

# The art of talking to express — rather than impress

**Amanda Hamilton-Attwell has taken her passion for communicating all over Africa, writes Sue Blaine**

IF THERE is one thing communications specialist Amanda Hamilton-Attwell would like to do it's ban PowerPoint. "Would I have a dream? I have been so powerful on PowerPoint!" she says.

Hamilton-Attwell knows communication well; she is the first South African to receive the chairman's award of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

"People write to impress, not express. A CEO will talk to employees and try to sound important instead of really talking to them. It's that manners thing your mother taught you. Talk, listen, don't abdicate your responsibility to communicate. If there is one thing I would ban, it's PowerPoint.... We get so bogged down in creating great slides and we lose minds."

"My purpose is to tell people that communication is not that difficult. If you don't create understanding you didn't communicate. There are three things you can do: give people knowledge, share emotion or change behaviour. You need to know what you want to achieve first, then you must be able to package that communication, write it for the correct medium — newspaper, radio, e-mail...."

The first woman in Africa to earn a PhD in communication, from the University of SA (Unisa), Hamilton-Attwell was responsible for founding several IABC chapters across Africa.

"We began as a member of the African region — there were chapters in San Francisco, and then Canada, the Asian region and the African region — and they decided they wanted to expand, so we began a chapter in Pretoria, but I said, 'We are not Africa, we are SA. Let's venture outside.'"

"There were 'orphan members' in other places. We began one in Dar es Salaam and when they were up and running that generated a lot of interest in Lagos, so I said, 'If there is a plane to Lagos, I'll be on a plane to Lagos.'"

It was 2002 when Hamilton-Attwell got on that plane to

Lagos. When she landed she thought she would have to get herself to her hotel.

"It was hellishly scary, you know, I was from SA and 'We know Nigerians,'" she says, using her fingers to indicate quotation marks.

"There was no one waiting with a board with my name on it, and the next moment two men walked up to me and took my bags! There was an argument."

It turned out the men had been sent to fetch her. "So, now, I'm like the queen. There's a whole entourage. There is me in one car, and my luggage in a second, and (IABC member) Samuel Addenakare in a third, and I see us go straight past the Protea Hotel and I think, 'This is it', but it turns out we went a totally different way, but got there (to the hotel)."

**“A CEO will talk to employees and try to sound important instead of really talking to them”**

Hamilton-Attwell's travel attitude is, "Life's too short to stay in a hotel room", so, after a morning of meetings and armed with research on what to see in Lagos, she prepared to walk from her hotel to a museum she had determined was nearby. Her walk was ended before it began, by horrified hotel staff concerned for the white woman's safety.

Since then the IABC has also established a Botswana chapter. "Africa, I think it's fun. People are so receptive.... My impression is that often they don't understand how an organisation is run, they don't fail on purpose, they just need more guidance on how to run a consistent, sustainable organisation. That's part of my IABC role."

Hamilton-Attwell grew up in an area of the old Transvaal that has become one of SA's most rural provinces — the North West — at a time when women's career choices, if they chose careers at all, were limited. "When I was in school in

Wolmaranstad, proper girls would become a nurse, a teacher, a librarian or work in a bank. My teacher was very annoyed with my idea of being a journalist, it was just one up from being a prostitute." But her mother was "a very stubborn woman", a shopkeeper, who told her to do whatever she wanted.

She signed up for journalism at what was then the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (now North-West University's Potchefstroom campus). In her second year the university changed the course to one in communication science, and Hamilton-Attwell did journalism as an elective. "I did it because I love writing stories," she says. "Also, it offered a different world ... I thought I could go to these places with faraway-sounding names and ask people funny questions...."

When I was a lecturer (in communications science at Unisa) I realised I liked research, it's journalism in a different format, you can tell a story with what these numbers tell you. I can take mine workers' stories to the managers, I am still telling stories. You need the discipline of journalism to get to what the essence of an issue is and you need to tell it in a way that will grab managers so that they will say, okay."

After years of work, at a newspaper, a holiday resort company, Unisa and at the National Productivity Institute (NPI), Hamilton-Attwell decided to go out on her

own. "I decided there's a time to come and a time to go, and 2000 sounds like a good time to go, so I left the NPI and started Business DNA."

The day she left the NPI she ensured she had a meeting in Cape Town rather than face saying goodbye, and, feeling emotional, was hovering in a bookshop at the airport when she saw a book about the emotional turmoil involved in starting your own business.

"The corporate world is like a shell. It's nice and warm and comfy, but some people feel they just can't stay and they crack the shell. But it's painful and it takes a lot of energy and then there's the scary, new, big world and you don't have a salary and a credit card.... It's a long leap off a cliff and it is beautiful, until you look down.... I felt so terribly alone, so it was wonderful to read that there were other people who had also been there."

Hamilton-Attwell believes strongly in belonging to professional organisations — as well she might, having dedicated much of her life to the IABC. "You need to know what is going on locally and globally. So many don't. They don't talk to peers or see what leaders say and I feel they lose out. You need to challenge yourself to be part of a global conversation. It is scary, but you will see that SA in particular, and Africa, are not that far behind. Sometimes we're the leaders."

One area in which SA leads is in workplace diversity management, she says. "The US, yes, it's diverse, because, wow, they have millennials. We have so much more to take into account. They don't have an idea of what it is to communicate in SA,

where you have a highly skilled engineer working with a no-skill workforce."

There appears little Hamilton-Attwell can't do.

"Everything is as difficult as you want to make it. I had my son when I was doing my PhD and he would wake up in the middle of the night, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I would type with one hand and play with him with the other.... I read once that the best thing a woman can teach her son is how to accommodate a professional woman."

"I find it amazing that some men are still threatened by the success of their wives."



**A powerful point**

Amanda Hamilton-Attwell takes a simple approach to communicating, and would ban PowerPoint if she could.

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