

Willing & Abel podcast: Finding our own solutions with social entrepreneur Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba

[00:00:00] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So the culture is meeting people at their point of need. I have a young lad that just joined my team. Absolutely brilliant. Studied actuarial science as well. So he's on the consulting side at Kwandiso. He's doing our financial modelling, but he's struggling with English. And he says, if you could speak more in English to me, I would really appreciate it.

[00:00:23] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** For me, it's about meeting people and making sure that you compliment them and bring out the best in them. Open and honest culture is what I punt and I push for. I will never penalize someone for telling me the truth.

[00:00:38] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel. I'm a business, marketing and communication specialist and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel.

[00:00:46] **Mike Abel:** I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, 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 Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis. My guest today is Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba, a social entrepreneur and speaker, the founder of Kwandiso Consulting.

[00:01:16] **Mike Abel:** Ayanda is a chartered accountant who is passionate about education, social justice, empowering SMME owners, and good governance, and also alcohol-free drinks, which we're going to discuss. So great to have you here today, Ayanda. Welcome.

[00:01:34] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Thank you so much for the warm welcome, Mike. I'm happy to be here.

[00:01:38] **Mike Abel:** We're going to have a great conversation. I'm looking forward to it. So for me, always, when I meet with entrepreneurs, I'm fascinated by what germinated entrepreneurship, I guess, in their childhood when it all started and began. So you were born in Komani, then Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. And I understand that both of your parents are from a legal background.

[00:02:03] **Mike Abel:** So how did those early years shape you?

[00:02:06] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** My parents had a practice, so I was born into the legal practice basically, and for most of my childhood I thought I'd be an attorney. My parents then left legal practice and then went on to be on the bench. Okay. And, um, after hearing some of the stories of the cases that they were doing, I thought this cannot be my life.

[00:02:28] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I thought it was extremely traumatic, and there's absolutely no way that I could sit in court and listen to testimonies day in and day out. Also, reading those long documents is just not for me.

[00:02:39] **Mike Abel:** Short attention span.

[00:02:42] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So, my mom suggested me being an accountant, and I thought, okay, no, but I actually want to teach. I want to impart knowledge. I want to make a difference. So I want to be a teacher. And she said, nope, teachers don't earn a lot of money and I need you to have money.

[00:02:57] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And I thought, okay, mom, but you know, I really want to make a difference. I'm not about making money. And she said, but when you have money, then you're in the rooms that allow you to make decisions that make a difference.

[00:03:09] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And that is how I ended up becoming a chartered accountants.

[00:03:12] **Mike Abel:** That's amazing. I mean, I think that's exceptionally sound advice for our listeners today. I think that there always is a practical reality, I guess, in terms of the decisions we make and the lives that we want to lead. And I guess what you're talking to is how you can choose an alternate career to teaching, but still teach.

[00:03:34] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** A hundred percent.

[00:03:35] **Mike Abel:** And I've seen from your career so far that you spend a lot of time investing in education, both yourself in terms of bursaries, but in terms of how you've structured your life around educating. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

[00:03:49] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yeah, 100%. I'll even share an experience last week.

[00:03:53] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I was a guest lecturer at Stellenbosch University. So the entrepreneurship class, the second and third years, I do their case studies because I'm an entrepreneur day in and day out, and they help me solve problems within my businesses. And that's such an important part of the work that I do, bringing the practical element together with the theoretical parts.

[00:04:16] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I still teach maths on weekends to grade 12s that need it.

[00:04:19] **Mike Abel:** Personally or online?

[00:04:21] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** No, personally. Okay. They come to my house. We kit out the office and we teach maths, calculus, whatever they need. My husband cooks and yeah, that's part of us giving back as well.

[00:04:35] **Mike Abel:** And when you say your husband cooks, does he cook for the students that are there for the maths lessons?

[00:04:39] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yes, he does.

[00:04:40] **Mike Abel:** That's amazing. And what I love about it is you told me earlier before we chatted that your husband is an actuary. So also obviously a brilliantly clever man and just incredible at you on this journey together. I want to explore that a little bit. Tell me how the two of you met, how you came together.

[00:04:58] **Mike Abel:** And then also specific to this maths teaching, how he then goes into the kitchen and prepares the meal. I'm just loving this. So roll with the story for me.

[00:05:07] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** All right. So we met teaching maths in Gugulethu for an NGO called Fun Learning for Youth. And we give extra classes through that NGO for children that can't afford extra maths lessons.

[00:05:19] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But also because we understand that maths is an integral part of pulling people out of poverty. And so that's how we met, we fell in love, and at the time I was still in corporate and he had just quit, we decided we're going to do life together. So we embarked on the journey of entrepreneurship.

[00:05:36] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So it's been a wild ride ever since. We have acquired a couple of businesses between the two of us, and that's what we do on a day-to-day basis. With him being an actuary I think he was feeling extremely unfulfilled in his work and he wanted to be in the real economy and same goes for me. We wanted to have a direct impact on people's lives knowing that at the end of the month you're supporting so many people and so many families.

[00:06:02] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And also you're able to direct your path as an individual. I think entrepreneurship, a big part of it is being able to direct your path and other people's lives. And he loves cooking. So I take full advantage of that.

[00:06:16] **Mike Abel:** What does he love cooking? What does he cook?

[00:06:17] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think his most famous dish is the seafood pasta, which we had last night as well.

[00:06:22] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And then he does. I'm coming over. Please do. And then he does an amazing pulled pork that he smokes for something like 21 hours. Oh really? Yeah. Okay. So yeah, we have a lot of fun there. Yeah. And I think

when we came together and we acquired our house and decided to do life together, it was ensuring that we swept the asset.

[00:06:41] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So we use our house to teach, to take in people that need a little bit of support along the way. And yeah, so our home has become everyone's home at this point.

[00:06:50] **Mike Abel:** Beautiful. So just so I understand, is it entirely philanthropic in terms of teaching these kids or is there a commercial aspect to it as well?

[00:07:00] **Mike Abel:** Because I often believe you can do both. So, you know, you spoke earlier about kids that can't afford extra lessons. So are your math lessons free or only free to those students who can't afford to pay? How does that work?

[00:07:14] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Our math lessons are free.

[00:07:16] **Mike Abel:** They're free?

[00:07:16] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** They're absolutely free.

[00:07:17] **Mike Abel:** And the meals are free?

[00:07:19] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** The meals are free as well.

[00:07:20] **Mike Abel:** What an incredible gift you're giving to society and again, for our listeners, I think that there's so many amazing lessons to be learned out there in terms of how you can use your skills to make a meaningful and tangible difference rather than, I guess, throwing money at the problem, as they say, looking and saying, I can actually make a massive difference to a few people's lives or many people's lives as you're doing.

[00:07:43] **Mike Abel:** That's very commendable. So when you say your husband and you invest in businesses. Do you invest in the same businesses together or do you spread your risk differently so he invests in certain ones and focuses on certain ones or do you guys do everything together in terms of your investment strategy?

[00:08:01] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** No, we don't do everything together in terms of investment strategy, but the end goal is to have a family office. Right. Okay. So at the end, once that is set up, it's to consolidate everything and just try and build this family office and leave a legacy. So there's a couple where it's just him, a couple where it's just me and some that we're together in.

[00:08:21] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But if you'd like a flavour of some of those. Yeah, I'd love a flavour. It's, um, a couple of franchises, we're in fuel, we're in energy, we're also in the restaurant space and warehousing.

[00:08:33] **Mike Abel:** So you mean you've got quick-service restaurants? Is that right? Yes. Are you happy to tell me which types of restaurants?

[00:08:40] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** We have a couple of famous brands. Okay. And then we've got filling stations as well with some of the big franchisors. Okay. And then we've got warehousing that we provide. Oh. We sell fuel, paraffin, gas. We are hustlers. We're hustlers.

[00:08:57] **Mike Abel:** Well, and that's incredible because you've also got your accounting firm.

[00:09:00] **Mike Abel:** Where, as I understand it, you specialize in offering accounting services for SMEs. Is that right? A hundred percent. So what type of companies do you help with? Their accounting needs?

[00:09:12] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yes. The need for Kwandiso came about when I, I was at KPMG servicing big corporates, but I saw that a lot of their supply development programs would be at a basic level, trying to help these SMMEs corporatize and improve their businesses and help them scale up for funding and also to be able to get out there and expand their offering.

[00:09:36] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So I realized that there isn't a very niche support service for those companies, particularly in the township economy. So a lot of my clients are cash businesses that are turning over north of a million. That on the face of it you wouldn't think they are.

[00:09:55] **Mike Abel:** Per animal per month?

[00:09:56] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Per month.

[00:09:57] **Mike Abel:** Okay, oh wow.

[00:09:59] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Um, on the face of it you wouldn't think they are.

[00:10:01] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But they just need help in managing that cash flow, in doing their taxes, in understanding how to scale their businesses, how to negotiate credit terms with suppliers, and basically to make sure that the money also plugs back into the economy so that we can improve the state of the country. So my services are basically saying that the services of a chartered accountant are not limited to your blue chip companies.

[00:10:26] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** They're not limited to being a fancy banker and wearing a suit. They are for everyone. And the skills that we impart, which is what I try to do, help them become better. The end goal is that they don't need me after three years, they're able to do it themselves.

[00:10:43] **Mike Abel:** Amazing. So, I mean, clearly what you've articulated here far exceeds what a traditional accounting firm would do.

[00:10:52] **Mike Abel:** And I guess that's why you're called a consultancy because you give business advice. And I'm sure there are a lot of people listening to that thinking, gosh, I could do, with quite a bit of that in terms of your criteria for selecting a client, because I presume that is a commercial enterprise that's not philanthropic, but what you're saying is within the services that you offer, you hardwire a philanthropic aspect to it in turn, because you just mentioned about how those companies in and of themselves can also contribute to society. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because that fascinates me that you are taking those companies a little bit on that direction as well.

[00:11:36] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** If you think about Khayelitsha, the one here in Cape Town, in a month, the cash that moves through there is about a billion in cash.

[00:11:46] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And that is not cash that's through the bank. That's purely cash. It's not going to SARS. It's not going to the bank.

[00:11:52] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:11:58] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And I think it's a market that is forgotten or unknown of. I think the banks maybe have forgotten about it. They're maybe not aware that they could bank that business, that they can help those businesses grow.

[00:12:12] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So when I come in, I say, let's grow your business. Let's employ people from here. Let's invest in the infrastructure here.

[00:12:20] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Let's not take the business out of Khayelitsha. Yeah. And so I try to drill it into them that if you're employing people, employ the people that are here, uplift this economy and let me teach you so that you can teach the next person.

[00:12:36] **Mike Abel:** That's amazing. So when did your, I guess, determination to contribute to make a difference in society start? When I was born. Really? Talk about that. Yeah. I know that you said lightly, but yeah.

[00:12:52] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yeah. So last year my mom bumped into my Creche teacher.

[00:12:57] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:12:57] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Auntie Bridget King.

[00:12:58] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:12:59] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And Auntie Bridget said, is Ayanda the president yet?

[00:13:02] **Mike Abel:** I guess.

[00:13:03] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And my mom reminded me that since I was four, I kept saying, I'm going to be the president of the country because it's the only way that at the time I thought I could make a difference. Yeah. And my mom said, no, she's not the president yet, and I don't think she'll ever be the president, but she is doing exactly what she set out to do, which is change the world.

[00:13:23] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And it's been an inherent part of my life, I think, because I've seen my parents doing it. I grew up around it.

[00:13:30] **Mike Abel:** So your parents were also very involved, invested in the community and upliftment?

[00:13:35] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** 100 percent. Okay. Yes, I was raised as an only child, that my mother birthed, but I was raised with at least 10 other people in the house that my mom just decided, oh, they don't have a place to be or go or sleep.

[00:13:49] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So they're going to be at my house. So I was raised in that kind of home. So it's almost built into me to want to do that.

[00:13:59] **Mike Abel:** And have you retained a relationship with your siblings in Invertebrate?

[00:14:03] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** One hundred percent. Every other week it's, to my husband, Oh, this is my sister. This is my brother. And then he'll often say, which one again?

[00:14:12] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Because there are so many of them. Yeah. But yes, 100 percent retained a relationship.

[00:14:17] **Mike Abel:** And you know, a big part of this conversation, as you know, is around us. imparting wisdom and imparting knowledge. Those kids that grew up in your house, like siblings, have they also gone on to have successful careers and be entrepreneurs or give me an example of what some of them have gone and done, because I think that that is such a, an important model in South Africa, in terms of contributing, making a difference to people's lives. And I'm very much in the same space and not raised a lot of children, certainly with my own. I haven't done that, but certainly put kids through school and seeing them absolutely blossom and their futur transformed.

[00:14:59] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Absolutely. A couple of them are social workers. Okay. We've got two attorneys that followed in my parents path, a traffic

officer, we've got a policeman, and then a lady who's now quite senior at Derco Department of International Relations. Yes. And she's jet-setting across the world and speaking at various conferences.

[00:15:21] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think the most important thing beyond putting them through school, is the time my parents were willing to invest, because that is something you just cannot quantify. You can quantify school fees. You can quantify how much it costs to put a meal on the table for someone. But the time that you invest in someone, there's absolutely no quantifying that.

[00:15:42] **Mike Abel:** 100 percent right, I mean it reminds me of that saying of people who know the cost of everything, or the price of everything, and the value of nothing, and you're talking to the value of everything, you know, those little things that make transformative differences to people's lives. Yes. So as an entrepreneur, because our listeners might think it's all moonlight and roses, but it's not, and it's tough, often because you're making so many multiple investments.

[00:16:10] **Mike Abel:** When you hit a wall, when you feel stuck around something, when you can't come up with an answer, how do you problem solve?

[00:16:17] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** That's a difficult question. It depends on the problem. Yeah, it's going to be difficult. It depends on the problem. So two weeks ago, our generator stopped working at one of our sites, the filling station.

[00:16:30] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** It's in quite a dangerous area. So at about 2am, we get a phone call. Generator's not switching on. What are we going to do? Wake up my husband, I say, generator's not working. We had ladies on duty that night. And it means, besides not being able to pump fuel, the lights are off. And then it means the alarm system's off and you can't press the panic buttons.

[00:16:55] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So we woke up everyone in the family and we went with lights and we told everyone to bring lights, just so that there can be light and movement and no one tries to take advantage of the situation or tries to rob the shop. Other times the crisis is big. I mean, we opened up our Wimpy in March 2020, a week before COVID, a week before lockdown, and we had stocked up to the brim.

[00:17:24] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** All the stock went off, as you can imagine, because of lockdown. Our brand new staff couldn't be paid. And I mean, that really took it out of us, us personally but the business. Imagine starting off a new business a week in and there's nothing you can do except close and apologize to your staff for that.

[00:17:47] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So what we tend to do is go back to the drawing board. We're very good at troubleshooting. I think we've mastered that skill over the years. Yeah. But when it's something as big as that, you have to completely reimagine. And I always say to my husband, let's not be scared to reinvent ourselves or retell the story a different way.

[00:18:08] **Mike Abel:** Yes.

[00:18:09] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And we somehow made it out alive.

[00:18:12] **Mike Abel:** And is that Wimpy open today? Did those staff get employed? Did it carry on after the crisis?

[00:18:18] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** It did. Okay. It did. It took 11 months, Mike, of us getting it up off the ground again. And we managed to revive the store. We had to get new staff because it was difficult to expect that that same stuff would just sit around and wait. Eleven months later, we managed to reopen and we recently sold it at a profit. We managed to avert the broader crisis of a store failure. I always say to my husband, in times of crisis, let's not be scared to re-imagine or re-dream our lives, or rethink of how life will pan out ultimately. I think it, it takes away that element of fear, knowing that nothing is guaranteed to go according to plan.

[00:19:06] **Mike Abel:** Well, as people often say, the only thing you can expect in life is the unexpected.

[00:19:11] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** : 100%.

[00:19:11] **Bookstore:** Mike Abel's book, Willing and Abel, lessons from a decade in crisis, captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins and 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.

[00:19:47] **Mike Abel:** So it's interesting that you've sold the business because let's also talk about not just investing or entering but exiting as well. What were the triggers? What are the decisions that you make to say, okay, I think this business no longer fits into our investment portfolio, or this business has run its course, we've got it up and running, we can make a profit, we can move that money into another investment.

[00:20:09] **Mike Abel:** What is your process about changing your investment portfolio and disinvesting?

[00:20:14] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So that we held for shorter than we had anticipated. We like to at least do seven to ten years. And the change came about because it is a difficult industry to be in. And in all the businesses that we have, we are fully involved.

[00:20:30] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** We're hands-on, even when there is a manager, we still are hands-on. We want to know what's happening in the business. It was taking up a lot of our time for very little return. And when a buyer approached us, we thought it was the perfect opportunity for an exit.

[00:20:46] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. And is that buyer going to run it as their sole business?

[00:20:51] **Mike Abel:** I think that that is the thing about those types of businesses is that when you've got a very hands-on business that requires a lot of time, unless it's a business that you're spending your time in yourself, as you say, the juice isn't worth the squeeze. Yes, no 100%. From an investment portfolio point of view, but not from a day to day running career point of view.

[00:21:12] **Mike Abel:** Very interesting. So you've spoken about a number of different businesses, and we're going to get to one of your newer investments shortly. But they say that, you know, there might be a gap in the market. But is there a market in the gap? How do you assess whether there's a market in the gap? Now, obviously, with you being a chartered accountant, with your husband being an actuary, there's a whole lot of ways that you're going to scientifically analyse it and predictive modelling and all of that kind of stuff.

[00:21:38] **Mike Abel:** But do you want to just talk our listeners a little bit through how you analyse whether there is a viable market within a niche opportunity?

[00:21:47] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** 100%. So if I can talk about how this new venture came about, I was struggling to find alternatives to alcohol pairing my food, my steak, I couldn't have a red wine, my fish I couldn't have a white wine.

[00:22:02] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And I was tired of having fizzy cool drinks and or ordering sugary cocktails, mocktails rather. And so I thought surely I'm not the only pregnant person in the world and I'm not the only person that's not drinking alcohol because I think we've been so socialized to think that everyone is having a drink or a dop on a Saturday.

[00:22:24] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And so I went down this rabbit hole of trying to find out what are other people drinking? What are they pairing their food with? And after reading lots of articles and speaking to pregnant people, Muslim people, Jewish people, sober people, people that are part of Tribe Sober, which is like an Alcoholics Anonymous platform.

[00:22:47] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Trying to understand what are they drinking? What alternatives are out there? I realized there's definitely a market and there is definitely a gap. And so I thought, let me be the filler.

[00:22:59] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:23:00] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And that's how that came about. But it really depends. Like you said, there's a lot of literature you can read.

[00:23:05] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** There are a lot of statistics, a lot of modelling. But what I like to do is speak to the average person and just understand what appeals to you and what would get you going because ultimately those are my clients.

[00:23:16] **Mike Abel:** And in terms of this business, I understand it's an e-commerce platform where people can order non-alcoholic drinks of all different kinds.

[00:23:26] **Mike Abel:** Is your plan to take it also into a bricks and mortar situation where people can sit down and enjoy it? Or is that simply where other people that run pubs and taverns will be supplying your drinks. Where do you see this going in terms of the evolution of non-alcoholic drinks?

[00:23:45] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I definitely see it turning into bricks and mortar, Mike.

[00:23:48] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think South Africa is a little bit behind when it comes to that space as compared to the rest of the world. But I mean, in the UK, in Germany, in America, there are dry bars where people are just going to have non-alcoholic drinks. In South Africa, we recently launched dry safaris, or sober safaris, because sand parks are alcohol-free.

[00:24:10] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But the people would still like an experience of having sundowners on the safari with a nice mocktail or a beer or a wine. There are retreats, spiritual retreats or holistic retreats that have asked us to curate menus for them. So I see it going very far. Very, very far. And I think maybe bricks and mortar won't come in the next year to two years, but we'll be, we'll be ready for when, when the time comes.

[00:24:40] **Mike Abel:** What I also think about, and I've been in alcohol marketing for three decades, so I know a thing or two, particularly in the beer category, but, what is very interesting when I read about your investment in this business is the ability of combinations that when you go out for supper, even when you are finished breastfeeding and you can drink alcoholic drinks, how one might start off with a glass of one or two that has alcohol.

[00:25:09] **Mike Abel:** And then you actually swap over to drinking non-alcoholic, uh, wine. Is that part of your thinking? Because I think that, you know, we know that, you know, there are as wonderful as wine is, or any drink is in terms of a social lubrication or a lovely night out. Too much of it, like anything, you drive a car too fast, it's not good for your health.

[00:25:33] **Mike Abel:** You do anything too much or too fast, it's not good for your health. Do you think that there is a way of stimulating the thoughts around

combinations of moving from an alcoholic start to an evening to a non-alcoholic progression of an evening?

[00:25:45] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** 100 percent. I see a lot of my customers are blenders and that is the term that we call people that mix.

[00:25:54] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So we're saying just because you've stopped drinking the alcoholic drink doesn't mean the party's over at all. So then you switch over to your non-alcoholic beer. We also see a trend of people that are sober curious, so are wanting to be sober on some days or some months or some weeks and not sober other times.

[00:26:15] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And those people are also free to try out the non-alcoholics. Let's say you're going out for supper on a Monday and you wouldn't normally have alcohol on a Monday, but on a Friday you're definitely having alcohol because you don't have to wake up for work. Some people are choosing to only have the alcoholic glass of wine with their dessert, for example, would love to pay non-alcoholic for the starter and main. So we're seeing a big shift towards the blenders.

[00:26:41] **Mike Abel:** That's so interesting, and I think that that is an entire social shift that you're talking about right here, because it's not certainly something that I've encountered, and I like it very much.

[00:26:54] **Mike Abel:** And I've never been to a restaurant where I've had one or two glasses of delicious wine and then thought, okay, well, I'm now going to continue drinking, but I'm going to shift over. And it's really not just about, I guess. The responsible aspect of it, but also the health aspect of it. Because, you know, alcohol in any shape or form, as good as it is, isn't good for you.

[00:27:14] **Mike Abel:** But when you do see those, I don't know, Italian nonnas that are living to 95, they drink a glass of wine every day. I think that there's nothing wrong with that. And one of your husband's famous pasta marinara. So we've spoken at the beginning about mentorship and teaching people and what I'm picking up from your journey as well is, I don't know if it was Simon Sinek or somebody like that who said something like be the boss that you wish you had had.

[00:27:43] **Mike Abel:** Talk to me about your leadership style because you obviously employ a number of people across a variety of businesses. How do you like to lead? How do you like to manage people?

[00:27:53] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** The most important thing for me, Mike, is meeting them at their point of need. People have different needs and in terms of a leader and being led, they have different needs in terms of their personal life, which you actually cannot exclude from work, right?

[00:28:09] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I have someone in my team that has a hard stop at 6pm. Sometimes we work overtime, but she has a heart stop at 6pm because

she's on medication that completely knocks her out. This is an open and honest culture that we've built, and everyone knows that she's got a heart stop at six because of the medication.

[00:28:31] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But she's in super early in the morning, so she'll never do overtime in the evenings, but she will come in earlier if you need her to. So the culture is meeting people at their point of need. I have a young lad that just joined my team. absolutely brilliant, studied actuarial science as well, so he's on the consulting side at Kwandiso, so he's doing our financial modelling, but he's struggling with English, and he says, if you could speak more in English to me, I would really appreciate it.

[00:28:59] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** For me, it's about meeting people and making sure that you complement them and bring out the best in them open and honest culture is what I punt and I push for. I will never penalize someone for telling me the truth. If they're having a rough day and they just cannot get out of bed I would prefer that instead of lying to me and saying, you know, your grandmother died or something drastic. I think just leading from a place of empathy and understanding, people are going through a lot, and the work that we do is not life and death, and I never want to treat it as such.

[00:29:35] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:29:36] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yeah.

[00:29:36] **Mike Abel:** I think that's a very special message about authenticity and honesty in the workplace, building trust rather than, you know, concocting excuses. You can only claim that your grandmother has died twice before it becomes an obvious lie. So, let's jump back to the informal economy. I know that the greatest crisis that South Africa faces at the moment by a country mile is unemployment.

[00:30:05] **Mike Abel:** And I think people. that worry about electricity rightfully and crumbling infrastructure rightfully and all of those other challenges. But I don't think that they understand the social tsunami that could be on the horizon in terms of our staggering youth unemployment rates. What are your views around the current unemployment situation and what you think that other people listening, and government and society should be doing to address this issue because I don't think that the issue is being addressed in a meaningful way. But I'd love to pick your brain on it and hear some of your thoughts and ideas.

[00:30:44] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** It's been a very interesting time for me. I've been in this space now for two years, sort of formally, leading this youth unemployment initiative.

[00:30:52] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think things that, I was unaware of before joining the movement is the mismatch and this mismatch is between those that have the jobs and those that are looking for jobs. There's a lack of information on

both sides because, for example, 25 rand 42 cents as a minimum wage, is it a livable wage?

[00:31:16] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** It is so difficult to live off of that amount of money. And so people on the employer side, they're often doing the bare minimum, which is actually not sustainable for the employees. On the employee side, there's this idea that the government owes me work. The government owes me money. The government has to take care of me.

[00:31:40] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And that's also not the case. You have to get up and want it for yourself and for your family and do it. There are things like, how much it costs someone in a month to find work? A thousand and twenty-seven rand. How are you expecting an unemployed person to spend R1, 027 looking for work? And that is for transport, to attend interviews, that's for printing CVs, it's access to internet, to find these jobs.

[00:32:08] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And the mismatch is also because people don't have access to data to look for the jobs. So on the internet, so many jobs, but they cannot access the internet because they don't have money.

[00:32:22] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And it's crazy, it's absolutely crazy to say, but there are jobs, people aren't working, they don't know that there are jobs.

[00:32:30] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Because where are they meant to find them? Where are they going to get the thousand rand a month to find work? And it takes an average of six months for them to find work. So that's 6, 000 Rand that they need to dig up from somewhere in the midst of trying to put food on the table.

[00:32:48] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. I think that that is a very sobering message and again, you know, I spend a lot of time trying to help people who have access to very little, particularly through our global street store initiative.

[00:33:01] **Mike Abel:** I don't know if you know about it. No. Please tell me. Um, so what the street store is, uh, we founded it 10 years ago this month and it's the world's first rent-free pop-up clothing store for the homeless and for the needy. So basically using four posters we came up with this idea of running a store on the side of the street where people in need can come and have their first free shopping experience and choose three or four items that they like, that they need, that fits them rather than having something that's oversized or too small.

[00:33:33] **Mike Abel:** And we've had a number of people rock up there to get clothing for a job interview because they don't have the right clothing even for an interview. So when you talk about it, but I've never thought of the cost associated in finding a job, which is very sobering, but I'm wondering if somehow between your youth bridge and my street store, we can do something in terms of raising money for having the funds of that thousand Rand to found the job in the first place.

[00:34:00] **Mike Abel:** But I'm thinking more specifically around work wear clothing, so that people can actually go for the job interviews specifically. So we should talk around that.

[00:34:09] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** That would be great. Mike. Absolutely great. Thank you.

[00:34:12] **Mike Abel:** You started a bursary fund, as I understand it, in your name, where you provide kids with bursaries to study.

[00:34:19] **Mike Abel:** What is your selection criteria for that? There's so many people that are in need. How do you identify who the perfect person is going to be that receives one of Ayanda's bursaries?

[00:34:31] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Yeah, it was difficult, Mike. I think I received 6,000 applications this year. Oh, really? My goodness. And I only had 10 bursaries to give.

[00:34:39] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Okay. It was difficult. The need is there and there are so many people with good marks, that I struggled. I had sleepless nights about it. I kept wishing and praying for more money to fall out of the sky. But ultimately it's for commerce students, undergrad students, regardless of what they're studying, but it has to be commerce-related.

[00:35:02] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think the ones that we ended up choosing, what we picked up from them, and I had a selection committee was this entrepreneurial flair that they had. So yes, everyone had great marks. Everyone was doing well, never failed anything. But they had this entrepreneurial flair that you could almost see. They're not just sitting and waiting for the bursary.

[00:35:24] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** They're selling sweets for a little bit of extra money. They're braiding hair and getting a little bit of extra money. They had already put something on the table towards their own education. And that is why those ones got chosen.

[00:35:37] **Mike Abel:** You know, there's that famous saying, I think we all probably heard it as kids from our parents at one stage or another, of God helps those that help themselves.

[00:35:45] **Mike Abel:** One hundred percent. But I'm picking that up from that, you know, that if you try to change your own circumstances in whichever way you can, you know, the universe conspires to help you. And that being kind of like a key criteria of yours to say, what has this person done to change their circumstances themselves, rather than waiting for a divine intervention, I think is really interesting.

[00:36:08] **Mike Abel:** So a few years ago, the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants named you in their top 35 under 35. That's wonderful. Congratulations. What do you hope for and look forward to doing in the many years, please God, that you have ahead of you?

[00:36:24] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** That is another difficult question, Mike. I hope to give hope.

[00:36:32] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I encounter so many young people, old people, that say, you've given me a new lease on life, you've given me hope. And whether that is through an encouraging word and me speaking life to them, or giving them a job, giving them a bursary. And that is what I hope to continue to do. And one day, I often get asked, what do you want to be remembered for?

[00:36:57] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And it's always love. That one day there was, long time ago, there was this lady and her name was Ayanda and everything she did was out of love. And it sounds soppy, Mike. It doesn't. I know it sounds soppy. Yeah, but you know I'm a soppy kind of person. It's almost counterintuitive for a chartered accountant, right?

[00:37:18] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** But that's what I want to be remembered for. The lives that I've touched and that have been changed forever.

[00:37:24] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, well, as that great Bert Bacharach song goes, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. 100%. And it's true. Yeah. If we can all bring a little bit of love, if we can all look at what unites us, not what separates us, if we can all lean into goodness, you know, I think that we will make the world a far better place.

[00:37:44] **Mike Abel:** So that resonates powerfully with me.

[00:37:45] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Thank you.

[00:37:46] **Streetstore:** 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.

[00:38:15] **Mike Abel:** You've done really well at a young age and you've built a great company of companies. Often people feel they are held back because they don't necessarily have a network. Has a network been important to you? Connections with other people in terms of helping you along your way?

[00:38:33] **Mike Abel:** And if so, who would those people have been? Or has a network been irrelevant in terms of you building your business?

[00:38:41] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** That is a great question. Not difficult this time. Okay good. A lot of people ask me where did I get the capital to start all these businesses or acquire them. And I always say the greatest capital I've had is my social capital.

[00:38:56] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** It's my network. Yeah. I would not be here without that network. And even mentors and sponsors along the way, people that have vouched for me, people that have opened doors for me, I would not have that. I would have, I wouldn't have anything that I have now without my network. From when I started out at KPMG doing my articles, the people that supported me and provided me with every opportunity to be the best that I could be.

[00:39:26] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I'm still in very close contact with those people. Jawad Haider, who was my manager as a trainee, he is still my biggest supporter and I wouldn't be where I am without him at all. Iné van Heerden, she was a partner when I was at KPMG and I used to be starstruck when I saw her because she was the only female partner at the time and I just kept thinking, surely I can also be someone, surely I can also be a leading lady.

[00:39:57] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And to this day, I'm still starstruck by her. Are you still in touch with her? Yes, we are still in touch. And then my mom. My mom is a powerhouse. Yeah. She is the most incredible woman I know. She's now a magistrate and she specializes in criminal cases. She puts away criminals. Okay. And that.

[00:40:18] **Mike Abel:** We need more of that.

[00:40:19] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** We definitely do. And that lady. has been in my corner. She has mentored me, besides being my mom, she has mentored me, she has reviewed my legal contracts. When I'm short-staffed and I need someone to add up the numbers in the financial statements to make sure that they are correct, she is there with her calculator adding up the numbers for me.

[00:40:40] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** She's just an absolute star.

[00:40:43] **Mike Abel:** Sounds like a dynamo your mom. I'd love to meet her one day. So, you've imparted so much wisdom and so many gems here, Ayanda, that I think people are going to listen to this over and over again. But as we head into the homestretch of our conversation, you're a very curious person as I can see.

[00:41:04] **Mike Abel:** In terms of the mysteries out there in South Africa or in the universe, what would you like to have the answer to right now?

[00:41:12] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** This is gonna sound very stupid.

[00:41:14] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, I like it already.

[00:41:16] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So do you know the rapper called Tupac?

[00:41:17] **Mike Abel:** Yes, of course.

[00:41:19] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I want to know if he really is dead.

[00:41:22] **Mike Abel:** Oh, really? Or whether he's staying with Elvis and Marilyn Monroe in an old age home somewhere.

[00:41:26] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** No, no, I think those ones really did die. Elvis and Marilyn, but I think he's somewhere in Africa. I don't think he's dead.

[00:41:35] **Mike Abel:** What makes you think that? Don't you want to think he's dead? Or what makes you think that?

[00:41:38] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** All the conspiracy theories that I read while I was pregnant and I couldn't sleep.

[00:41:45] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And the fact that his music is continuously being released. You can't tell me that he recorded all of this pre 1996. So yeah, I want to know if he's still alive.

[00:41:55] **Mike Abel:** Well, when you find the answer, let me know. I'll be back. Because maybe he and Michael Jackson have got some digs together. If you had to think about your life, what important thing would you say you've changed your mind about?

[00:42:10] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So I used to believe that things were black and white, and I think that there's a lot of grey. I think that there is room for redemption, and I think that there's always room for second chances, and I didn't grow up thinking that.

[00:42:23] **Mike Abel:** Can you give me an example that you're prepared to share where you've given someone a second chance, where you've seen second chances?

[00:42:31] **Mike Abel:** Is there anything that you'd be comfortable sharing? Or uncomfortable sharing. I know it's a hard question, but, or maybe you could just give me, maybe not something that's happened in your life, but something, because I think that there is so little forgiveness in the world. You know, people lack that generosity of spirit.

[00:42:51] **Mike Abel:** And I think it was Madiba who said. Resentment is like drinking a cup of poison and hoping your enemy does, or certainly something like that. And I've always found that to be so wise, the inability to let go, the inability to forgive. And I have to confess, I have forgiveness issues myself, because I set a standard for myself where I don't ever intend to hurt someone. I sometimes think of myself metaphorically a bit like Dirty Harry, that I've never killed anybody that didn't deserve killing, metaphorically, of course, but that doesn't mean that if I see somebody behaving in an appalling way, which I have done in my career, that I wouldn't fire them on the spot. And I would because I just don't believe that we have the right to steal somebody else's dignity and hope. I think leadership is a huge blessing and honour to be able to grow somebody's career and a huge responsibility. So when I see people betraying that responsibility and treating people poorly, it triggers me enormously. So I do suffer from forgiveness issues and I'm happy to share that openly. But is there anything that you could share around forgiveness a lot?

[00:44:06] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Sure. This is probably in the beginning of our entrepreneurial journey. Yes. We had staff stealing.

[00:44:13] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, oh wow.

[00:44:15] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And I remember my first instinct is they must go. It's theft, it's dishonesty. And it took my husband doing the digging into what happened. Why did you do this? Help me understand.

[00:44:29] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:44:29] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And when I heard the stories, then I understood.

[00:44:34] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Hence, I was intentional about building the culture of openness and honesty with my staff, that if you are hungry, you come and tell me and we will make a plan and make sure that you're fed. If you are struggling at home, if you don't have transport fare, if you don't have taxi fare, come and talk to me, don't steal.

[00:44:55] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** So it took changing the culture of the businesses that we took over, making sure that people understand that, hello, we're in your corner and you don't have to do this, but they weren't bad people. They were just caught in difficult situations.

[00:45:11] **Mike Abel:** And I think that in South Africa today and the world as unemployment is a huge problem.

[00:45:17] **Mike Abel:** I think if people could bring us, you know, people said, don't bring me your problem, bring me a solution. But that's not always a practical thing to say, because sometimes they're on solutions, you know, other than helping put food on the table, helping keep the lights on, as you say, helping to buy someone some

data so that they can actually look to see if there is a job available for themselves to pull themselves out of poverty.

[00:45:41] **Mike Abel:** My last question to you, you're clearly a problem solver. I think most of what you do is solving problems. I think that would be the common denominator I would take out of this conversation. Can you tell me one of the best problems you've ever had to solve or that you're in the process of solving because I don't think there is often one, you know, solution to a problem.

[00:46:04] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** With the youth unemployment, that's the biggest problem that I feel I'm currently trying to solve. And sometimes you make sure that they've got a phone and they've got data and then you organize a job interview and you say you're going to get a phone call to tell you when is your job interview and when you must arrive.

[00:46:23] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And then they don't answer their phones. And then I think to myself, why didn't you answer your phone? No, I thought it was a debt collector because I owe someone money. And then the opportunity completely goes away. And so I understand the problem that they're in debt. I understand the problem that there's youth unemployment.

[00:46:42] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** And then in trying to solve it, there's obstacles that you can try everything in your power to solve, and remove the obstacles. But I just can't solve you not answering your phone. So I'm still struggling with that.

[00:46:56] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:46:57] **Mike Abel:** Well, I mean, obviously what would help is if somebody's waiting to hear is now to work out how do you capture that person's name or number that they would be wanting to hear from.

[00:47:07] **Mike Abel:** So that at least it doesn't come up as a blank number, but you can actually identify who the caller is. Because you speak to something profoundly worrying here, which is realistic, that if you don't have a job, you are likely to get yourself into all sorts of debt and all sorts of problem and people that you are gonna want to avoid.

[00:47:26] **Mike Abel:** You don't think about that ordinarily. And those people can't afford a true caller either in terms of paying the subscription to know who's calling. So maybe at the end of every interview or whatever, these candidates start capturing the number that's going to be giving, calling them a call and you for that.

[00:47:43] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, I think, I think that could be perhaps a solution. So I know I promised that was the last question, but I want to end on something which is really important because as a little girl, you dreamed of becoming the president of our country. And I could think of no better president. Don't tell my friend Songezo Zibi that, but I couldn't.

[00:47:59] **Mike Abel:** I think that you'd make a magnificent president. We need people like you in this country. What makes you not want to go into politics? Cause you said now. That you're older. It's not something you would want to do. Why do you think the wrong people go into politics in many ways? And I do exclude my friend, Songezo Zibi from that because I think he's one of the good guys that is trying to save the country.

[00:48:20] **Mike Abel:** But what do you think it is about the people that are best suited to solve our country's problems, not going into politics?

[00:48:28] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think on one hand, they are gatekeepers. If I think about, if I went into politics, I'm the face of integrity in the work that I do. Everything has to be above board, everything has to be about governance, and I think inherently there would be gatekeepers to that, or people that hinder that progress.

[00:48:46] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I think I moved away from wanting to be president because I stopped thinking that I needed a massive title to make a difference. I think that I'm making a difference where I am, with the resources that I have, with the time that I have, so I'm not limited in my impact. I think I would be frustrated, almost, with the red tape, with the lack of governance, with the compromise, the compromise, and that's not something I'm willing to do.

[00:49:14] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** I cannot compromise on my integrity.

[00:49:16] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, well, I'm hoping that you can become our president one day and you can remove all of those barriers and impediments to integrity in doing that job because that in and of itself is such an indictment that when one talks about the role of running a country or running a political party inherent in that right now might be a sense of compromise.

[00:49:39] **Mike Abel:** And if anything needs to change, it's that, that you can actually be able to fix a country in an unfettered way. Thank you so much for joining me today, Ayanda. It's been so invigorating to hear your ventures and adventures and to see the difference you're making in society. I've loved every minute of this conversation, what you're doing for young people, SMMEs and women-owned businesses makes me feel very hopeful for the future of South Africa.

[00:50:08] **Mike Abel:** So thank you.

[00:50:09] **Ayanda Vabaza-Mvandaba:** Thank you so much for having me. I had an absolutely amazing time, Mike.

[00:50:23] **Mike Abel:** Thanks so much for listening today. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five star review. Tune into Willing and Abel next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

[00:50:36] **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.