

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 1, EPISODE 2

THEMBA CHAKELA – PEOPLE ARE NOT CATTLE!

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Themba Chakela is the General Manager of Ways of Working at Transnet, South Africa's state-owned transport company. a Change Maven, Impact Driver, Culture Chemist, Transformation Trooper, Organisation Whisperer, Complexity Slayer, Value Wrangler, and Engagement Engineer. Before Transnet he was Principal Head HR, Southern Africa at Dimension Data.

In this episode, Themba talks about how HR and “Ways of Working” is like music, painting, cattle herding, village elder meetings, and warrior collectives, how much better work could be if, as with his son going to school, we went there more for the people than the job itself, and what both African and artificial intelligence have to offer toward employee engagement.

Michael Lee

We're here today with Themba Chakela. Themba, welcome to At the Edge. Thank you for being here. It's really a pleasure to have somebody here from South Africa.

Themba Chakela

Thanks, Michael. Happy to be here.

Michael Lee

You have an interesting background as a human resources expert. There's a long list on LinkedIn that we read earlier of the kind of titles for yourself. And the last one there is Engagement Engineer. So let's talk about engagement. What makes you an Engagement Engineer? And how do you get the workforce engaged?

Themba Chakela

I believe engagement needs to be intentional and approached with the same sense of respect and discipline that data engineering or chemical engineering would need. And that's really my take on engagement: you've got to work at it. I think a lot of us pay lip service to "An engaged workforce is a productive one or happy workers or productive workers," and I'm going: Unless you really, really engage, you go all in, as the millennials say... If you just put it in your nine to five, then you aren't truly engaged.

And to prevent that from happening you need to draw people in. I believe you need to be engaged from a head perspective, so the stuff you do needs to make sense to you. You need to be drawn in from a hand perspective, you need to be able to physically do your job. And then something that becomes really important when you have those two things buttoned down, is your heart and is what you do really aligned to your purpose?

I'm also a data geek. You need to understand before you make yourself understood. So I spend quite a lot of time asking questions that lead to insight. As a practical example, we had a team strategy session for one of our functions, and the head of the executives in that function said, Themba, can you come and do something "Ways of Workish?"

So what I did is, a week before the session, I sent out three questions on simple Microsoft Forms:

- Tell me the one thing you believe you should stop doing that's preventing your client, that's negatively impacting client satisfaction.
- Give me the one thing you think you should start doing.
- And then give me the one thing you think you should continue doing.

And we had a really productive conversation around what they can do as a team, and establishing full ownership of their engagement, because that's the other thing - we abdicate engagement to change management mystics and HR practitioners and think it will go away. My approach is it's a full contact sport, and you draw in as many stakeholders as you can. So the executives that invited me in came to me afterwards and said, If you told us it was going to be this much work, we might not have invited you, but you're lucky that it was this much fun, so we believe that it was time well spent. So that's just a practical example.

You have to do it. It's a full contact sport. You learn a lot by doing it a lot of times, and you get to learn nuances. Every time, in my experience, that I've gone after engagement, and done the work, it sort of magically appears earlier than you thought it would. Because you're actually intervening with the system already. So in the sourcing of data or in the conversation around the data, if the end goal is to create engagement, it unlocks slightly earlier, and maybe that's the meat, that's the music in the gaps between the notes that you learn to look out for when you've done this a couple of times, because it's like music - if you hit the drop exactly where it's supposed to be, and nobody can tell you whether it's five minutes and thirty seconds in, but there is a moment when it feels right. And if you drop the needle at that point in time, you will get the outcomes that you're looking for.

So I see the working towards engagement as engagement, and the outcome will be even more engagement. And if you continue to work on it, it doesn't become engagement, it becomes embedded. And it then becomes cultural. You have to keep at it. Engagement for me is not an event. And I think I've shared with you that I'm not a fan of these event surveys, whether it's once a year you test how engaged the business is, or how happy it is, or whether you're the best employer on the planet. I'm much more of a pulse and nervous reaction time guy, so that the closer you are to the heartbeat and the life beat of the organization, which is your employees, you can do very creative things. You can run thirty surveys a month as long as it's no longer than one question, and the question is no longer than one line, and for example if you randomly send this out to a thousand people, only after the fifty-fifth time do you run the risk of asking somebody that same question. I'm assuming that it gets out to everyone.

So for me, you always need to be asking a question: How are you doing? And it's almost like a needy artist who constantly needs their work edified and looked at and commented on. The cool thing about working in this space is that your painting is never done. So it's a bit like painting in oils. And you can make adjustments as you go. And what might have been a Starry Night very quickly turns into a picture of the Milky Way by just a few smudges based on customer and employee feedback.

You can't stop when you've got your engagement indicator up. Because that is the thing that is telling you what your organization responds to positively and those are the things that you should probably work on driving into the fiber of the organization, get leadership to model it, you get your policies and procedures to work in line with it, you make sure that your comms and your engagements are built in that way.

So if you follow the logic that if my purpose is to do good, and I'm working for an organization that does good and our purposes align, and my colleagues are tolerable and my manager is good, and my salary covers the things that I need to pay for in terms of the basics, that's a powerful mixture for me being in that organization for a long time. It is when you have a deficit between person and org, when you have to start looking at all these other things to tweak them. But if I walk in to the office every day, and I'm aligned with our stated purpose, which is not just to move stuff around South Africa, but to positively influence every single citizen of the country, it doesn't matter what Michael offers me for his little startup that's going to generate millions over the next couple of years.

Michael Lee

We talk about Innovation at the Edge, we talk about using innovation as an engagement technique. Have you experienced that? Tell us about that, if you have.

Themba Chakela

So it's one of the things we explored when I was in the smaller of my consulting companies, was getting everybody's voice heard, but also bringing the bulk of the business into our

confidence. And one of the things we spoke about is that traditionally, I'll say South African or Southern African, it resounds across the continent, and maybe across the globe - the meeting of elders in a village happens right next to where you keep your cattle, and they will always have those important conversations there. But often, they will insist that the next crop of men, and maybe next crop of adolescents are sitting two or three rings out, so that they hear why are Michael and Themba debating deep issues and resolving anything from cattle theft to the well running dry for the entire village. And what that does is it not only brings your communities closer together, but it also allows everybody to hear the realities on the ground and very little is taboo in those conversations. But the only people that speak in that forum are the people in the inner circle. Then what usually happens is Michael walks home with his son. And his son asks questions about what happened there. And you clear those up. And the next time your son and my son meet, they have a conversation about what they heard. And so you industrialize your learning and pass on orally some of these things.

So that's pretty much how I try to use Microsoft Teams. I'm famous for inviting people to my meeting, and then they will be the core invitees to discuss an issue. And then what I'll try and do is also invite some fringe beneficiaries who I think might benefit from hearing what we're talking about. And I've seen some green offshoots of that spreading. I guess the only challenge with us is that we were not sitting on a quiet evening after the plow has been drawn up and the cattle have been corralled, we're in a fairly rapid moving workspace and time is at maybe a greater premium than you'd have in those sessions. But that for me is again, how do you take a platform that has become fairly commoditized, especially in the last year, and everybody thinks they know how to use Teams, and they're using it properly - there's applications of it that can be used to mitigate some of the human connection challenges that we see.

And I'm a high touch guy. In my previous role, the word on the street was, if you're looking for Themba, look for him anywhere but his office. Because I work in forty-five minute sprints. So I'd be at my laptop for forty-five minutes, and I'd literally get up and walk somewhere and connect with a grad or walk into somebody's office who is struggling with something or just go to the balcony, sit on the balcony and enjoy the view.

I read last week about a company in the States that took a radical position. They sent out a memo and because I guess their labor laws are slightly different to ours, saying we no longer have full time employees in this organization, you're either employed 20% of your time, 40% of your time or 60% of your time. Please indicate on the form below and your salary and everything else will magically be updated in the background by the HR Oompa Loompas. And what they did with their office sites is that they shut down I think half of them, and then refurbished the other half of them to only do two things. You could only find collaborative space, so big whiteboards and smart surfaces and all that stuff. And foosball machines, pinball machines, table tennis, pool tables and popcorn machines and cotton candy machines, because they made the decision that the only thing that's going to happen at the office from this point onwards is collaboration and team building. And that's what they did. And you know, I think there was a brilliant HR person behind that decision. Can you imagine if we were able to think of the office as a place of fun, and where I meet my friends to collaborate?

What would that do to you in the morning? I mean I can already hear Eye of the Tiger playing already, right? Then I look at my eight year old, he sees school that way, having to learn stuff luckily comes fairly easily to him, but his reason for going to school is to see Luke, Gareth, and Kyle, and the fact that he has to listen to Mrs. Groenewald take them through Afrikaans spelling bees is a by-product and well worth it because he gets to see his friends daily. Now, I want that same kind of excitement. You can imagine turning that excitement around and leveraging that in the workplace.

Michael Lee

He's not going to school to learn. But learning becomes the conduit to his getting engaged in a sense, right? Like, he's able to get that engagement because he has to go to school to learn. So in the same way, is it possible to look at work as a situation like that, where the activities of work are actually something that ends up with an engaged workforce, rather than it being your first step, but rather that you're working towards it because all the things along the way are also productive?

Themba Chakela

In my interview for this role, I was asked, Themba, when are you at your best? And I said, I'm at my best when I'm shoulder to shoulder, shield to shield, and spear to spear with people equally driven, equally skilled, and equally caring about each other as I am. With a good general, you're telling us when to point and thrust. And the best times of my life at the workplace were when we had really difficult issues to deal with. But you had shoulder to shoulder, shield to shield, spear to spear and we're all pointing these things in one direction and getting things off. That's when you forget that it's Friday evening, or somebody says, you know, come in, we need to solve this thing on Saturday. And you say yes before you've spoken to your wife and kids. That when you're all in. And for me, creating that magic also needs to be intentional, right? Because if you're capable, if your capacity outstrips your capability, you just have a lot of people that aren't necessarily focused if it's the other way around, you have too few people, then you're not enough hands. If you don't have or demand great leadership and management, you don't get the kind of progress that you need. And all of these things daisy chain, at least in my experience, to create that feeling of flow when you lose time at work.

Michael Lee

Is there a special African element to any of this? Do you think that in your experience, there's something Africa can offer the rest of the world in terms of ways of working, in terms of ways of engaging, in terms of innovation?

Themba Chakela

One of our public sector businesses that used to be a real shining beacon for what it did and what it delivered has now gone into clear distress. And we didn't bemoan the revenue. We bemoaned the fact that the innovation that was coming out of that business had so many parallels and this seems to be something in, I don't know whether it's the African sun or the African soil that drives this curiosity to solve stuff. You may be familiar with the two young gentlemen that have built an electronic truck or bakkie, as we call them in South Africa, with limited resources and limited schooling. We've all watched the Netflix flick about the boy that harness the wind to create a dynamo. And so I think that there is something - I'd like to take a broader perspective and say that it is in our DNA as human beings. It's what's what helped us step out of the caves. And I always say to people that my one of my biggest heroes is the first person that looked at a hen and said, I'm going to eat the next thing that comes out from that animal, and then proceeded to do so, because there is a bravery in being the first through the door.

So yeah, I would say, definitely our environment. And maybe it's the context of perpetual scarcity that we face, whether it's electricity, water, all of these things that creates innovation that may not necessarily jump to the forefront in a country like Sweden, where I don't think there's very many people with the living memory of a power outage. in that country.

Michael Lee

You talk quite a bit about the use of AI in human resources.

Themba Chakela

A practical example - somebody called me this morning, they have seven hundred CVs to read through to get to a shortlist. And my immediate answer was, there has to be a better way. And then my second answer was, wait, I know of a better way. Could you not run it through a bot or algorithm and make your life a little bit more fun than reading through seven hundred documents? I believe that there are distinct jobs that the human brain has no place doing or shouldn't need to do in a world where you can automate. The HR practitioner with the seven hundred CVs could probably spend their time truly business partnering with clients in those hours they would have spent reading through CVs.

I see bots and AI like colleagues. And if we take that approach to robotics and AI, you can then really begin to open up the spaces for true human rights, which is what the H in HR stands for. And it's often said very quickly, and you move straight to "Resources". But for me, it's about trying to get back to that human interaction and human interface, even if it's fed by insights and actionable intelligence that comes from artificial intelligence or bots.

Michael Lee

So if you have to share with the world about your experience as a human resources expert, here you are, speaking to the world listening to this podcast, what would you want to share with them that's uniquely your vision or your learning that you'd want people to make sure that the takeaway from this?

Themba Chakela

I think any solution tabled for anything is incomplete without people applied. And this goes for solving world peace or world hunger to developing the next set of VR goggles for use in the built environment. And we need to place a premium and some respect on that lens, because I think it's become undervalued over time. And for the last, at least two hundred years has been this emphasis on technological advancements. And maybe too much to our detriment, but the people side has been pushed back. If you look at the way factories were laid out in the First Industrial Revolution, and then you look at how classrooms were laid out, it became very clear that kids are sitting two by two at a desk, because that's what they're going to do, be putting together widgets two by two at a desk.

But the evolution that we've seen in industry has not necessarily been mirrored in the way we approach education, for example, so my kids still sit two by two at a desk, but the one wants to become a gamer, and the other one is on his way to become a world renowned pop icon if he gets it right, and I'll help them as much as I can. But for me, that would be my perspective.

So you ask me any question, my first answer is people. And then I'll sort of figure out why my answer was people. And we've heard, especially in this part of the world, now the narrative has been around the Fourth Industrial Revolution. I can't wait for the Fifth and you know, people are beginning to talk about it, it's where the hardware meets the wetware that sits between our ears. And if we don't have an understanding about how the brain works and Neurolinguistic planning and those things that are considered as mystical to engineers, as we see wind resistance as people practitioners in their field, those two things are going to become really important.

And I suspect that the people who are going to be successful in the future world of work are those who understand that intersection and optimize it to their benefit. And you can't do that without the understanding. So whether you call it ways of working, or how I introduce myself at barbecues - because I don't want to say I'm in HR - I'm just a people guy. And that's the perspective I will always have. And I think the more people can either oscillate between that lens and another, or multiple lenses, those are the people that are going to drive the next wave of innovation. You can't just be a technologist anymore, you can't just be an HR manager anymore, you have to find a way to live somewhere in between.

Michael Lee

HR is about innovation and innovation is about people.

Themba Chakela

In Human Resource Management - and I get the, the chills just saying that, right? Because it's already impersonal. In my change management journey, at some point, I started saying, look, I grew up herding cows. And I know what that's like, and you manage cows. We should probably call it Change Engagement Management. Because human beings, as soon as you try and manage them, they're going to go everywhere but where you want them to go. And if you draw them in early and get them to engage and believe in the destination, the journey becomes fun and easier. So I think they're intertwined.

I think you may see HR definition or scope shrink in a way in the opposite response to how it's become really broad over time, to mean those specific tactical and transactional items that drive Human Resource Management and service delivery. And then you will have all these other portfolios sitting next to it. So that's how we're set up at the moment. We have Talent Management, Employee Relations, Ways of Working, Health and Wellness. And then we have Service Delivery, and Service Delivery, if you look down a level, is where you find traditional - and I mean that respectfully, because it is important - traditional HR as you'd expect to find it. But it is influenced and peppered by all these other portfolios where we have the freedom to unabashedly look at what we think is the best way to drive culture in Transnet.

Michael Lee

Anything else that you'd like to add before we close?

Themba Chakela

People are critical. I think that's what would be my biggest message. The people discipline needs guidance and a firm hand as everything else. And the more we have people working in this space, and that diversity of experience, the better we will be. So I am a firm believer of blinkers off, hand up, and mouth open. So my opinions are readily available and I wear them on my sleeve. And I interact with people who do the same.

Michael Lee

You guys heard it. Themba's mouth is open, his ears are open, so reach out to him. You'll be able to find him here, also on LinkedIn. And he is the world's top Change Maven, Impact Driver, Culture Chemist, Transformation Trooper, Organization Whisperer, Complexity Slayer, Value Wrangler, and Engagement Engineer. All in one.

Themba Chakela

I'm gonna whittle that down. I had a lot of fun putting it together, but it's long. It's fun.

Michael Lee

Themba, thank you very much for being here and giving your time to us.

Themba Chakela

Mike, thank you very much for having me. I really appreciate it. Good luck with the rest.