

by Sharon Tetrault
photography by Bill Furnish

message of joy

Chris Alexander was working for the Human Resources Institute in Johannesburg in the late 1980s when the South African government tapped him for a new job. His role: Go into the prisons and act as an intermediary between the government and prisoners from the African National Congress.

Alexander was a skilled negotiator. In addition to his work at the institute, he helped multinational companies acclimate to the local business climate and to the sensitivities and customs of the South African people.

But this job was more challenging than any he'd done before. He was a white man trying to narrow a deep divide between the white-controlled government and the disenfranchised blacks under apartheid.

"I'd go into the prison chapel where 60 prisoners were waiting and I'd tell them ... 'I'm here to build a bridge over troubled waters.' South Africans are very musical people, so borrowing the words from the Simon and Garfunkel song helped break the ice. It'd bring a smile to their faces," says Alexander, a sought-after speaker, author, and owner of Synergy Executive Education.

It didn't take long for Alexander to earn their trust. He remembers times when he'd leave the prison after a negotiating session and a phalanx of prisoners would form around him, much to the chagrin of the guards. "It was a sign that they trusted me."

Alexander's acceptance may have been helped along by the fact that he was an outsider. His great-great-grandparents were German settlers who landed in the Cape of Good Hope in 1653 to work for the Dutch East India Company. Alexander's grandfather left the area in 1890 and made his way northeast to work for Cecil Rhodes in what would later become known as Rhodesia.

Alexander had a bucolic childhood in Rhodesia. He grew up on a 100,000-acre cattle and tobacco farm where giraffes, wildebeests, and lions roamed freely and where fun for him was sneaking up on herds of elephants and playing games of chicken with the crocodiles in the rivers. He played freely with black children and, despite the segregation that existed, never felt racial tension. "None of us knew what discrimination was back then."

But Alexander, who moved to South Africa in 1970 for employment opportunities, eventually learned that the world wasn't ideal. Two months into his role as negotiator, he quit. He says he became disillusioned with the government's practice of rounding up people en masse. "I began to feel that I was a pawn of the government."

He refocused his attention on the corporate world, and along the way, he began to discover a larger principle at work in what he did, something Alexander calls "the phenomenon of synergy"

It's about that magic moment when communication flows openly within a company, when employees feel a sense of

belonging and a connection to their peers, and when everybody is united and working in concert toward a common goal. When all this happens, a company experiences synchronicity.

His message struck a chord with businesses, particularly American Businesses. Alexander found himself being wooed by American executives who were eager to have him share his ideas on organizational behavior with audiences back home. And so in 1989, Alexander and his wife of 25 years, Maryna, moved to California.

"I found that this elite band of companies at the top—your Nordstroms, Walmarts, and Southwest Airlines—were structured like inverted pyramids. The boss is at the bottom, not because he's the least important person, but because he recognizes that the employees and customers, who are at the top, are what's most important."

When Alexander's self-education period concluded, he knew what his job was: "My true purpose in life is to bring joy into the workplace."

In the roughly 300 seminars that he gives annually, he appeals to employers' sensibilities, as well as their bottom lines. "Research substantiates what we've known all along: Employees who feel a sense of belonging in the workplace are inclined to produce at a higher level," says Alexander.

His message is resonating beyond the workplace as well. In his book *Creating Extraordinary Joy*, one of three he's written, Alexander takes what sounds like an abstract idea and packages it in a way that makes it understandable, relevant, and attainable.

"Joy is beyond accumulation, materialism, and things. Joy comes from within oneself and from finding one's passion in life, and feeling a sense of purpose and connection with your world."

He volunteers to speak to abused adults on how to turn their lives around and find joy again (or for the first time) and hosts two cable shows: *Overcoming the Odds* and *Working Wardrobes for a New Start*.

Alexander will address his biggest audience this fall. He's taping two shows that will air on PBS in November, titled *Creating Extraordinary Joy* and *Joy in the Workplace*, which is also the title of his next book.

If this all seems like a very different world from the one he left behind, think again. "I come from an environment of high change and from a culture of political and racial conflicts." At the same time, he says, being reared in Africa exposed him to "the great synchronicity of life," where nature was like a perfect symphony with all its varied parts working together in harmony.

Clearly, Africa is never far from his mind. Alexander, a naturalized American citizen, says he misses its red soil and dusty fragrance, and the inescapable feeling of being connected to nature. "There's an ex-pression that says, 'Once you get the dust of Africa in your nose, it lives with you forever and you always want to go back.'" OC

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