

# WILL YOU BEE MY BELOVED?

The Black Economic Empowerment whip is being wielded with increasing ferocity in this country, says Jill Hamlyn, the MD of The People Business group of companies, with empowerment charters for virtually every industry sector being launched with the inherent message to become empowered, or be excluded from business in South Africa. However although this imperative is well understood, and accepted within the general business framework, achieving it isn't that simply.

Despite our turn-around culture, businesses fear making reckless changes. Everyone wants BEE, but the forced marriages of convenience this has led to has weakened the driving force behind many businesses, led to failed expectations. Yet while any business would like to do better than this, suitable partnerships are hard to come by, especially when choices have to be made in a limited time frame.

Hamlyn says that her own advertisement for a BEE partner, in the style of the "personal" column of a newspaper, would be as follows:

**Wanted: ideal partner. Preferential qualities: tall and handsome. Must be dark.**

*A well-endowed 17-year old established business concern seeks to meet a tall dark*

*stranger with the prospect of forming a mutually satisfactory relationship increasing joint prospects of wealth and prosperity. Has many dependants. Respect and trust will be the core requirements for an extended partnership, and an ideal partner would be one with complimentary offerings, ethics, and shared values of honesty and integrity.*

**'Suitable BEE partnerships are hard to come by'**

*Special interests must include recognition of the value of enhancing and development people to grow the business*

It's light hearted format aside, this "advertisement" embodies all the qualities she would like in a BEE company with which she would consider partnering. But it also requires time to build a business relationship into a partnership, and yet businesses are yet being forced to grow extraordinarily fast through the BEE mergers they're entering into, often, as a result, foregoing the development of a solid business culture and service ethos, as well as the greater depth and quality inherent in a company that's grown its skills from within.

## **Also an opportunity**

Nevertheless, the challenge of becoming empowered must also be seen as an opportunity, says Hamlyn. As in any marriage, the partnership would be worthwhile if each party is able to enhance the value that the other one brings to the table, ensuring the growth and prosperity of the two of them. This may be in the form of some sort of complimentary offering such as a new market that can be leveraged, or even an injection of the Human Resources or intellectual property. It could also be a capital injection.

Pulling off a successful BEE partnership also requires shared values and a shared vision, along with a good mix of business maturity. The important thing is selecting a partner is to clearly define the parameters that will ensure that a fair, measurable contribution is delivered by both parties. A healthy regard for all stakeholders is also essential.

Hamlyn says that would-be partners shouldn't commit too clearly, but nor should they give up too quickly, either: these partnerships take time to cement, since marrying the operational and visionary parts of a strategy isn't easy. And they must understand that it takes a strong leadership and a focused management team to