When stuff done quickly or they're curious about the service or, you know, now we want our groceries in 60 minutes and it's phenomenal what it does to liberate, uh, the amount of time that you would ordinarily have spent shopping Saturdays, you know, the, the angst when you're, when you're leaving work late and you're having, you know, families waiting for dinner and you haven't bought anything. Now you can, you know, you can sort all of that out. So I guess there's a, there's a value of the freedom, um, or the liberation from, you know, unproductive stress that a lot of people have in running the multiple aspects of their lives that, um, that e-commerce really unlocks. And I think there's a huge value to that. But the part that I'm also excited about is, you know, it's e-commerce is not for the haves, you know, it's for everyone. So even people that are living, you know, whether you call it living in, in, in townships or whether people are of a certain income level. The truth of the matter is there is power in, in, in, in the money and your, your, what you actually spend. And as long as you are buying groceries, you can order, you know, your groceries on Mr. D and get them delivered to you. Why do you need to, you know, those are people that actually can do with saving their money instead of spending money on taxi fare or transport or somebody to carry, you know, your goods for you or your, your TV and fridge and all those kind of things. You know, why spend that money when you can save it and if you buy your stuff on takealot. com or Superbalist, they get delivered to your house. Right? And so I think that's what is important, um, for, for us to actually really drive and make people aware of is that this is not for the, it's not about the haves and the have nots, it is for, it's actually is a service that has great value for everybody and either saves you time, money or stress or simply provides the variety and the quality of shopping that does not necessarily exist in your, it's you know, physical reality. It's a shopping mall in your hand. You don't need to have a shopping mall, um, in your village. If you don't have it, I mean, even, I mean, I come from a rural area. I know what kind of retail options are available there. I mean, I'm lucky to even come from a village that has a shopping mall and a bank and fast food and all those great things that lots of people um, you know, they don't even have, they're like vast parts of this country where it's only like small general dealer shops, uh, and that's it. They have to travel an hour to the nearest Supermarket.

[00:43:41] **Mike Abel:** But what you're saying over here is no matter where you live, you've got this huge mall on your mobile phone to buy whatever you want. But what I love about what you said, which is so powerful, um, because I mean, you know, you guys are a born and bred South African company, a great South African company. And what's coming through this conversation very powerfully for me is, what you

said about giving people access to a market. So in terms of, you know, having a small business, making candles or making, uh, you know, jams hats,

[00:44:13] **Mamongae:** Making hats

[00:44:14] **Mike Abel:** Making hats

[00:44:15] **Mamongae:** Making beauty products. I mean, that's the thing that is so inspiring is like, if you look at the diversity of products that are being sold on the platform and you also look at how many of them are actually, you know, developed by South Africans. These are not products where somebody has gone and bought a product and relabelled or just bought a product and just resells. Yeah. They're those and, and they have their role, but they are also many South Africans. Um, I mean, the, the, the number of Individuals have started a beauty product, um, and they started selling it on take a lot, um, during COVID and they had such success that now they've been Abel to access, um, you know, uh, the bigger brick and mortar retail chain as part of the expansion strategy, but they would never have had the opportunity to do it the other way around, you know, cause it's far more prohibitive to get into, into the, the, the brick and mortar because it's just a different model. It's a, you know, and there's limited shelf space. We don't have, uh, you know, the, the, the, the limitation of shelf space. Um, what we, you know, what we want is, is, is, is more South Africans doing more value-adding products that solve South African problems and needs and, uh, and, and playing a role in. Seeing the success of all these entrepreneurs is, is, is terribly inspiring.

[00:45:52] **Mike Abel:** So if I had to take that answer that you've just given me right now, and I said, asked you, given what you've just said, what advice would you give to small medium enterprises and entrepreneurs who are starting out right now?

[00:46:08] **Mamongae:** I mean, first of all, if it's a retail product is. Get it on takealot.com. Um, and if it's a fashion brand, um, you know, uh, we, we have about 112 local brands that, that are sold on superblis.com

[00:46:21] **Mamongae:** On Superblis?

[00:46:22] **Mike Abel:** Oh really?

[00:46:23] **Mamongae:** Yeah. Okay. So we're a big, we are truly a South African business for, by South Africans, for South Africans. Um, and we, we don't just talk the talk. We want the talk and you can see it evidently in every single one of our businesses, even, um, on, on, on Mr. D. Um, and so my advice would be get started, consider take a lot as a, as a, as a opportunity, um, as a, as a distribution channel to, to, to building your business. Commits and invest in your, you know, you, you have time, you have your skills that you can invest in making sure that you understand what it takes to be successful because we provide the opportunity and the access and a lot of support to, to help people navigate. But at the end of the day, you need to also make the investment. It's not easy to become successful. It requires hard work

and dedication. It requires that sometimes you don't go out on Friday night with your buddies, that you're sitting there packing your products. Or learning, learning about the platform, learning about, uh, being a business person, what does it actually mean? And if you put in the work and you're always, um, you know, seeking the, the, the advice and support, I think you'll find that a lot of times, provided, you know, you've got a quality product, uh, that's price right, um, and you do what, um, what is required of you, you you are able to be, uh, successful. Um, but it's definitely requires, um, commitment and, and, and, and hard work.

[00:48:11] **Ad:** The Street Store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent free, premises free, free pop up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need. Allowing them to choose from a selection of pre-loved clothing and shoes. Over a thousand stores have been hosted around the world in the past decade. And now we're calling on you to host your own. Visit thestreetstore.org to sign up and find out how.

[00:48:40] **Mike Abel:** Mamongae, I know you're a very curious person. Um, What are you curious about right now?

[00:48:47] **Mamongae:** A couple of things. Um, I guess I'm curious about the elections next year. Like, what's, what's going to happen at the, at the national level? Yeah. Curious about whether load shedding is actually solved, uh, and then whether...

[00:49:06] **Mike Abel:** My lights went out last night, so I can only vouch for that.

[00:49:12] **Mamongae:** There's some confident, um, you know, uh, articulations that within the next 12 months, it, it might be The worst of it might be behind us. So, you know, so curious about, you know, what's, what's going to happen with that. And of course, you know, curious about what, what it would be like once Amazon is finally here. I mean, from a business point of view, I think that is something that is obviously, uh, in our, in our reality. Yeah. Yeah. But I think, um, I'd like to ponder. Yeah. Look, I think more impactfully is, is, um, what's going to happen next year, uh, from a country leadership point of view.

[00:49:53] **Mike Abel:** So as we head into the tail end, uh, of our rich discussion today, which I've greatly enjoyed, so thank you. There always are a couple of cornerstone questions and, uh, you know, you've just spoken about, uh. South Africa and 2024 and load shedding and the elections. Um, what do you think we're not saying in South Africa right now? What? What is the conversation we're not having with other people or with ourselves? That's, uh, we really should be. That's important.

[00:50:27] **Mamongae:** Yeah, I'm sure there would be a number of, of those conversations. One of them for me is, you know, what am I doing to be part of the solution? Um, it's all easy to be a couch critic and be Abel to say what's wrong with the country, what Ramaphosa should or should not be doing. Um, and yes, there's accountability there to, to be had because, you know, everybody who has a role, a role to play has to be, um, accountable. But we are also citizens. We're not victims.

We, we, you know, we are participants in the reality that we see, um, and, and we need to, um, I guess, have the courage to be more involved. Um, I think also, you know, it's, I guess they, they, they, they, they are being had or they have been had, that it's a conversations about leadership and, um, and it is a hell of a hard time to be a president of this country. Um, and I really don't envy the man in terms of, or the leaders that are wanting to do the right thing. Um, and who knows what, what they have to deal with, but you know, when you've got, you know, the number of years in terms of, um, just corruption and some of the, the things that we're seeing that are just not really who we are as South Africans, you know, when you think about kind of like the diligent and the sacrifices people made, um, for, for our freedom, for people like me to even have the opportunities I have access to today, you know, uh, there was always a lot of pride in, um, in people that, you know, um, That record that honest, um, you know, there was kind of like credibility in, um, in, in being, you know, in, in having integrity and how you operate and run things. So to, to actually see the level of corruption that we see today, it's like, what's, what's happened? How did we get here? Um, and, um, and where is that sense of. The real sense of Ubuntu, the real sense of, you know, we have to solve for the collective and not just for the individual. Because yes, you know, I need to be okay, but I don't need to take away from everybody for me to be okay, because that's not sustainable, right? What happens? I think there's been a lot of lost ground and a lot of great talent that has been, um, I guess, destroyed in, in, in, in the, in the environments where there's been, um, a lot of, um, I guess, corruption where they just didn't feel like they could actually operate in those places. So I think there's, there's some questions to be, to be had around, like, how did we get here? How do we get out and how do we make sure that we don't get here again? And how do we actually, um, you know, hold, uh, each other accountable, hold our leaders accountable, um, and then be part of the solution. So what I, what I see. Now, what really encourages me is, is the way we've seen a lot of business leaders that I guess have now said Tumamina, you know, so join, um, the, the, the coalition to say we see we've got problems with, you know, with, with electricity, there's problems in terms of logistics, you know, there's like some key work streams that, um, they're working collectively with government to say like, you know, we need to work together to get ourselves out of here because we all realize that if we, if we don't. You know, the ship will sink all of us because, you know, it's, it's, it's not going to sink part of the country and not the, and the, not the rest. So we do need to kind of get involved. So that gives me hope.

[00:54:53] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, it gives me hope too. What doesn't give me hope is when I see these fantastic CEOs and CMOs and companies that are getting behind saving our country, which they absolutely need to be doing to have that narrative twisted, maybe that they supporting a political party as opposed to supporting a country, which is very much what I think they are doing.

[00:55:16] **Mike Abel:** But what I love about what you've said is not just calling for Active citizenry in terms of what can I do to make a difference, but you added another piece to that, which is, and how do I hold myself accountable for my own behaviour in that? And I think it's very easy to get behind a cause or jump behind something versus actually standing back a bit and saying, what do I stand for?

[00:55:43] **Mike Abel:** And what am I prepared to do to see South Africa become the country I want it to be? And in many ways, that's what I'm hoping these CEOs are doing is rallying the call of, of their own value systems and what they want the country to be. And that's my sense of it. We're going to close on a question, which is One mystery you would like the answer to. What is that?

[00:56:12] **Mamongae:** How do I win the lotto? Um, what's the mystery?

[00:56:17] **Mike Abel:** Infinite permutations.

[00:56:20] **Mamongae:** Wow.

[00:56:23] **Mike Abel:** I know, it's an unfair question.

[00:56:24] **Mamongae:** Yeah, what mystery do I want solved?

[00:56:28] **Mike Abel:** What mystery do you think about? It's just us. You can share anything. There might be thousands on the other side, though.

[00:56:39] **Mamongae:** Yeah, look, I don't really have a big mystery. Um, I guess, uh, yeah, it's, it's, I don't have a one big, one big mystery.

[00:56:51] **Mike Abel:** I'll give you mine. Maybe you can solve it.

[00:56:53] **Mamongae:** Maybe it might inspire.

[00:56:54] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, well, I don't know, you know, with social media now today. You know, the genie's out the bottle. Yeah. And, you know, you spoke earlier about critical thinking. How do you think we get people to think again?

[00:57:08] **Mamongae:** How do you think people are thinking? Um, some might not realize they're thinking other people's thoughts. Uh, because you absorb a lot of information. Um, but I think it's, uh, conversation. And, uh, and curiosity are the things that make people think. I think usually, like, when you I mean, you're always thinking, like, you know, but I guess what you're saying is, how do we get people to think more, more critically and to be...

[00:57:45] **Mike Abel:** Well, that's what I mean by thinking.

[00:57:46] **Mike Abel:** I'm unfamiliar with the notion of uncritical thought.

[00:57:54] **Mamongae:** Hello...Um, Yeah, I think it's about having the conversations in the spaces where you feel safe, that you can have the conversation without judgment. I love that. That, that, that, that I would say is practically where, where people can, that's how, how it can happen. So if you are somebody's friend or

somebody's colleague or somebody's, um, you know, and, and these are people that are a key part of your life, it's, you know, create the space for people to, to, to actually want to have the conversations that they're uncomfortable to have with strangers. Um, because if we are not creating the space, where are those conversations going to happen? Um, and, and I, I guess, yeah, it, it does require us to, because if we want the safe spaces, how do we become a safe space for, for other people? Because that's the only space I think those conversations are going to happen. Nobody's going to have a question about politics, um, or about what's going on in, you know, Gaza, you know, or, um, Israel, Palestine, in an unsafe space, because these are highly emotive conversations, and, you know, those are like, you know, examples of it, or when you talk about, you know, you know, you know, whether it's about, um,

racial, gender issues, where are the women in business, where are, you know, all of those kind of things.

[00:59:34] **Mike Abel:** So I think, I think that's the perfect place for us to, to, to, to, to close here because what I think you've captured here, and maybe this is the next unicorn in the world, uh, which is, you know, if you think of Twitter or X as it's now called, worst branding job in the world to, I don't know, you know, anyway, X. Imagine having a platform that was not designed around judgment, but around conversation. Because that platform and the style of that platform is so established already as I think this, you said that, as opposed to discourse, exchanging of ideas. I love that. And I think that's a very powerful, fresh idea. I want to thank you, Mamongae for sharing your valuable time with me today, I've loved this conversation, uh, and for being willing to open up much more than one often does, you know, in sharing these ideas. I think you've given our listeners much food for thought, lots of useful advice, and in my view, plenty of inspiration too, that they can use and apply in their own lives. Just goes to show that sometimes taking a few unexpected turns in your life or career can bring you to the place that you Most need to be right now. Thank you so much, Mamongae. It's been absolutely fantastic having you on the podcast today.

[01:00:56] **Mamongae:** Well, thank you very much, Mike. It was wonderful having this conversation with you, and I hope that, uh, your listeners find something that is, um, useful for them.

[01:01:14] **Mike Abel:** Thanks so much for listening today. If you've enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five-star review? Tune in to Willing and Abel next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

[01:01:28] **Credits:** This podcast is produced by 2Stories. Written by Linda Scarborough, produced by Carol Williams, with audio editing, engineering and sound design by Kozi Mzimela, with production assistance from M&C Saatchi Group South Africa's team, Maciek Dubla and Nadia Siegel. Special thanks to Sonic Nursery and Edible Audio for the recording of these episodes.