



THE

INSIGHTS FROM ONE
ENTREPRENEUR TO ANOTHER

YOUNG

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ENTREPRENEUR

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The Leading Entrepreneur*

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DEDICATION

The Young Entrepreneur is dedicated to the colleagues, partners and clients who have shaped my experiences for the last 25 years. I am where I am today, because I stand on the shoulders of giants who have come before me and from whom I was able to learn invaluable lessons. The book is also dedicated to the brave souls who call themselves entrepreneurs. It is a difficult, but transformational journey if you have the courage to see it through.

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INTRODUCTION

I've wanted to write this book for several years, or at least, something like that. I've simply just never made the time for it. With the advent of Conversational AI, I was intrigued by the technology, exploring its relevance to what I do personally and what we do as a company. So I decided to play around with thoughts about my book and was finally prompted into action.

The Young Entrepreneur is 100% self-authored, although I did make use of Conversational AI as a means to interrogate whether or not there were some plot elements, names, or concepts, that I could better express. In the end, it was a creative process which I loved. It was as if I had someone immediately available, from whom I could bounce ideas off. Having written the book in-between meetings and other after-hours engagements, having that "voice" was truly helpful, as other people may not have been so accessible on the fly.

The Young Entrepreneur is intended as a guideline to the entrepreneurial mind. Whether you are leading a large, multinational corporation or just thinking of starting your own business, an

entrepreneurial mindset is pivotal to success in a world that is constantly changing. This book follows a young girl on her adventures as she embarks on her own understanding of the world. Throughout her journey, she keeps a journal of the lessons she learns, most of them are about business. Her grandfather, a highly respected man, used to say, in those early days when she wanted to stay in bed rather than go to school, “No matter how tall your grandfather is, you have to do your own growing.” He was right of course. It was time for her to grow and accumulating knowledge and experience was the best place for her to start.

SO WHAT?

So now there's a book. Firstly, I wrote it for myself. Why? Because in the least, it leaves something behind. Art, in my view, is the soul, heart or mind, expressing something about the author and putting it out in the world, to linger there forever. It is perhaps one of the only ways to achieve an element of immortality on this side of the veil.

As a better outcome, I hope that the book may inspire, enable or empower someone on their journey; to find them where they are and help them to become a better or more informed version of themselves. If not that, then I hope there is at least some pleasure to take from reading about Mimolette's adventure.

While fictional, the book does embed some of the lessons I have learnt through my own journey. I've realised that it's impossible for me to encapsulate all my learnings in business and in life, but I hope you enjoy reading it, as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

THE AUTHOR

Time is arguably the most valuable of all resources. It is the one thing that you can never get back. It should take you roughly 70 to 80 minutes to read this book from cover to cover. Why should you?

Why does my opinion or Mimolette's journey matter?

This is a very important question, so let's address it before we push forward.

As I write the book, I am 43 years old. I am a father of three – two girls and a boy. I am a husband, a keen musician, sportsman and CEO of a successful technology company that has survived – and thrived – in spite of a culmination of dooming global events.

Before founding Converge Solutions (www.converge-solutions.com) I worked at T-Systems, a subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom, for 17 years. During that time I had numerous roles, ranging from being a business analyst, to being a developer, a pre-sales consultant, a certified SAP

consultant and ultimately, a sales manager with a target of roughly 7 million US Dollars per year in a Rand-based economy.

The market was constantly changing, and so was the company that employed me. At some point, I realised that it was time to leave. The environment and I were on separate trajectories. So I went from sales manager to competitor, having several overlapping prospective clients. Shortly after founding Converge Solutions, Covid struck. Companies – even established ones – were forced to close their doors. No-one could have imagined the impact that the prolonged lock-down would have on businesses and the national morale. The country fell into depression and desperation, to the point where the army had to patrol the streets to enforce law and order. This was compounded with very specific South African conditions that made entrepreneurial ventures challenging under the best of times. Black Economic Empowerment put my co-founders and I at a political disposition, given we were all Afrikaans speaking, white males. Coinciding with this was a phenomenon called “load shedding”, which in layman’s terms simply means the country’s electricity demands exceeds its supply. The result? Areas across the country were left with reduced or no electric supply, several times a day.

So there we were – a young, bright-eyed leadership team with big dreams and big challenges. We had been thrown into a whirlwind of elements outside our control, but we had grit and purpose, and nothing was going to hold us back.

We had to scramble to make things work more times than I can remember, but we did. We had to innovate to grow, and we did.

We had to borrow from friends and family who believed in us and shared our dream, and they did, some of them, at least.

Today, we are stronger for it. We now serve clients across Africa, Europe, Asia Pacific, and the Gulf. We deliver differentiated ICT services to more than 50 direct clients and more than 280 indirect clients (through partners).

We have weathered the storm, through sheer force of will... and some basic principles and hard-won lessons. These are some of the lessons that Mimolette will learn on her own adventure and through which I hope you will be able to survive your own storms.

THE AI

Of all the value I derived from the Conversational AI, the name, “Cheeselings” was perhaps the best. That, and the name of the main character, “Mimolette.” Cheeselings became the foundation for many “labels” throughout the book, which seamlessly fell into place once this was established.

This was the instruction I gave the AI:

Give me a playful, tongue-in-cheek name and a bit of lore for fictional tiny people who live in a little town called Fromage and who are obsessed with cheese.

This simple instruction, eventually sparked me into motion, becoming the catalyst that broke the cycle of inertia.

1

THE LITTLE TOWN OF FROMAGE

The tiny people of Fromage, a quaint little town hidden deep in the heart of a dense forest, are known as the "Cheeselings." They are a playful and mischievous bunch, who are always up for a good laugh, superfluous wine and first and foremost, an endless array of cheese.

In fact, their love for cheese was nothing short of legendary, as their plump bellies and round cheeks announced to anyone visiting the town. The busiest times of year in Fromage were weekends, when hordes of tiny people would stream in from neighbouring towns and cities. The Winelings (who were obsessed with wine), the Beerlings (lovers of beer), the Meatlings (carnivores, one and all) and the Bingelings (slaves to all forms of entertainment) would all flock between their various towns over weekends, enjoying the best of what their neighbours had to offer. There was never a shortage of demand or supply, no matter the appetite.

The Cheeselings are led by a wise and benevolent ruler known as the "Big Cheese." No living Cheeseling knows exactly how he came to be the Big Cheese, but there was as much myth and mystery surrounding the man as there was cheese in Fromage. Nevertheless, the locals were

content – he was a good leader and Fromage thrived. But the story of the Big Cheese is one for another day.

The town of Fromage was founded on the legacy of four cousins: Pierre, Giorgio, James and Beppe. At least 90% of the cheese that was traded in Fromage and the neighbouring towns, originated from these Cheese Masters. Meanwhile, everyone else shared the remaining 10% of the market. It was a difficult thing, trying to compete with the four masters. Some, in spite of their feverish efforts, grudgingly thought it impossible to change the status quo. Many believed that the four masters represented all there was to know about cheese and that their way was the only way, settling to play a secondary role in the grand world of cheese.

Now, no one knew for sure, but it has been rumoured among the townsfolk of Fromage, that between the four masters, they had a book of wisdom, called THE TRIBAL KNOWLEDGE OF CHEESE. Everything - from the making of cheese, to the eating of cheese and everything in-between - was believed to be recorded in that book, and when anyone asked any of them, why or how they did what they did, the answer was always, "...because we've always done it that way."

In some ways, this contributed to the consistency of the cheese market in and around Fromage. Afterall, if you do the same thing over and over, year after year (whether that is a good or a bad thing) you will become incredibly good at the thing that you do.

And that was the way of things in Fromage; you lived downwind from the factories, close to the river and the busy streets, or – if you were part of a select few – you lived where the cobblestones in the road were flat,

where the sounds at dusk were that of birds chirping and children playing, and where the sunset could be viewed peacefully in all its splendour.

It must be said though, that each life has its own pain. To live downwind comes with its joys and its pains. To live upwind, the same. To make the cheese is hard work, but there is also joy in its creation. To eat the cheese has its own set of consequences. I raise this because you should know, and I mean really know, that whatever road you choose – there will be pain. It's really just a matter of which pain you're willing to live with. Lastly, in reading this book, I hope that you will form some sort of picture of your own future in your head and in your heart; that it may inspire you to set out on a journey to discover yourself, your future, your dream... anything really. Defining the goal is a good starting point, but then starts the process. To reach the goal, you must fall in love with the process – a process that will require discipline over motivation, and sweat over contemplation.

And here, begins our story...

2

MIMOLETTE

It was another beautiful morning in Fromage. Mimolette blinked, stretched her arms widely and jumped out of bed, as she always does. She loved the mornings, before the world settled into a rhythm. It was as if those early morning hours held some mystery or wonder that was lost as soon as the rest of the world awoke. She discovered this early in her life. Her friends were, in a word, nocturnal, coming alive when the sun set. She had adopted an "early to bed" and "early to rise" approach. It gave her, she felt, a head start to the day.

Mimolette was of slender build, with a casual yet resolute way about her. She could easily be described as the girl next door, were it not for her excessive (some would say) adventurous spirit that was as tangible as any physical features she may have sported.

Her somewhat peculiar way made her sceptically popular among her peers, but always leaving something of a mysterious question, that no-one was able to answer.

Her curious blue-green eyes always seemed alive and hungry, like the build-up of clouds before a storm. Her long blond hair cascaded down her back, framing her youthful and energetic face. When she read, she tied it above her head like her mother does, making her look slightly older. Mimolette boasted some signature expressions: A smile that would light up a room, a curious expression that showed her mind and heart were working overtime to solve some mystery, and – to those who were closest to her – she sometimes showed a calm, dreamy contemplative expression, when she was trying to make sense of things that others merely accepted as the way of the world. What probably set Mimolette apart from her peers more than anything else, was that she saw the world not only for what it was, but also for what it could be. Mimolette briskly walked down the hallway. She knew she would find her father scurrying in the kitchen, brewing coffee to go with their morning cheese, while mother was tending to the little ones; her twin brother and sister who had arrived two moons ago. The days in Fromage started early; after all, cheese did not make itself, but today was different. Today marked a change for Mimolette.

Mimolette was the oldest daughter of a controversial man named Hendrik and his lovely wife called Fleur. Their family had visited Fromage before she was born and her parents had chosen to make it home. Growing up, her father worked as a cheese salter at the local factory owned by Pierre (one of the four Cheese Masters), and while they had always made do with what they had, Mimolette knew deep down that there had to be more to life than this. Her father and mother were content – even happy – but for Mimolette, there was a stirring, an itch, a push or a pull to something else... something more.

As a young, inquisitive child she had always been fascinated by the cheesemakers in the town, and she would often sneak into the factory to watch them at work. She would ask questions, take mental notes, and learn as much as she could about the craft. No one really took notice of the inquisitive child with the bright eyes and friendly nature. No one gave a second thought to her repetitive “why” questions. At her young age she posed no threat, so year after year she grew up before their eyes, learning everyone’s trade acutely. She even spent time with Pierre himself, having become, over the years, a bit of a mascot for the factory. It was during this time, that Mimolette discovered that there really was no book of wisdom. She also discovered that there was so much more that could be done to bring Fromage from its stale existence into a re-imagined future. Moreover, she found that to the outside world, it appeared like the Cheese Masters had all the answers, yet in the inner circles, the truth was far from it.

For a while now, Mimolette had put off discovering the world and her place in it. It started to gnaw at her until she could put it off no longer.

So, on the morning of her 18th birthday, as she walked into the kitchen, Mimolette made the bold decision to leave home and travel to a distant land, far from the confines and legacy of Fromage. It was difficult to leave the comfort of home as it was all she had ever known. But Mimolette knew that magic happened outside of your comfort zone, so she bid her parents farewell, and with nothing short of sheer determination she set out to take on the world. She knew that somewhere out there, she would be able to find or create the space to put her knowledge to work, discover more and change the future for her and her family. She also knew that staying home would stop her from reaching her full potential, so difficult as it was, she took on the challenge. She was determined to write her

own book of knowledge, filled with the valuable lessons she had already learnt and would learn on this bold adventure.

Lesson #1: Always be authentic. Mimolette could try and be like everyone else, even the Cheese Masters, but instead she chose to be the best Mimolette she could. And so, what might not be apparent here is this: before Mimolette could change the world, she needed to know herself. It's impossible to be authentic if you don't have a good understanding of who you are and what you stand for. So, the start to authenticity is self-discovery.

Lesson #2: Sometimes, in order to find yourself or your purpose and to live this life to the full, you need a fresh start and a new environment. One of the biggest things holding people back from reaching their full potential is the very people they expect to support them, driven through fear and uncertainty. Growth is often a lonely journey. Walk it anyway. I'm sure you've heard it said that "ships are safe in the harbour - but that is not what ships were made for." It's true for ships and it's true for people. If your goals don't scare you - even just a little - odds are, you're in the harbour.

Lesson #3: Everyone *wants* change. Few want *to* change. To grow, you *must* change. Embrace it. Mimolette was not willing to merely follow in the footsteps of her father or that of the Cheese Masters. No, she wanted to be different. She yearned for change. Before we can change the world, we must look inward and change ourselves or in the least, embrace the process of change. Recognise that sometimes, you will meet people and clients who are not open to change. It is highly seldom that you can convince someone that change is required, if they are not in some way, already convinced about that necessity and you are merely the catalyst.

Lesson #4: No compelling event, no deal. “Nice to have” doesn’t sell. “Nice to be” doesn’t transform. Mimolette realised that a different outcome required a different approach. In business and in life, change requires a compelling event, some pivotal moment in which we have that moment that says “this can’t go on”. In Mimolette’s case, the compelling event for her adventure was knowing that she wanted to walk a different path. It was also linked to a specific timeline. The moment she was of age, she immediately initiated her strategy. The same applies in the life of the entrepreneur and importantly, in your journey of selling. Unless your client has an actual **need**, the **desire** and the **urgency** to address a pain or a vision right now, your efforts may go unrewarded. The same is true for any other habit or need at a personal level. I waited years to write this book until I had a compelling event that prompted me into action.

Lesson #5: Ask yourself: what are the consequences of doing nothing versus changing? This is true for yourself and your clients. If there is no consequence to sticking with the *status quo*, people will choose that option more often than not – this is the road of least resistance. I have dealt with CIO’s who knew irrevocably that their business was haemorrhaging as a result of poor systems and infrastructure, but they were too settled or comfortable to take on change, because it required a sense of effort. In their case – and at the expense of the business – they opted to do nothing. Change, might mean they have to step out.

Lesson #6: The journey that Mimolette was embarking on, was bound to be tough. Any attempt to change, is. There will be plenty of times during a process of change or adoption, where falling back on what was known, comfortable or easy, seems like the right thing to do. It’s not. Living with

her parents is easy, but it means accepting a reality that is inconsistent with her vision for her life. The questions she needed to ask herself were: (1) Am I willing to live with my pain or current reality? (2) Should I act at all and (3) should I act now? So many people talk about an outcome that they want to see in their lives, but they don't fall in love with the process of transformation. Grit. It is an essential attribute of any successful entrepreneur.

Lesson #7: Large business may have an advantage of established clients and brands, but they also often represent large legacy investment, older technology and a general inflexibility to adapt to changing technology or market needs. Entrepreneurs have agility and adaptability with no legacy investment or technology on their side, often allowing them to deliver a more calibrated, customer-centric and relevant service to customers. The market has need for both. The Cheese Masters represent these large and established businesses. Some clients will choose to buy from the Cheese Masters, no matter how good Mimolette's products and pricing is, because they represent a legacy of stability. That's okay. There's room for large and agile enterprises. The key is to decide what you want to do and how you want to do it. There's nothing wrong at all, with working for a large business. It really is a question of deciding where you see yourself now and in the future.

Lesson #8: Enterprises like the Cheese Masters, that have existed for multiple decades often fall into a fatal rhythm of doing things the way they've always done it, instead of consistently re-inventing themselves as markets and technology change. We refer to this as Tribal Knowledge. The organisation that is likely to succeed - especially in today's fast paced economy - is the one that is always in at least *some* state of flux, as it refuses to settle into the lull of consistency. Momentum can be good,

but it can also prevent us from turning when we must. Find a balance. Even large enterprises can reinvent themselves to remain relevant. I've seen SAP do this in the last three years. Had they remained the same, they would have become a brand in history books. They pushed through the pain to completely re-think how they want to be viewed by the world. It came with a lot of pain, but today, they are stronger for it. They're still a larger enterprise, but they've adopted an entrepreneurial and collaborative mindset.

Lesson #9: Sleep. Mimolette believes that rising early gives her more time to achieve her goals, and she is right. What is relevant however, is that when her nocturnal friends go out to party late into the night, she rests, knowing the demands of the next day will require her to be at her best. You cannot be at your best if you're tired. The world no longer offers the comfort of silence after sunset. There is always noise and clutter, or at least, the option to push forward. As an entrepreneur, there is also always more to be done, but we have to deliberately and consciously choose silence. We must put aside the world and rest, for in the rest lies some of the answers. In fact, while we rest, we often solve some of the most complicated problems. Avoid becoming part of the crowd that mistakenly wears four hours of sleep a night as a badge of honour. All it really says is that you lack discipline. Put down your phone, uninstall Netflix, and sleep. You'll need rest on the journey, if you are to be alert and alive enough to cease the moment.

Lesson #10: "Why?" can be viewed as accusation, when used in the wrong context, yet it is a powerful tool to acquire knowledge. There are people who live their lives in a way that expends the least possible energy. As a generalisation, I will refer to them as "the average person". There's nothing wrong with this, however, this is not a desirable trait in

an entrepreneur. When you ask the average person a question, you will get the most basic answer in return. However, the answer will still give you "something", and if "something" is good enough for you, well, you can consider the job done. But for Mimolette, "something" is hardly good enough. She's on a journey of discovery. Discovery is about asking "why", over and over until the answer becomes clear and highly motivating. She would ask herself: Why am I here? Why me? Why here? Why now? It is the many "why's" that follow, that contain the deeper answer and that forces us to think, interrogate and learn. Of course, for the avoidance of having people feel uncomfortable, you might rephrase your "why" to "can you tell me more?" or simply, "I don't understand?", which typically achieves the same outcome - more insight. However, my point is this: don't settle for the first answer. It's likely superficial, with little substance.

Lesson #11: Many people go through life, content – nothing more. They go through the motions and they get by, but what is often missing when we really pay attention is passion. Few people have the courage to pursue something that truly moves them - something memorable or meaningful. Something that makes what they do more than "just a job." Companies have vision and mission statements, defining what they are about and what you can expect that journey to look like every day. It's seldom that people take the time to do the same, yet the saying is true: "if you don't know where you're going, anywhere will do." Set yourself a vision and mission statement and make sure that your own, is at least in some ways, consistent with what you do and where you do it. If not, recalibrate. After all, you're wasting away your most valuable resource: time.

Lesson #12: *When* we make decisions, is important. Mimorette, in truth, did not decide on the morning of her 18th birthday, to leave home. That would have been rash and likely inspired by an emotional trigger. She had been mulling it over for years and the decision had been gradual and calculated. She merely decided to act on it when the timing was right. (I generally have one principle – don't make big decisions after sunset. Personally, my mind is clearer, and I find myself more capable of having complex discussions and making complex decisions during daytime. Nine out of ten bad decisions I've made in life have been after sunset, so now, if you expect me to engage on a complex matter after dark, expect to have to wait for the answer. When it comes to decisions - avoid dark and avoid emotion, neither support good decision making. Putting this differently, timing is important. Choose your engagements with your customers wisely. Try and understand their schedules and what would be a good or a bad time to engage. Poor timing will deliver negative outcomes, even to the best propositions.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS

The world is changing. Industries are merging or rather, flowing into or across each other. Banks are becoming medical schemes and vice versa, mobile operators are becoming systems integrators and the world is not quite as we used to know it. Technology, more visibly than ever, is changing the way we need to engage the world and run our businesses.

Who could have thought that the primary competitor to calculators, cameras, compasses and more, would not be other, similar suppliers, but the mobile phone? This is just one example of how our core competitors are not always who we think they are. Certainly not anymore. We are

living in a world of exponential innovation and diversification and if we're not alert or responsive, we can become obsolete in a moment.

This very book was in some ways, "co-authored" using an artificial intelligence tool. I chose to make use of AI in a way I never thought I would. Names, sentences and even paragraphs of this book, were in fact, originally generated based on an outline / instruction, after which I edited the results to produce the final book. If this is not "science fiction today", then I don't know what is. Even the initial, draft cover of the book was generated by an AI tool.

The fact is that we cannot continue to apply old methods and techniques and expect the same outcomes as we did some years ago. The same applies to sales techniques and the general running of a business. Now, I must say that I believe there is little difference between how you choose to live and how you choose to conduct business. If one is to be authentic, then these two cannot really be completely unrelated (meaning, similar values) to each other. While this book will focus on business, it is therefore, as relevant to life. This book attempts to simplify and summarise some of my key learnings over the last two decades, specifically in the context of more complex business to business engagement and sales.

The notion of a "black horse" is the late entrant of an unexpected party or competitor, who then wins the race or closes a deal. In this book, Mimolette represents that dark horse, being the little girl that everyone dismissed. Her journey will empower her to become the disruptor in time. The point is this – don't discard the underdog – if they're in the race, they have something to offer even if it might not be evident to you.

In this short book, you will follow the story of Mimolette as she travels from one adventure to the next, writing her own book of knowledge, which will pave the way to her success.

For some who read this book, they may associate with the Cheese Masters. These readers are expected to become more aware of their landscape and how they can re-think what they're doing to remain relevant.

Others may associate with Mimolette, being on an entrepreneurial journey. For these readers, Mimolette's book of knowledge will act as an empowering tool, helping them to better articulate and differentiate themselves to achieve success, with the benefit of learning from others as opposed to making all the mistakes yourself.

If there's one key take-away from this chapter, let it be the "compelling event for change." Without a strong case for change, nothing will happen. People will not kick a bad habit, and clients will not sign. People mostly tend to the path of least resistance. If there's no compelling event, go to where there is one.

I worked for a large, multi-national ICT firm for many years. In the early days, it was a good place to learn, later, to grow. In my tenure at the firm, I held numerous positions over the years, each steering me to where I am today. Towards the end, I felt a slow but steady separation of value systems. This bothered me for some time, as I could no longer reconcile what I "sold" with the absolute confidence that it will be delivered.

I had lost, if you will, confidence in the ability of the firm to deliver against expectations and that “sense of betrayal”, was the compelling event for my own change. Of course, there was a specific climactic event that pushed me into action. I had worked on a specific opportunity for more than two years. I spent much of this time outside the country, at great expense to my family and life.

Right at the end, the day after the client had in principle awarded us the deal, one person, sitting at head office, wanted to make a point, having recently joined the organisation. They had an agenda and needed a deal on which to illustrate their positional authority. One person made the call to disengage from the client and two years of work was lost in an instant. Not only that, but it suddenly erupted into many, childish and ridiculous streams where people needed someone to blame. Of course, other people may have their own perspectives on this, but from my view, ego had gotten in the way of progress.

It was the end of this particular chapter for me, and the beginning of a much more exciting and challenging one. I had decided, in that moment, to start a new journey, to find a new place to grow, and I would be joined by several, exceptional team members who would be my companions on this wild, new adventure. In many ways, we were naïve with our expectations and grossly so, in terms of the amount of conflict and adversity we would find on the way – after all, we were the proverbial David, taking on the Goliath’s of the industry with big eyes and big dreams. Some of these learnings, as we continue to grow, are also shared through Mimolette’s journey.

3

DISCOVERING WHY

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

JRR Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings.

Mimolette had been on the road for several days, when she reached the town of Winehaven. It was the first time in her life she had entered a town other than Fromage. For young Earthlings, travel was unlikely, as they had to apprentice to the previous generation to follow in their footsteps without question. She was both excited and anxious, uncertainty bubbling just below the surface. She walked to the first store she saw, collected her courage and made her way through the door towards the owner.

“Good morning. I am Mimolette and I have set out on a journey to learn. What is it that you do here?” she asked.

“Well hello to you, Mimolette. My name is Shiraz. You’re a breath of fresh air” he said, smiling friendly.

She frowned, “Fresh air?”

“Yes,” said Shiraz. “Most strangers who walk through my door are trying to sell me something. Regulars, of course, come here to buy some wine – feel free to buy some wine.” He chuckled, before continuing. “But strangers – except on weekends when we have an abundance of people from other towns - walk in and immediately start telling me about how wonderful they are and why I need what they have to offer. Everyone’s trying to make use of my shop, to market their own products. Hardly anyone ever walks in to listen and learn. They talk and talk, whether they have something to say which is of interest to me or not. I tend to lose interest very quickly. Because I try to be polite, I hear them out, but really, I have no interest in people who talk without understanding first. So yes. Someone who wants to understand, and not just talk, is a breath of fresh air.”

Mimolette reflected on this and made a mental note.

“Come over here. Let me pour us some wine, then we can talk some more,” Shiraz said.

Mimolette pulled up a chair, nodding her head in thanks and sat down.

“You want to learn?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to understand how and why things work the way they do,” replied Mimorette. She gave him a quick account of her history and what had prompted her to start her adventure.

“So, you want to live at the top of the hill then?” Shiraz enquired.

“No, not necessarily. I just don’t want to become a salter like my dad. There has to be more than the boxes people put us in. It should be possible to design your own future.” She paused for a moment, contemplating her own words. “Let me rephrase. If I *do* become a salter like my dad, it must be because I want to, not because it was my only option.”

Shiraz pondered for a moment, sipping at the glass in his hand while twirling the wine in a circle.

“Hmmm...” he replied after some silence. “*Why* we do things is often more important than *what* we do, although what and how also matter of course,” he said.

“The “why” is what will keep you going when things get tough, because they will. Then, you need to remind yourself why you’re doing this.” He gestured with his hands, waving at mock chaos above his head.

“It must be a really good reason. Something that truly drives you. Getting to the top of the hill is a poor motivator. Once you get there, then what? What drives you then? You need a purpose that is larger than your milestones.” Shiraz then fell silent for a moment.

“I have a cousin called Sprint. He was the fastest of the Winelings. His goal was to be first at the Earthlings (Wineling, Cheeseling or others)

World Championship for the 60 meter dash. This was a big event that only took place every four years. He trained every day for it. To get into better shape, he even stopped drinking wine for a while. It was no surprise to anyone when he broke the Earthlings World Record on the day. He was overjoyed.”

After an awkwardly long pause, Mimolette enquired, “And then?”

As if snapping back from being lost in thought, Shiraz replied with a sad expression across his face.

“Then nothing. He fell back into old habits, having achieved his goal. He had nothing more. His purpose and his milestone was the same, and so, he just went from being Sprint the Spirited, to Sprint the Sad. The spark had gone.”

Mimolette wondered about this and made a mental note.

For a while, Shiraz went on about basic principles of supply and demand and why he felt that wine was a really good asset class. Some of it made sense to Mimolette, while other topics were lost on her, but all in all, she was intrigued by Shiraz’s understanding of the world, and the wine was really good. After about an hour, the conversation was reaching a natural end.

“I’ve got to get back to working, otherwise I’ll have the missus breathing down my neck soon, and I certainly don’t want that!” Shiraz chuckled.

“It was great meeting you, young Mimolette. I hope you find what you’re looking for.” And with that, Shiraz got up and started heading back to do whatever Winelings do.

As she opened the door to leave, Shiraz called after her.

“One more thing. The people that just walk in here and start talking... they think they’re so important. They don’t realise I’m already giving them my time, which is often more than they deserve. They never stop to think why I should care about what they’re telling me? They just think about themselves and their own interests. I think you will go far, because you’re keen to learn and slow to talk. Stay humble. Stay inquisitive. No Earthling that walks in here all self-important, has ever left my shop with anything other than wasted time.” With that he bid her farewell and disappeared into the back of his shop.

It was a good day.

Mimolette continued to explore the little town of Winehaven, drinking wine and chatting to the locals. Later that day, she retired to a small room she found on www.staylings.com and wrote down some of the lessons she had learnt in her own book of knowledge.

Lesson #1: The “why” must be bigger than the milestones I set myself. Why speaks to “impact”, instead of “goal”. Think of it almost as your personal vision statement. Our “why” is the fuel that must propel us forward, no matter what.

Make sure you understand your “why”, otherwise you run the risk of becoming disheartened when things get tough, and they will. Consider a “why” that is a stretch target. If my “why” is achievable, it might be the wrong “why”.

Lesson #2: Selling – and everything else - starts with listening. There is no point in talking, unless you know what is truly important to the listener. One way to demonstrate your interest in people is to ask more questions, allowing them to share their thoughts. This is an invaluable negotiation tactic. The more information you have, the better you can articulate the value you offer. Caution against listening with the intension to respond. Google brings back probable results from the first search term. The more information you offer, the better the results. This same principle applies to people. Listen to understand and not to talk, it will ensure your answers are more relevant. A solid strategy that has worked for me, is to learn that questions do not necessarily require answers – not immediately at least. Some questions are best answered by another question.

Lesson #3: Self-importance serves no purpose other than to steer away from your objective. If Mimolette had started the discussion with Shiraz talking about herself in a boastful manner and incessantly talking about her own goals and visions, Shiraz would have lost interest very quickly. Be humble and respect your own time and that of others. Ego is the enemy of all things, including progress. Aspire to be a person of value rather than a person of importance.

Lesson #4: Is your conversation or engagement relevant? Why should the customer care? What benefit is there to them? What we offer only becomes “a solution” if it actually solves a problem or addresses a requirement. If what you’re offering is not relevant to the other party, it is like giving someone the perfect answer to the wrong question. It serves no purpose at all.

Lesson #5: Asking questions helps you understand your client. Without this understanding, you have no way of knowing whether you can actually

deliver the value you think you can, and I can almost guarantee you that the customer doesn't think you can – not yet. How could you? You don't know enough about the business to understand the quantifiable benefit they would derive from what you're offering or how they measure value. Learn to love questions. Our instinct is to seem like we have all the answers from the very first engagement. We don't, and that is okay. Getting to the answers that have value, starts with relevant questions.

Lesson #6: Learning about the client establishes credibility. Credibility builds trust. Trust, gets you everywhere. Become the first name the client thinks of when they have a question.

Lesson #7: Change is not easy and not cheap. Even where customers have a level of pain in their current way of working, the benefit of change must outweigh the opportunity cost of change. This is commonly referred to as the value to cost ratio. Change is not just the direct cost of a new product or service, but also the emotional tax that comes with doing things differently. Try and avoid unnecessary obstacles by setting clear goals from the start. In other words, if you are clear at the start, you'll be clear at the end. You might not have all the answers or even a good plan at the start, but at least have a plan that gets you from A to B in a methodical, measurable manner. Even though the journey may take you on a different course, be very clear about your ideal end. I often read statements like, "it's not about the goal, it's about the journey." This may be true in some circumstances, I'm sure, and the journey itself is most certainly important. But in business and in life, the journey takes you somewhere, and the somewhere must be clear, otherwise, anywhere will do. Customers don't sign up for "anywhere". They look for specific outcomes, by specific dates, at a specific price point.

Lesson #8: Mimolette approached Shiraz with confidence, not arrogance. Confidence in yourself and your product or service is paramount. People can sense uncertainty and will steer away from those who are uncertain about their value. Be confident, even if it means practicing to yourself in the mirror. The more you listen, the more you learn and the more confident you will become. Confidence is not being extrovert and certainly not being arrogant. Make sure you understand the difference. Some of the most brilliant people I know are introverts. From time to time, I hear people saying that entrepreneurs must be extrovert. I don't think that's true. Entrepreneurs must be passionate and that passion will show.

THE SHIRAZ TEST:

1. Have I truly discovered my “why” and can I clearly articulate it, so that it serves as my compass?
2. Is my “why” bigger than my milestones? In other words, my “why” must be my vision.
3. Do I feel a little lost on my journey? If I understand my “why,” it will also guide me; not only in where I'm going, but also on how I intend to get there and what types of behaviour (values) align with my “why” to start off with.
4. Do I truly care about understanding through empathic interrogation, or did I simply show up to tell people about myself, my company or my product, without understanding where they are on their journey and if it's even relevant to them? In other words, what does my discussion start with: myself or with the interests of the prospective client?
5. Am I being respectful and humble? This starts with acknowledging that “it's not about me.”

6. Do I understand the customer's "why"? To truly understand what matters to the customer, it doesn't stop with what they do, but goes on to explore why they do it. You need to understand your customer's customer.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS:

Before you dismiss the notion of a vision, or mission and value statement as something dating back to the 80s, let me tell you that it has immense value. I didn't realise it at the start of my new chapter, much like I didn't realise the value of focus and teamwork – not fully, at least. You can call it what you want, but it really does help you and those around you. A vision, mission and values clearly and crisply articulate what you are about and how they can expect you to behave along the way. It acts as a reminder and compass, keeping you from deviating. There will be times when an opportunity or person crosses your path, that does not align with your vision, mission and values and yet, it seems so compelling that you might feel tempted to forego one thing and pursue another. While, as an exception, this may be the right course of action, the emphasis here is on "exception." Your vision is often underpinned by something core to your being, which is why founder-led organisations have a strong sense of direction and culture. The why is part of who the founder is, not just what they do.

A little more than five years down the line, as a founder of an established digital company, we find ourselves again at a juncture where we need to get rid of the noise we accumulated last year, and to recalibrate, refocus and reprioritise. People are like crows – we collect pretty things along the

way. Pretty things that can make us heavy as we carry them around everywhere, whether they truly add value or not. These are often products we thought are relevant, but they are not. Let them go. The same is true for people or opinions or unfounded fears. When we hold on to things, they anchor us to one place. If your anchor is a value or a vision, great. If your anchor is an opinion or a person or a product, just know that these are variables that can and will change. Perhaps they are better suited as companions, as opposed to anchors.

When bringing additional people into your organisation, make sure they share the same core values. Skill can be taught, passion and values, less so.

I'm almost ashamed to admit how many of the lessons contained in this book, have taken me forty-something years to learn. One of these, is that I finally understand that the loudest person in the room is seldom the one that has the most to contribute. It's the one who listens – truly listens – and asks the right questions who probably has the most to add. Everyone has an opinion or a view. No one cares, really. Not about your opinion and certainly not about your problems. Harsh, I know, but it doesn't make it less true. People hear what they want to hear, but when you're disproportionately the loudest voice in the room, you need to take it down a notch and learn to perform what is commonly referred to as active listening.

There are numerous techniques to help you improve your active listening skills, such as paraphrasing, inquiry and acknowledgement. I will not go into these techniques in this book as there is much to be discovered on this in other books and in the public domain. What I will say on the topic is that discovery must become part of who you are. Invite people – and mean it – to provide continuous, positive criticism about their experience

with you. This is the most inexpensive and fastest way to grow. I don't mean that you should ascribe an unnecessary amount of time trying to imagine what people think of you, no. That is a slippery slope. What people think about you, is their business. What I mean is that you surround yourself with people who you respect and who you trust to provide constructive and honest feedback – a coach, if you will. I have many of these coaches – some of them formally, while others are completely oblivious to the fact that I find ways to solicit their feedback on specific engagements in order to improve who I am and how I conduct myself. I try (I'll admit, I don't always succeed) to use every bad experience as an opportunity to recap and see what could be learnt from it.

My kids – my son in particular – tends to ask me really bizarre questions. He will say something like “Daddy, can fire burn through metal?” Now, if you're a dad, there should be several red lights flashing round about now.

Instead of saying “yes” or “no”, what is more important is to understand his thinking behind this obviously loaded question. Either he has or he intends to find out, neither of which is really desirable.

Instead of answering his question with an answer, I have taught myself – where possible – to answer questions with questions, at least initially. This way, I understand the intention behind the question, allowing me a much better response when I do provide an answer.

So, a simple response such as “Can fire burn through metal?” mirrors his question back to him, prompting him to give me more information. In sales, and in life, information is paramount. The more you have, the better. So instead of trying to impress someone with what you already

know, why not try to increase your knowledge and understanding so that when you speak it complies with the following criteria:

1. Is what you intend to say true, is it kind and is it necessary?
2. Does speaking improve upon the silence?
3. Is it relevant?
4. Does it take the context of the other stakeholders into account?
5. Where (and on whom) does it focus the attention?

I often think marketing gets it completely wrong. A novice marketer would emphasise the product or the brand for its own sake. A skilled marketer focuses on what it means for the buyer. Let's use Starbucks as an example here. A novice might say "We sell great coffee in a neighbourhood near you." The veteran has moved beyond coffee, connecting with the prospective client in a deeper, meaningful way. Today, the Starbucks slogan reads, "Inspiring and nurturing the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighbourhood at a time." If I had to choose between two "equal" cups of coffee, from two side-by-side stores, I would buy my coffee here. Every time. This kind of marketing only becomes possible if you start understanding something more profound about your clients.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi (winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his discoveries related to biological combustion processes and vitamin C) put it well when he said, "Discovery is seeing what everybody else has seen, and thinking what nobody else has thought."

In the ICT space, we often refer to "solutions." Truth is, something is only a "solution" once it's proven to solve something. Before then, it is merely an "offering." Be in the solution business, not the offering.

In the movie *Robots* starring Robin Williams, there is a character called Big Weld. He ascribes his success to one motto: See a need, fill a need.

To force yourself to be and remain humble and respectful, do this: Instead of thinking of your business as delivering a service, think of yourself as serving.

We serve our clients, partners, employees, friends and family, by acting in a specific manner that augments their world, through the convergence with our own. We add value, and it is this value for which the world is hungry and for which businesses are willing to pay.

4

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Mimolette was in the habit of rising early. She saw no reason to change this habit, after all, big change started with small habits and rising with the sun, was a really good habit. It meant a peaceful start to the day and more hours to get things done. She nibbled her cheese and sipped at her coffee (an import in the town of Winehaven), thinking about the day ahead.

Having packed light, she was off in a moment, dressed in her travel garments for the weather seemed grey and rainy.

As she made her way down the streets of Winehaven, she found herself walking in the general direction of a couple of street urchins. They were haggling and begging for this or that from the finely-dressed Winelings walking down the street. Mostly, they were shunned and left empty-handed. It was unavoidable; the route took her past them, so she pressed forward. She had no appetite for being bothered, but should they bother her, she would simply ignore them and trudge forward.

When she reached the smudge of urchins, they greeted her with a polite “Ma’am” and a nod of the head before moving away. Without knowing why, she suddenly felt annoyed. Why would they haggle everyone else, but greet her and let her be? Almost instinctively, she turned to the red-headed Streetling and sneered, “Excuse me?!” Her tone was accusing. “We ain’t want no trouble, Ma’am. We’ll just be on ‘er way” he replied, hoping to duck away in the long shadows that still marked the birth of the day.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Mimolette replied, swirling around to cut off his attempted escape.

“Why?” she asked, “I saw you engage everyone else in their finely dressed attire even though they shunned you, but me, you simply greet and move off? Why?” she enquired, waving her hand to the long-gone elite of Winehaven who walked like peacocks on air.

“Begging ‘er pardon, Ma’am. I meant no insult, but ye dunno have what we want,” said the Streetling in a matter-of-fact manner.

“What?” replied Mimolette, with eyes wild and round.

“It’s simple, Ma’am. We want money and you dunno have any,” the Streetling explained. “You’re not worth the trouble.”

Mimolette was speechless. In all her young life, she had never felt quite so confused and insulted. She pivoted between anger, disgust, annoyance and disbelief. When the Streetling saw her going through this flux, he spoke up.

“Ma’am, we only have so many hours inna’ day. Soon, the Lawlings will shouts at us to go away, so we have to know our customers,” he said. Mimolette paused, shocked out of her reverie.

“So, what you’re saying is that you select your customers (she chuckled at the bizarreness of her words) based on the likelihood of your success?” She spoke as if to herself, as if trying to process a complex math problem.

“Exactly that, Ma’am!” said the Streetling. “T’night, I wanna eat. I canna be wasting time, ye know?” Mimolette shooed them away, shaking her head in disbelief. She wasn’t sure what upset her more – that she was upset to start off with, or that she was viewed as “not being worth the trouble.”

She made a mental note before continuing on her journey to the next town down the road, shaking her head every so often with a question lingering in the back of her mind. They had found another customer a moment later and they were giving it their best. She could see that they had learnt exactly what topics to push and why and who their ideal customer was.

“They’ve certainly mastered their craft,” Mimolette commented as she turned the corner.

Lesson #1: What does your ideal customer look like? Do not try to sell to everyone – everyone is not necessarily your customer. You only have so many hours in the day. Be productive, not busy. They are most certainly not the same thing. I receive a ridiculous amount of unsolicited emails at the moment about companies claiming they excel at providing you with

a qualified lead list. Leads are a good place to start, but that is not your goal. From a list of leads, you need to choose who fits the profile of your ideal customer. If what you're offering as a product or service is based on a topic you are passionate about, you may already know who your ideal customers are. Now focus on them. There is no value in having a great lead list and a poor conversion ratio. Play to your strengths. Identify the clients who will agree to your unique value proposition.

Lesson #2: Try and use every opportunity, good or bad, as a learning experience. Sometimes, very valuable lessons can come from the most unlikely places or failures. Instead of denying an experience, ask yourself what you can learn from it. If you have the option to do so, identify a number of people you respect and who have officially retired. Ask them whether they will give you an hour or two of their time every month, where they will be willing to coach you. Offer to pay for their coffee, or wine and ask them questions. Learn from them. Share your doubts, fears and mistakes. Their inputs are invaluable. Things go wrong. This is only natural. We cannot control every dimension or situation. What is important is that we use every hurdle to prepare us better for the future.

Lesson #3: If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well. I embed this message into my kids so frequently, that when I start by saying "If it's worth..." they already proceed to finish the sentence in a choir of voices. While at the moment, it's slightly dismissive on their part, I hear them repeating it to each other from time to time. I can only hope that the actual principle and not just the words will be visible throughout their lives. This is important for two reasons. If you're going to do everything you do, to the best of your ability, make sure that the things you do, are worthy of your time. Chasing every customer and every deal will cause burnout and actually,

cause a decline in your success. Perhaps the answer is to pursue less opportunities, but make those count. This loops back to lesson 1.

Lesson #4: Brand is important, but few really understand what “brand” is all about. The people who were targeted by the Streetlings were identified based on their visible attributes, or their “brand.” They were distinguishable based on how they presented themselves. Mimolette’s brand or attributes, were not what they were looking for. Build a strong, consistent brand that stands for something and that immediately sets you apart. I always think about it this way: your brand is not your product. Your brand is the emotion people will have towards your product. It is the attribute that will want people to be associated with you.

Lesson #5: Brand is outward, Culture is inward. Brand draws clients and culture draws employees. Yes, this is slightly – but intentionally - over-simplified. Brand and culture are siblings or cousins insofar as there must be a similarity, but they are also distinctly different from each other. Culture is an essential part of why people will work for you. It embeds the values and experiences that employees can expect. Among the Streetlings, there will be a culture of sharing and collaboration. That is their culture.

THE STREETLINGS TEST:

1. Who is my ideal customer? Put this down on paper. Write a profile. Then re-write it. Do this over and over until you are perfectly clear and know that this may change over time, as you change. Spending time on the wrong customer (or

partner) will result in “not eating” that night and potentially, many nights after that. More on this later.

2. Am I using my time wisely and sparingly? Yes, time is finite and every hour matters because you’re never getting it back. We tend to be more giving with future time, compared with current time. I may agree to a meeting in a month, because the value of time in the future is perceived to be less than the value of time now. Truth is, if a topic is not worth your time now, it is likely (all things being equal) that it’s also not worth your time later. (There is of course a huge caveat here, in that your priorities may change over time, and then so will how and what you spend your time on.)
3. If and when you do choose to pursue a topic, partner, customer or employee, then put in the effort to do it well. Have a plan and establish upfront what your successful outcome looks like, and by when. If you have done your best and you get the impression that the other party is merely stringing you along, have the courage to disengage; it is in your interest and theirs. Be clear about everyone’s agenda and expectations. Everyone has an agenda and everyone has an expectation. The sooner you learn this, the better.
4. Is my brand attracting the right customers, partners or prospects? Your brand is the lens through which the world sees you. Have a strong personal and professional brand that is consistent with each other. If you’re authentic and honest, then it must show both in how you conduct yourself professionally and personally. Let excellence be a way of life. Be okay with the fact that your brand will be appreciated by some, and not by others. In fact, be more than okay with

this, be excited by it if the people who are attracted to your brand meet the criteria of your ideal client.

5. Is my culture attracting the right people? Culture should not only attract similar people (in other words, you don't want to employ people who are only like you), but rather people who can bring diversity and depth to your business, but still committed to the same principles of "how we engage each other". Your culture is the framework within which employees interact with each other.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS:

Over the last five years, we got this wrong as often as right. In our early days, we pursued a range of opportunities, whether those opportunities were within our strategic focus or not. Cashflow is the violent death of many a start-up and the pursuit of a positive cashflow can create desperation, when really, it should prompt more focus. Hindsight of course is 20/20. We have never been shy of work, however, we have been guilty of working on the wrong things, and by wrong things, I mean products, services, clients and partners.

We really needed to (and we need to continue doing this) ask ourselves exactly what our ideal client is and why and how we will deal with misfits. And with misfits, I mean exactly that – people, clients, partners, products or services that are a better fit to someone else than to us, in other words, not fitting to our strategy, values or vision. It's a well-known fact that it is more costly to acquire a new client than to serve an existing one, and even cross-selling and upselling in an existing client, is easier, since you already have an established reputation and track record. But everything

in moderation. At the previous company I worked for, the majority of revenue came from three very large clients. The risk was that losing any one of these clients could cripple the business because of singular revenue risks. I am personally a fan of the Jerry McGuire “mission statement.” Less clients, more intimacy. However, this needs to be balanced.

What is certain is this: Understand who you need to pursue, why and how. To know this means to ask the right questions, and lots of them, as well as to challenge your own thinking and have others do the same.

The best athletes in the world have coaches, not because coaches are better than the athlete, but because the coach is able to see what the athlete cannot. The coach is able to have a wider “outward-in” perspective, coupled with knowledge and experience. The athlete has the talent, but relies on the continuous expertise and guidance of the coach. As a young organisation with a young management team, we have appointed several non-executive directors who are true industry veterans. They are, in many ways, the coaches while we are the athletes who must run the race.

I have been involved with complex sales for over two decades, during which time there have been great experiences and terrible ones. Many of the bad experiences, relate to working for thousands of hours on the wrong things, only to look back in regret at having wasted my time.

I’ve also come across a quote by Jeremy Goldberg, saying, “Courage is knowing it might hurt and doing it anyway. Stupidity is the same, and that is why life is hard.” Qualify where you spend your time and when to push forward or when to disengage. Disengagement, and the wisdom to know when to do it, is a necessary science and art. It is essential to progress.

It may be disengagement from people or opportunities, or something as simple as disengagement from an old method or technique, to adopt a new.

There are numerous deal qualification methods. I propose you find a mix between all of them that works best for your style of selling, what you're selling and who you're selling to. The key here is not to fling it. Have a plan and be focused. If you can find some way to qualify your engagements early on, so that you need to disengage less, you're saving yourself a lot of pain and expense.

5

THE OPEN-AIR MARKET

Mimolette had arrived in Meatville two days ago. It was a truly foreign place for her, with bulky, oversized people, grunting to themselves while walking around purposefully. Some of them looked excited – as if plotting their future in silent whispers, searching for the answers in an imaginary horizon, squinting, as if seeing something the rest of the Meatlings could not. Others, meanwhile, looked worried, as if there was never enough time and always something more to be done. Mimolette found Earthlings who worried perpetually very disconcerting. They never made her feel at home.

It was a lesson Mimolette had learnt early in life as she had scurried between the workers at Pierre's cheese factory. Mostly, however, this lesson was learnt from her father. He had a special technique as a salter. He would add the salt gradually, not all at once. This, he felt, ensured a better consistency. She had no idea whether it was true or not, but it worked for him. She could hear him now, as if he were standing right there next to her.

“Patience, you see? I act, then I observe and only then, do I act again. If I rush, I lose the opportunity to learn from the outcome of my previous actions. I need to be informed to be empowered. Acting without insight is foolish, because I cannot say for certain what the outcome will be. So, I observe, digest and then calmly, calculate and act again.”

Since Mimolette was writing her own book of knowledge, she too paused and contemplated this.

Lesson #1: Knowledge leads to *appropriate* actions, which leads to desirable outcomes. Without knowledge, you’re in the dark. Everything becomes a gamble.

Observe. Interrogate. Understand. Act. In that order. Gain knowledge about your customers, the market in which you operate, your competitors, your value proposition and your differentiators. The more knowledge you have, the better you are equipped to ensure success.

Lesson #2: Hope is not a strategy. Without a plan you’re already lost, you may just not know it yet. I don’t refer here, to the Biblical concept of hope, which is more akin to faith. You should always have faith. No, the hope that I refer to here as is when you just “hope” that things will be okay. It’s like the old adage, “if you build it they will come.” That may have been true in the eighties. It’s certainly not the case anymore. Now you need a strategy (which speaks to the “why” and “what”) and a plan, which is the “how”. You need this, to know where you’re heading and what your journey will look like.

As she meandered through the bustling streets, thinking about her father, she found herself diving deeper into memory lane. There were so many curious characters working at the factory. She often thought to herself, “We already have a circus, we just need a tent.”

She remembered Nancy.

When Nancy was out of earshot, people would refer to her as “Nancy Nickers,” because she was always panicking about everything. Everything seemed to be a crisis with her. Sure, she worked in the quality control department at the factory, “... but,” as her father always used to say with a bit of a chuckle, “no matter the crisis, there’s no need to get your knickers in a knot.” Mimolette half smiled thinking about this.

Nancy was one of those people who always seemed to have too little time. She walked at a fast pace, with short strides. She wore flappy dresses, with her hair tied loosely into a bundle on top of her head and had bony features with wild eyes. It was as if she had come to “own” panic. It was her crutch, her identity.

She felt that it gave her a sense of credibility or importance, to seemingly worry about every problem (and then of course, come up with the solutions) – big or small. The fact is, Nancy found a problem to every solution. It was a self-fulfilling prophesy. She expected there to be too few hours in the day and she expected every waking hour to be one of crisis, and so, that is what her world became. A series of numbing problems, many of them completely inane, yet for her everything was an issue. She was always busy, but hardly ever productive. First in and last out, with very little to show for it. Needless to say, Nancy did not have many friends. She came across as controlling, while she herself was out of control with every sentence starting with “The problem is...” whether there was a problem or not. You could always rely on Nancy to find one.

Lesson #3: There is always more to be done. Don’t panic and whatever you do, don’t be a Nancy. While critical thinking is important, caution

against finding a problem where there is none, as overthinking can cause inaction. Be willing to take calculated risks. You won't always have all the answers and insofar as it is possible, adopt a "solution" mindset.

THE NANCY TEST:

1. Do I have a solution or a problem mindset? Put differently, do I search for solutions to existing challenges or am I looking for problems where they don't exist?
2. Do people who engage with me feel calm and confident or anxious? If all I ever do is challenge the solutions that people offer by countering them with even more problems, people will gravitate away from me and any wisdom and input I may have had to contribute, would be lost. Critical thinking is important, but how we communicate is as important as what we communicate.
3. Do I create the impression that I am always in panic? I, for one, will not feel comfortable leaving any topic of importance with someone who is in a perpetual state of panic.
4. Spend the time to explore whether you have any other "crutches" or "identity attributes" that may result in people labelling you in a specific way, and which are not consistent with the brand you wish to portray.

And then of course, there was Vincent. Of all the words Mimolette could muster, "misunderstood" was the most appropriate. Vincent was one of the smartest Cheeselings she knew, but when it came to articulation, he

was at the back of the queue. She thought, “The problem was...” and then Mimolette laughed. “Seemingly there is a little bit of Nancy in all of us.”

Nevertheless, the way Mimolette saw it was that Vincent seemed to know things but between his brain and the tip of his tongue, they seemed to get lost. So, over the years, Vincent became known as “Vincent-so-what.” See, whenever someone said something in the boardroom, Vincent had an inexpressible itch that the thing that was being said was less important than something else. However, he never seemed to know, or was unable to explain, what that something else was, instead he would simply ask, “So what?”

The Cheeselings mostly got annoyed at his line of enquiry, but sometimes, just sometimes, Mimolette actually agreed with Vincent. She too, though, struggled to understand why.

Pierre would say something like “We make great cheese” and Vincent would say, “So what?”

The head of marketing, Viola, would say, “We are launching a new product” and predictably, Vincent would reply with “So what?”

Mimolette thought that the dismissal of his question was an opportunity lost. At the time, she did not understand why, but now, as she was exploring a bigger world, she started to make sense of it. She remembered the discussion with Shiraz in Winehaven, about learning what people need and slowly she started understanding Vincent.

Lesson #4: Having an idea or a product is of course good. The question is, does it actually fill a need? And, would Earthlings be willing to pay you to fill that need? Vincent's "so what" question challenges us to consider what the actual underlying value of our products, actions or even our words, are. "So what" takes us from "the thing" to "the value of the thing".

THE VINCENT TEST:

1. I have an idea or a product. So what?
2. Does it fill a need?
3. Do people need it, can I do it, how much would it cost to do it, and would people be willing to pay *enough* for it?
4. Has it been done before with success or failure and why would my approach be different or better?

"If I ever see Vincent again" she thought, "we should order a bottle of wine from Shiraz and talk at length about this. Perhaps outside, away from other people, under a starry night. Maybe then, if there is no peer pressure (and with a little wine to help things along) he may be able to share with me those words that always seem to lose their way."

Mimolette snapped out of her absent-minded reverie. She had gotten so caught up in memories of the past, that she had not noticed herself join a crowd of people walking briskly through the street. She briefly studied her surroundings, trying to make sense of the scene. Meatlings of all shapes and sizes were walking purposefully down the street. It had the feel of a carnival or a march and she could feel herself being drawn in, pulled along like a leaf caught in a current. Children were laughing, running away from worried parents who tried – and failed – to maintain a

sense of order. Here and there, someone would blow on a horn or beat a crudely fashioned drum, as if to celebrate whatever this was. In a scattered array, she saw painted faces and people dressed as mascots. Clearly, she had stumbled into something of importance. She snapped out of her reverie as she heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Are you on your way there?”

A heavy-set Meatling was standing in front of Mimolette, with her rebellious hair and cheeks that kept moving long after her mouth had stopped talking.

“Well,” she enquired, “are you on your way there?”

She raised her eyebrows in question.

Mimolette was puzzled. “On my way there?” she mirrored, not sure what else to do.

“Well, I figured you’d be on your way to the Steak-out, missy. It’s what all the fuss is about.”

“The Steak-out?” enquired Mimolette.

“You mean to say you don’t know? It’s the life of this little joint!” she said while waving as if to suggest the whole of Meatville knew. “It’s our open-air market hosted on a field just north of town every Friday night, it is!” said the lady with a hint of madness in her eyes, like a child holding a cookie but not being allowed to eat it.

“Hm-hm,” confirmed Mimolette, making it up on the fly, “that is where I’m going.”

“Well, then it’s settled, we will walk together!” said the lady... or what Mimolette assumed was a lady.

So off they went on trot, making their way into the street which – at some point – had become a one-way out of town.

“Can you tell me more about the Steak-out?” asked Mimolette. “It’s my first time.”

“Your first time?” bellowed the lady.

“Well missy, are you in for a treat. This will be something you will never forget.”

She paused to breath, huffing to keep up with her talking and drudgery at the same time.

“The concept is a little crazy, I must admit.” she said.

“Everyone whose anyone in Meatville, gets together in one really large shed. There’s music – mostly on import from Bingeville – and everyone is trying to sell you something. There’s hundreds of stalls, all erected this morning, where you can buy just about anything to satisfy that skinny face of yours.” She said, smiling as if inconsequential.

“Your first time!” she chuckled, as if through all of the chaos that was the one thing that stayed with her.

As they entered the gates to the Steak-out, emphasised by a kludge of horns rudely erected over a makeshift entrance, the lady slapped Mimolette on the back with an encouraging “Off you go then” as she darted into the crowd, half walking, half gasping for air.

“What strange people!” Mimolette thought to herself.

It was a strange concept to her: scores of stalls (essentially competitors) going head to head for the same customers, all of them trying to sell something to the amassing passers-by.

“At least,” she thought, “they knew that everyone who showed up at the Steak-out intended to buy something, so there was that... a captive market, I suppose.”

She wondered how one vendor would differentiate themselves from the next.

“This will be very interesting!” she thought to herself.

Mimolette walked from one stall to the next, perusing, enquiring, wondering, learning.

Some Shoplings sold one, single thing and made a big show of letting everyone know they are focused on just that, thus making them the best. It was clear that this appealed to some, but for others, if they did not want this one item then the Shopling had nothing else to offer them, so they moved on. This did not seem to bother the Shopling and made Mimolette recall the “know your customer” lesson.

Others sold an array of meats, claiming that their unique value was in their variety under one roof. These Shoplings attracted more passers-by, which was good, but she also noticed that sometimes people were just going there for the array of samples, happy to help themselves but never buying. It was strange how something that was offered for free did not necessarily convert into more sales. In fact, Mimolette wondered about this. It created the impression that the effort increased for the Shoplings, as did the cost, but not necessarily the revenue. These Shoplings however seemed content with their approach. “Maybe they know something I don’t” was the best Mimolette could come up with.

One shop was clearly a mess. A single Shopling was trying to sell every type of good you could imagine. She was unable to finish a single sentence before having to answer a question on a completely different topic. She was very busy, but making fewer and fewer sales as people did not want to wait to be served and the overall experience was simply sluggish. This would result in waves of patrons followed by no patrons at all. The lady behind the counter seemed utterly spent, in spite of the day only just getting started.

As Mimolette walked through the stalls, she could hear heralds (which she later learnt were called Marketlings) calling out to the passers-by, trying to sweet talk them into visiting specific stalls. Some were dressed as mascots while others waved posters. Their words were different, but the message was mostly the same. It all started with:

“We are...” or “We have...” or “You must...” For the most part, she did not feel they really helped lure clients. Again, she recalled some of her recent adventures and thought, “I can see now that many of the

salespeople only talk about themselves, not understanding the needs of their customers.”

One herald, she must admit, started his routine with “Imagine if...” She liked that. It prompted her to think about what she hoped to hear; to put herself in an imaginary situation or outcome, but then sadly, the herald’s message deteriorated to “more of the same.”

Shoplings were everywhere, selling culinary treats of every kind. Then she discovered a Shopling that sold meats, wines and... oh was she delighted...cheese! She walked right in and helped herself to the samples on the table.

“Well, hello to you too!” said the Shopling in a friendly, if slightly mocking tone.

“Whelu” she blushed and mumbled, trying to smile, apologise and greet at the same time, all while chewing wildly on the cheese, half covering her mouth with her hand.

Recovering her decency, Mimolette smiled broadly, “Are you from Cheeseville?” she asked.

The Shopling nodded in confirmation. “The weekends can get pretty busy there and everyone is selling cheese, so sometimes we come here or to the other towns to offer something different to the locals. We think of it as diversification.”

“It seems that there’s a couple of you sharing a stall?” Mimolette asked. “Yes, we call it partnering for excellence. Each one of us contributes our speciality, but we work together to offer a holistic experience to shoppers.

Everything under one roof, but still, each of us focused on one specific thing.”

“What happens if your partner doesn’t show up on the day?” she asked. “That would be a bad partner now, would it not?” replied the Shopling. It was clear that this was the only answer she was going to get, as the Shopling had to attend to some patrons who were actually buying. Mimolette smiled. It was clear to her that when supply is abundant, one has to become creative in how you position yourself in order to remain competitive. She made a couple of mental notes.

Lesson #5: Focus is really important. If you try to do too many things at the same time, you do all of them poorly. In our early days, people were constantly telling us to focus. They were right of course. Even now, I sometimes think we try to do too many things – at our own detriment. I believe any business will likely flow and ebb between diversification and simplification, expansion and focus. We change as we must, while remaining true to our vision. In hindsight, however, I realised that many people meant “focus only on one thing”. I didn’t agree then and I still don’t agree now. Some companies offer a single thing. They have the luxury of a “single product focus”. Others, address a larger scope of problems and require a larger set of services or solutions. What is true, however, is that what you offer should still be coherent to your customers. I cannot sell cheese and radios at the same time. It doesn’t make sense, but selling cheese and yoghurt, or even cheese and salty cracks, that makes sense.

Lesson #6: Choose the right approach or sales strategy that matches your intended client, your product, your brand and your personal style. There is no “one approach fits all.” Be authentic and adaptable. There

are many different strategies. If one doesn't work, do the research and adopt another. It's also important to determine who you're selling to. In a complex sale, you might have many different stakeholders, such as the CEO, CFO, COO, line of business managers and so forth. Even though you're selling the same product or service, the value proposition to each of these stakeholders is different. Understand what drives each of these people. The CEO is responsible for growth and vision. The CFO is responsible for financial performance. Therefore, the way in which you articulate the value of your offering must be different in order for them to recognise how what you offer, holds value to them.

Lesson #7: If you find you have a weakness in fully meeting the needs of your client, you may want to consider partnering, but be sure to choose the right partner. Partners have their own expectations and agendas, and it's highly unlikely that their objective is to grow your business. Be clear at the start to be clear at the end. Agree the principles of engagement early on, define the roles and responsibilities, and set a criteria against which to measure success and contribution, to ensure you avoid unnecessary conflict later on.

Lesson #8: No partners (meaning, you try to do everything yourself) often means higher overhead. More partners could mean less overheads or direct costs, but could result in more demands and expectations. Too many partners may lead to an overly complex landscape that can unravel and lead to conflict if not managed well, while, on the other hand, it could lead to a comprehensive coverage of client needs. Find balance and find what is right for you.

Lesson #9: Be cautious of "free." People perceive it differently, and often, free can actually deflate or erode the value of your offering. You also lose

a valuable opportunity to get someone “bought into” what you offer. Offering something at a marginal fee instead of for free, especially early on, might be a competitive strategy but it gives you other benefits as well. Such as being on-boarded as a supplier and the ability to evaluate whether a client is serious about the engagement. Many people will take you up on an offer if it’s free, whether they need it or not and then, after you invest time and money, they will do nothing with it. This is because it was free, so they had nothing to lose by doing nothing in return. Some people consider giving something for free to compel the other party to reciprocate in some way. You see this a lot at a market, particularly with low-cost items and it works. However, when it comes to complex business-to-business engagements, this is unlikely to work in the same way.

Mimolette continued to explore the Steak-out until she reached an area that, for reasons she could not quite explain, seemed more “exclusive.” The shoppers there looked more sophisticated, more informed, more discerned.

She had to know more.

“Excuse me,” she said, falling in next to an elderly lady who walked briskly but with grace.

“Why is this area different? I feel it, but I cannot quite explain it.”

The lady stopped and turned.

“Good morning,” she said, “my name is Eleanor, and yes, you’re quite perceptive. What is your name?”

“Hello, I’m called Mimolette.”

“Well, Mimolette, you’re perfectly right. We,” she waved inclusively to the other shoppers like herself, “are not here to buy ‘products’. I am in the business of experiences and outcomes and so my requirements are... more specific.”

Mimolette nodded her head, but remained silent, so Eleanor continued.

“I own an esteemed restaurant in town. Earthlings travel from near and far to go there. Of course, being a restaurant, they eat and drink while they’re there, but they can do that in any number of places. So instead, when people come to my restaurant, they buy an experience, something they will remember and talk about for months to come. In fact, if they leave my restaurant without talking about it, I view that as a failure. My ideal customer must linger on the experience long after the meal itself and passionately talk about their experience at every opportunity.”

Eleanor paused for a moment, then enquired.

“Does it seem like the stalls down there are attempting to sell meaningful and memorable experiences?”

Mimolette shook her head, “No. No it doesn’t. They want to sell as much of their products as possible, but it’s all about the product.”

“You’re right. Of course, it’s not the same. I cannot rightly compare what I do to what they’re doing – it’s a different business model and we’re looking for different outcomes. I can only share what is true for me and for the other people you see here.” Eleanor waved again, gesturing the fewer, but focused buyers.

“In a market like the one down there, an hour from now, no one will remember if they ate the blue, hard or soft cheese or the fillet or rump. They will just remember that they ate. Here, the Shoplings understand not just me as a customer, but also my own customers and so the discussion is very different. Subsequently, so is their value proposition. Shoppers that come here, are, in their own right, looking for partners who add strategic value, knowing the downstream outcomes that we’re looking for. We engage in long-term, meaningful relationships of mutual trust and respect and the quality I procure here is backed up by solid service.”

When Eleanor concluded, Mimolette's eyes lit up. "This," she said to herself, "is what I want. I don't want to just sell cheese. I love cheese and I love how it makes me feel. This is what I want to do. I want to offer others that same experience. I want to offer memorable and lasting experiences, and I will do that through my passion for cheese."

"Thank you!" she said.

"Any time, Mimolette."

It had been a great day. As Mimolette continued to walk through the stalls of the Steak-out, sampling here, buying there, she made a list of mental notes.

Lesson #10: Be novel. Steer away from being "just another undifferentiated provider." Value proposition is really an entire book in its own right. In short, value proposition is how the market or buyers perceive your value. Some companies get this completely wrong, thinking that the value proposition is a "product description". Not at all. You need to go through a process of understanding what value your product or service offers and how this is relevant not just to your customer, but the individual stakeholders at that customer. Only now, are you starting to unpack your value proposition. The next step is to determine why this is uniquely offered by you, which makes you more relevant to the customer than other vendors. Sometimes, there is no unique attribute. This is what we refer to as a "red ocean", meaning, there's a lot of blood in the water, because competitors offer mostly similar products. This is where your brand and culture becomes even more important, because you still must find some angle that makes you memorable and relevant.

Lesson #11: Some sell products, some sell experiences and others sell outcomes. How you position yourself defines what kind of clients you will

attract and retain. What you sell is dependent on your type of business and this will also impact “how” you sell, but starting with an understanding that “selling cheese” and selling “large scale ICT systems” are not the same, is important. Now at least, you can apply the right methods and techniques. I get approached by companies who excel in selling commodities, claiming that can “take our business to the next level”. No, they cant, because we don’t deal in commodities. The methods and models they apply, are not relevant to what we do.

Lesson #12: When you successfully enable your customers to achieve their strategic outcomes, you become more relevant to them.

Lesson #13: You cannot enable your customer’s objectives, if you don’t make an effort to understand their business. Know your customer, know their business and know what their customers want. By helping your customer serve their customer, you are not only more relevant but you become “sticky.” In other words, the client starts leaning on you as an enabler of their business. If you do this well, you will have customers for life.

Lesson #14: You don’t HAVE a voice with your customer until you EARN that voice. You achieve this by creating a lasting, positive experience. Build trust.

THE ELEANOR TEST

1. Am I selling commodities, experiences or outcomes?
2. What differentiates my product, strategy and/or culture?
3. Can I clearly articulate my value proposition?

4. Do I know what is important to my client?
5. Therefore, can I articulate my value proposition in the context of the client's world? Only then will the client agree that there is value, which is achieved one customer at a time.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS

A number of years ago, we appointed a certified project manager for a project I had concluded with a client. I was still very young and he was close to retirement. I was full of energy while he walked and acted with the grace and velocity of a chameleon approaching its prey. What got under my skin the most was how slow he was to answer the client's questions. See, I was ready with an answer long before the client had finished their sentence.

Of course, I now know that I was wrong. I wanted to prove that we knew the answers and had the solutions to every problem. While my zeal was great, my active listening was not. Answering a question while the other person is mid-sentence, is a sign of disrespect and achieves exactly the opposite of establishing trust. The project manager, when responding, would have a little routine. He would listen, pause, sometimes ask more questions, then pause, take off his glasses, clean them, put them back on, and then speak. It was the cleanest pair of glasses in all the world and it felt like I was aging decades in every one of his pauses. Strangely, no one else seemed to mind. At the time, I thought it was bizarre. Only later – much later – did I learn to understand and appreciate his wisdom

and calm demeanour. See, he listened – truly listened and before he would speak, he applied his mind.

While I cannot remember his name, his impression has always stayed with me.

In the movie *Chronicles of Riddick*, Judi Dench, as Aereon, says, “So when I choose to speak of it, you should choose to listen.”

When you propose to speak, make sure you have all the information. This will allow you to speak with authority. Silence is not something to be filled. Proverbs 3 says it best. Everything has a time, and in communication, silence has its place. Silence is an important ingredient of effective communication. Let others do the talking. This will give you much more context and knowledge on which to build your own narrative and positioning. The more you talk, the less likely you are to be in control of the narrative, situation, negotiation or discussion. Imagine for a moment, the Marketlings, standing next to the stalls, shouting out the goods and prices. They’re assuming that the passers-by are interested in what they have to say. Or, as many sales people go about prospecting, they’re just following a script, With no conscious consideration of what they’re doing. After a while, their voices become like white noise, fading into all the other noises. You expect to hear them shouting and so it starts losing value. In fact, too much talking and too little listening, is a great example of the principle of diminishing returns.

Imagine a Marketling shaking things up by **not** shouting out their products and prices, but asking questions instead. Who do you think will attract more (of the right) attention?

“Hungry for some truly succulent carpaccio?” or

“Have you tried our new barbequed fillet, covered in chocolate sauce? The recipe was lost for two generations and recently re-discovered.”

A well-timed (and calibrated) question, forces engagement and curiosity. What you’re ultimately looking for as a Marketling, is active engagement.

Work towards enabling your customer to achieve their objectives. “See a need, fill a need.” This makes you so engrained in the customer’s reality, so that they cannot see themselves growing without you. In doing so, you’ve EARNED your right at the table.

It warrants adding that sometimes we can do all the right things and do them really well, and still not succeed. I’ve endured 100 times the failures for every success I’ve enjoyed. I am reminded of the quote by Prairie Johnson, a fictional character in the Netflix series *The OA*. She says, “The biggest mistake I made was believing that if I cast a beautiful net, I’d catch only beautiful things.”

I recently read the results of a study that looked at thousands of companies, trying to determine why some succeed and some don’t. In the entrepreneurial world, you will hear people with a myriad of opinions. Some will argue it’s “the jockeys, not the horse”, so will argue “it’s your business model” or “your captive market” and so on and so on. One opinion stands out for me, and this was also the outcome from the study. It was all about timing. It was arguably the one thing all successful ventures had in common, and if you think about it, it’s true for so many areas of our lives. Ask someone to marry them too soon, you scare them off. Wait too long, they may choose to go anyway. Timing is a critical element of success.

So even if you read this book and there was some learning and yet you did not succeed at your first, second or tenth attempts, don't despair. The right product, to the right audience, with the right (real) value proposition, at the right time, will get you everywhere.

6

THE ROAD LESS TAKEN

Mimolette was almost ready to head back home to Cheeseville. This road trip had been what she had hoped for and, in the spirit of doing things well, she decided to take the long way home by travelling through Bingeville, a town unlike any other.

Bingeville was, for all practical purposes, a country on its own. The rules that applied to all Earthlings, or so the Bingelings thought, did not quite apply to them. From dusk to dawn, the Bingelings desired for nothing more than endless entertainment, in whatever form it could be found. Mimolette had heard of the busking artists lining the streets, the midnight carnivals where Firelings were said to swallow flames without so much as a blister.

Every block had a theatre and every theatre a show on the hour. The one thing you never found in Bingeville was silence. It was a sensory rollercoaster where everyone was an artist, or aspiring artist; some thriving, some suffering, and living in anything from a penthouse to crashing on a couch at a fellow artist's studio.

Word on the street was, “if you can make it in Bingeville, you can make it anywhere.” Mimorette imagined this had to do with the abundance on offer. Supply clearly overshadowed demand and so, in time, entertainment had become the primary export of Bingeville with artists constantly on the road, traveling across the entire continent.

Of course, Bingeville had a steady influx of thrill-seekers as well. It was for this reason that Mimorette decided to book her hotel while en route. As it turned out, there was no data signal on the road to Bingeville, making www.earthlingchronicles.com inaccessible.

Feeling frustrated, Mimorette decided to call the hotel directly at the first opportunity. To her surprise, the person who answered the phone was not situated at the hotel, but was instead a call centre agent in a foreign country. Apparently, the receptionist was busy busking in the foyer – a daily routine over lunchtime and when she did so – she outsourced the calls to the call centre. Mimorette explained her situation and asked if there was a room available for the night.

“Oh yes, ma’am, of course, ma’am” responded the voice on the other side of the phone with a peculiar accent.

With some concern, but no viable alternative, Mimorette reserved the room and followed the road to Bingeville. She could hear she was close, long before she could see the city in all its splendour. The bassline reverberated through her to the point of nausea. She started doubting her decision, but pressed on. Turning the corner, she could see the neon lights, an impressive display of colours and shapes urging her forward like a moth to a flame.

She decided to head to the hotel first to clean up after the long road and extreme heat, which felt nothing short of walking through a desert.

Mimolette rung the bell. After entering, she found that the foyer was busy and crowded, so she had to push through the other guests to get to the reception desk. It wasn't long before a woman in her late thirties dressed in a glittering onesie rushed forward to greet her on silver heels that were ready to give up the ghost at any moment.

"How can I help you, love?" asked the receptionist.

"Hi. I'm Mimolette. I reserved a room through your call centre." She then presented her passport.

"Hello. I'm Jordan," the receptionist replied in a voice that was perhaps a little more tenor than Mimolette had expected.

"Uhm..." said Jordan, "I hate to break it to you, love, but we don't have any rooms tonight."

"No rooms?" replied Mimolette.

"No rooms." Jordan echoed. "We have a visiting artist performing this evening. Goes by the name of Melvis. Very popular among the young'uns. Buses and buses arrived this morning. Don't think there's a room in all of Bingeville, truth be told."

Mimolette was fuming, but she tried to remain calm and collected.

"The call centre agent said..." she started.

“The call centre doesn’t know chalk from cheese, lovey. Had you spoken to me or the manager, we could have told you there were no rooms.”

“But you were not...” objected Mimolette and again, she was cut off mid-sentence.

“Them call centre guys, they get paid a commission for everyone who shows up. They’ll never say “no” to anyone. Room or no room. Everyone’s got an agenda. Remember that. Everyone wants something. You want a room. They want commission. I wanna be a star.” She held a dramatic pose displaying her side-profile, until finally she was snapped out of her self-importance.

“That’s not an acceptable...” it seemed like Mimolette would never get a word in.

“It’s tough, lovey, I’m sure. I feel your pain, but fact is, you didn’t speak to the right person.”

“No one else was available!” pressed Mimolette.

“And where does that leave you, love?” replied Jordan, as if this oversight or error on their part was not at all of any significance.

Mimolette was speechless, angry, dirty and now, utterly unimpressed.

“Tough lesson this one, lovey. If you’re speaking to anyone who says yes, but someone else can still say no, you’re speaking to the wrong person. That’ll get you nowhere in this town.”

“You can’t treat customers this way!” Mimolette spurted.

“And yet...” Jordan began, seemingly indifferent towards Mimorette’s discomfort, instead fussing at some point of interest on her fingernail with her hand stretched out in front of her as she held inspection, glaring over the rim of her glasses.

Mimorette was now somewhere between light-headed and outright rage.

“Gotta speak to the right people about the right stuff, love, otherwise people will string you along and you’ll never get what ye want, you got that?”

Jordan contracted a distant expression on her face, as if this lesson had come from a personal experience at immense personal cost, and the wounds were not fully healed.

At a loss for anything else to say, Mimorette responded. “Gotcha. Speak to the right people about the right stuff.” She then turned and left. It was time to go home.

As Mimorette recounted her steps, heading back home, feeling sorry for herself, she brooded on the conversation. Now, a point of habit, she made some mental notes.

THE JORDAN TEST:

1. Are you speaking to the right person? On any given opportunity, there are likely to be a range of stakeholders; users, influencers, decision-makers and approvers. Map out

the stakeholders and make sure you're speaking to the right people

2. Establish early on whether the client is willing to assign resources (people, money and/or time) towards the project. If they don't, it's worth re-evaluating whether or not they're serious.
3. Big decisions are seldom "outsourced." Identify who the project sponsor and owner is. Ask yourself "who has the problem?" and "who holds the wallet?" If these two role-players are not part of the discussion, there are some red lights you need to address.

Lesson #1: If you must operate under assumptions, verify those assumptions with the client as soon as possible. Insofar as it is possible, eliminate any assumptions as soon as possible. Mimolette had taken the call centre operator at face value. While one would assume that they are reliable and you should be able to take certain decisions on their feedback, it wasn't the case. If you're going to outsource any part of your business, make sure that your partner ascribes to the same level of quality you do. The book Animal Farm comes to mind: "All animals (or businesses) are equal, but some are more equal than others."

Lesson #2: Find the person that – when they say yes - no one else can say no. They're the one to talk to. Anyone else is a gatekeeper to the actual decision-maker. You may need to work through them and with them, but their "yes" is at best a "maybe." Complex deals have multiple stakeholders. Influencers, evaluators, decision makers and approvers. This is often compounded by internal and external stakeholders. Be sure you know who you're speaking to and why.

Lesson #3: If it feels off, it is off. Your gut gets smarter over time. Don't rush. Read the room. Observe. What is not said is often as important – if not more so – than what is actually spoken. Remember that people have agendas. It is highly improbable that a customer representative is always sharing everything with you during a sales or buying cycle, and why would they? If it is a competitive situation, the process must be fair and transparent. If it feels like someone is sharing too much, that too, will be a redlight to which you should not be colourblind.

Lesson #4: Everyone has an agenda. Everyone. If agendas align, great. If they don't, reconsider. This comes all the way back to a compelling event. Your agenda is selling. If the customer's agenda is not buying or not buying now, you will invest a lot of wasted time. Timing is often the big difference between success and failure.

Lesson #5: You may get “yesses” that don't mean “yes.” Learn which “yesses” are real and which set you up for failure or will suck all the life from your dry bones and still end up in a “no.” I've worked with clients, even senior officials, where the person you're engaging keeps saying yes, only to get you to do all their work for them. They never intended to buy and at times, if you speak to the other senior officials, you'll learn that there was not even a formal buying process underway. Your time, like that of the customer, is precious. Cherish it.

Lesson #6: A “yes”, even from the right person, is still a “no”, until the ink dries on the page. What a glorious world it would be if we could rely on the integrity of people's “yesses” and “no's.” If you start the service before the dotted line is signed, you do so at your own peril. Believe me. I've paid the dues. I've had CIO's call me and congratulate me on winning a deal directly after the board meeting, only to receive a letter of regret the

very next morning, hearing that the deal was awarded to a competitor.

Mimolette had put no more than 20 steps between herself and hotel, when a young man approached her.

“I could not help but overhear your...exchange...with the receptionist,” he said.

“A couple of us are...” he started explaining.

“No!” said Mimolette, interjecting.

“No?” asked the young man. “I haven’t even completed my sentence!”

“It’s still no!” said Mimolette again. She walked off, not looking back towards the young man, his group of friends having a go at him or Bingeville.

Lesson #6: The word “No” should frequent your vocabulary. Sometimes, counter-offers will be made immediately after the fair and reasonable offer was denied. Some may be tempted to accept this offer, because it seems better than nothing. It’s not. This is just one of many situations where “no” should be your firm ally. Learn to simply say “no” with absolutely no guilt at all. If not, you will learn the hard way that time, resource and effort, are scarce and we should be very discerning about how, where and when we spend it.

Lesson #7: A lot of pain could have been avoided, had the technology that Mimolette relied on, been reliable. This age will most certainly be

viewed as the digital age. If you are not using technology pervasively in your organisation, you're already lagging behind the organisation that does. Like with everything else, your technology should be fit for purpose, but with no technology, you're taking a knife to a gunfight. The world is connected and we rely on that connectedness to support our decisions. Take the time to ensure you have the necessary systems and processes in place. I'm not saying you need to invest heavily right at the start of your journey. You can probably find freeware for most early-stage enterprises, that will still be better than nothing. As your company grows, so should your intelligent use of pervasive technology.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS

I have lost count of the number of times I have seen this. Salespeople, all excited about the deal that is about to close. A year later, nothing has changed. No compelling event. No urgency. No decision-maker. The client, happy to stay with the status quo, and even more happy to use the firm for free consulting to justify that staying is still a safe option. The salesperson, led on by all the wrong people saying yes, and never having face-time with the real decision-makers. The ones that ultimately say yes or no. The wrong people say there is budget. The wrong people say there is a need, but the dialog is one-directional, and so is the effort and the resource assigned to the opportunity.

I have been a victim of this countless times, and from time to time, I still am. As I write this, I can list a score of clients and opportunities from the top of my head where this describes the current situation, at least in part. Yes, my current situation, in spite of knowing how to read the signs of a transaction reaching an impasse. However, there is the *one fundamental*

difference between my current reality and my historic one as I was learning the ropes.

I am ready to walk away - and have - if I see there is no movement, which wasn't always the case in the past. Now, if the value proposition is crisp and clear and agreed, and the key decision-makers have been lobbied and their support confirmed, then a decision must be made. No decision, *is in fact*, a decision and it is your right to disengage.

So why then, if I am so firm about this, do we currently have opportunities that follow this theme? Because we have an established, authorised sponsor (someone driving the deal inside the client's environment and who has the actual authority or instruction to drive this opportunity on behalf of the business). Yet somewhere, something is not working, not yet.

There is still something that is not in place. Essentially, the client's engagement was premature, because all their internal dependencies were not met. This is life, though. No one is perfect, not you, not me and not the customer. There could be any number of things that influence the timing of a decision or the commencement date of a project: A merger at one client, very poor annual results at another, or a change in leadership at yet another, forcing them to revisit their budget or priorities.

These things will happen. What is important is to consider the merit of the deal and the merit of the influencing factors causing the delay. These should not be excuses to continue trying to force the deal. If the timing is not right, then the timing is not right. You cannot ripen anything by sheer force. Read the signs and don't become emotionally attached to a deal. If the signs are there that things are not moving then politely shift your

focus to other deals, unless you are able to augment and shift your value proposition by using the crisis as an opportunity. “Never let a good crisis go to waste,” but read the room. Of course, monitor the situation and be ready to act when the roadblock is removed, but acknowledge to yourself that unless there is a strong “now” from the RIGHT people, you must remove the deal from your forecast and find something else to replace it.

There is a tipping point in a sales cycle where either it closes now or it becomes less and less likely to close. If you pay close attention, you’ll see it. In some ways, it’s like reeling in a fish. If the line is tight, the fish is getting closer. If the tension on the line is suddenly gone, make the call to reel in and start again. That fish is gone. The good news is, there are always other fish.

7

INTO THE FIRE

When Mimolette arrived back home, winter had settled in Fromage.

Patches of white snow were scattered between quaint, colourful houses and the typical winter quiet lingered long after a lazy sun pretended to care about sunrise. The days were much shorter during winter months and this was a time when early morning productivity would become the result of discipline, rather than motivation.

Mimolette's adventure had taught her much, although she realised that she was only just starting to scratch the surface. So much to learn, so little time. Such is the nature of life. The more you know, the more you know how little you know. At least she now understood the value of silence and of listening better, so her learning curve would continue to be exponential. With some of Shiraz's dessert wine cupped in her hands and her feet raised in front of a cosy fireplace, she thought to herself while nibbling at some famous mascarpone cheese on the platter next to her.

“There’s no shame in not knowing every answer I ought to. The shame is in being indifferent to not knowing.”

She looked at her book of knowledge. “It’s a start,” she said to herself.

Tomorrow, following a long hot bath and a good night’s rest, she would set in motion the adventure that would most certainly attract criticism across all of Fromage. Tomorrow, she would go up against the Cheese Masters. While the idea excited her, it also scared her, which was a good sign. Her intention was not competition – that was merely a logical and unavoidable consequence of challenging the status quo.

“Magic happens outside of your comfort zone,” Mimolette affirmed.

She now knew that there were numerous business models and a good range of learnings that would help her succeed quicker if she were constantly alert not to fall into the easy habits that many do, thinking that “if you build it, they will come.” She could see now, in hindsight, how people misunderstood this to mean, “have a product, and people will buy it.” With what she had learnt, she knew this to be the furthest thing from the truth. She knew that she could give the masters a run for their money. She knew that her deliberate learnings far exceeded the efforts they had recently invested to “sharpen their axes.” They were blissfully executing on “tribal knowledge,” which was only working because no one was challenging their marketshare or the way things were being done. Not until now, that is.

She knew that if she wanted to succeed, there were at least a couple of things she must do before anything else. She needed a strategy. She sipped at her wine and stared off into an imagined future. Tomorrow,

before the sun casts its long morning shadows, she will frame her future by:

1. Defining her why.
2. Writing down her vision, mission and values.
3. Setting short, medium and long-term goals.
4. Setting timelines and expected outcomes.
5. Mapping out her strengths and weaknesses, and identifying opportunities and threats.
6. Laying a foundation on which, or with which, to make decisions so that they are consistent with the criteria supported by her values.
7. Defining her ideal customer.

Mimolette was satisfied. That is where she will start. Once all of that was in place, she will then look at structure.

One thing was for sure though, she will need a couple of veterans who have learnt a thing or two about the world to help put her strategy together. Sure, it was her strategy and as the founder she will make the ultimate decisions and take the ultimate accountability, but having access to trusted sources who can provide positive input and criticism was paramount. She realised she might be met with some resistance, and that was okay. “No one ever said change is easy,” she thought to herself.

Her book of knowledge was a valuable tool. It would save her from making unnecessary mistakes, but she realised that here, at the start, is where success or failure begins. Clear at the start. Clear at the end.

Tomorrow would be a new day in so many ways, and she, brave and passionate and persistent, would be stepping into the fire.

8

CLOSING

Thank you for reading.

If you're still reading this, you survived and persisted, hopefully with some positive learnings along the way.

My own journey is all but done, and I will continue to learn and fail and learn and grow and share my learnings.

Look out for my next books in the series, which will be a crash course of sorts for business owners who want a basic understanding of the complex world of commercial law, called *The Scaling Entrepreneur* as well as a book on leadership called, *The Leading Entrepreneur*. Mimolette, after all, has big plans and many adventures to follow.

If you enjoyed the story of Mimolette and your teen / tween is exploring the world of coding, consider *Mimolette and the language of the Ancients* – a Python crash course loosely following some of Mimolette's adventures during her teen years.

THE YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR

If you wish to provide any input, good or bad or general feedback feel free to contact me at feedback@earthlingchronicles.com

Also, if you wish to follow us, as we continue on our own adventure to navigate the world of global dominion, follow us on LinkedIn by searching for @Converge-Solutions.

TESTIMONIALS

"The Young Entrepreneur" is a unique and exceptional book. Unlike any legacy motivational or "unveiled secrets" reading, you will find an easy to digest, clear and straight forward message, led by imaginary characters that reflect our everyday society and who show and crisply explain what it takes to become successful. Don't hesitate to take on this adventure and understand how to escape and conquer the status quo.

Ronald Sopronyi, Sales, Business Development & Project Executive, Hungary

"The book opens up a window into the fantasy realm of Cheeseling and Winelings and quaint fairytale towns hidden in forests, with the main character Mimolette embarking on something new in each chapter. But hidden behind the whimsical surface is a book that covers powerful lessons in strategy, business management and day to day lessons in life. At the end of each chapter, there is a summary of lesson learnt, with personal experiences and thoughts. These are meant to engage and teach both children and adults alike about the importance of innovation, collaboration, taking calculated risks as well

as offering home-grown wisdom. With captivating storytelling, Johann has managed to effortlessly merge fact and fantasy, captivating the reader with entrepreneurial thinking. As you read this book, be prepared to be spellbound as each chapter captivates a blend of imagination and real-world wisdom.”

Vaughan Firman, Non-executive Director, Lenmed, South Africa

“A fantastic read! The perfect self-help which gives valuable insight to entry level corporates right through to senior executives. The book is a well-blended representation of the AI world and the corporate realities that business managers and owners face. In appreciating the life lessons described, the reader gets a profound overview on how to strategically achieve core business objectives. One of those quick pocket books that you simply cannot miss.”

Faith Ketshogile, Hospital Administrator, Riverside Hospital, Botswana

“The combination of fantasy, lessons and personal experiences make for a truly engaging read as each section has its own nuances and wisdoms. Whether you are intrigued by the tales of the Cheeselings, wanting to skip forward to the Lessons or identify with the author’s own experiences, you’ll be both entertained and educated.”

Jaqui Gogele, Senior Tech Advisor at Endeavour, South Africa

SNEAK PEAK

Two years had passed since that morning when Mimolette took the first brave step towards owning her future. Two years of ups and downs, trials and errors and long hours of planning and execution.

Her Book of Knowledge had been invaluable in guiding her through these uncharted territories. She quickly learnt that there was a fundamental difference between knowing what to do, and actually doing it. Experience, as it turns out, is the best teacher.

The business was doing well. Her vision and passion had attracted raw talent and she had surrounded herself with a team of experts. At her age, she needed to tap into the learnings of others who had paid their school fees. She had learnt about the theory of unintended consequences, and how, sometimes, you do something with an expected result, only to see the exact opposite outcome.

One of her team members, Vinnie, had introduced her to the “Six Thinking Hats” psychology. This multi-dimensional approach had helped them steer away from making big mistakes and pursue the right things.

On a weekly basis, they would interrogate and challenge their own ideas with this method. It helped them consider all the angles before choosing to pursue a specific avenue.

They were at such a juncture now. The business had been growing organically, mostly within Fromage and the surrounding towns. Expansion and diversification had been methodical, with risk mitigation always being front-of-mind. Mimolette had plunged her heart and soul into growing the company and she did not want to grow too quickly. One of her advisors, Francis, had pointed out some risks early on.

“There are two certain ways to speed up the end to any business,” she had said.

“One, you can save yourself to death and two, you can grow too quickly.”

At first, Mimolette didn’t fully understand what Francis had meant. The latter – growing too quickly – was more easily understood. If you scale at a pace that exceeds your ability to meet the growing demand, you can end up unable to maintain quality and reliability – key attributes of any successful business. This could lead to a damaged reputation and a loss of clients.

The first part of the cautionary statement, needed some explaining.

“There will be times, Mimolette, when we have to cut back on spending. Right now, our sales are great and our cost of production is acceptable, so our margins are good. We should expect that at some point in the future, our margins will be under pressure. Circumstances outside our control, will force us to revisit what we’re doing and how we’re doing it.

We will need to make decisions about reducing our costs. That may include retrenching staff, reducing our portfolio, or any number of other options. We'll cross that bridge when we get there, of course. What we cannot do when the chips are down, is just cut costs across the board. We cannot respond emotionally and without careful consideration. We depend on certain services and people. If we cut those as a means to save, we may not survive the consequence. So yes, efficiency is really important, but in business, sometimes you need to spend money to make money. Being overly cost sensitive, can be as detrimental as being frivolous."

But this was not such a time. The management team were gathered in the boardroom to discuss the opening of a regional office on a different continent. This was a bold step. The upside was enormous, and so was the risk.

She had discovered that Earthlings may all be of the same species, but often, that was where the similarities stopped. The world was rich with diversity and as she travelled further and further from the comfort of her home in Fromage, she discovered that her view of the world had been narrow, even naïve. Opportunity was endless, as were the differences between people, language, culture, priorities and tastes.

Until now, Mimolette thought of herself as "okay" as far as her management skills were concerned. "Okay" was not good enough, even with the guidance of a senior team.

She thought about The Big Cheese. He had become a close friend and advisor. His experience and wisdom was unmatched in all of Fromage. What made him so successful? Why did people turn to him for advice? She made a mental note to investigate this more deliberately.

“What makes a good leader?” she thought, and then she returned her undivided attention to the faces across the boardroom.

“Right,” she said, “How do we do this?”

THANK YOUs

A project like this relies on the contributions, reviews, comments, and criticisms of many individuals throughout numerous iterations.

While it is nearly impossible to express gratitude to everyone who has assisted in some way, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge a few individuals.

First and foremost, my family. Your unwavering support has allowed me to dedicate long hours, immersing myself in the creation of Mimolette's story. But it extends far beyond the mere act of writing. It encompasses months and years of hard work, extensive travels away from home, and countless sacrifices as I navigated the realms of business and life.

To my editor, Jamie Stangroom, your work was nothing short of brilliant, surpassing all my expectations. Your exceptional service has played a pivotal role in shaping this book.

To my colleagues, this book stands as a testament not only to my own resilience but to yours as well. We have not only weathered seemingly insurmountable challenges but thrived amidst them. I'll go to war with you. Oh wait, I already do.

To the pre-release readers, your invaluable feedback has contributed immensely to the development and maturity of Mimolette's journey. Without your insights, the book would not have attained the depth and richness it possesses.

I must also express my gratitude to my publishing assistant, Tamsin Haley. Your assistance in navigating the daunting world of self-publishing has been instrumental.

Thank you all others who have contributed directly or indirectly, thank you.