

# Pioneers of Prosperity

## Entrepreneurial role models as sources of hope and inspiration

TRANSFORMING BUSINESS

by Peter Heslam



**Successful entrepreneurs often act as role models to aspiring entrepreneurs. In this article, Peter Heslam reflects on his experience as a judge in a competition on enterprise solutions to poverty that unleashes the power of role modelling.**

The quaint old town of Suchitoto, perched high up in the picturesque mountain terrain of El Salvador, was recently the setting for a remarkable event. Ten dynamic and inspirational entrepreneurs from six countries across Central America took part in the finals of a business competition on enterprise solutions to poverty in a bid to win a grant of USD100K to invest in their business.

Pioneers of Prosperity (POP) is a global awards programme made up of regional competitions. By identifying, rewarding and showcasing the leaders of outstanding high-growth businesses in developing economies, it seeks to promote commercial entrepreneurship as an antidote to poverty.

The programme, sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, the John Templeton Foundation, the Seven Fund, and the OTF Group, is the brain child of the thought leaders and entrepreneurs Michael Fairbanks and Andreas Widmer.

According to Michael Fairbanks, 'Businesses around the world have created more wealth for more people than all the aid, charity and government actions combined. People in industrialised nations don't need to tell poor countries what to do: all we need to do is find great entrepreneurs and give them rocket fuel.'

By the time the ten finalists, selected from 650 applications, reached Suchitoto they had already received USD40K of such rocket fuel. They had also won the prestigious designation Pioneer of Prosperity and the right to join an exclusive global network of technical experts, investors and eminent entrepreneurs.

Competition judges from around the world gathered in Suchitoto to meet the finalists, hear their presentations, and complete the final stages of a rigorous selection process. We emerged from it to award the second prize of USD75K both to Florex, a thriving company in Costa Rica that produces environmentally friendly cleaning products, and to Pan Santa Eduvigis, a successful bakery chain providing excellent stakeholder value in El Salvador.

We decided the first prize had to go to Adenica, a Nicaraguan company led by a charismatic young woman called Carolina Lopez. Adenica handles the logistics and paperwork involved for companies importing and exporting goods to and from Nicaragua. In an economic sector and a country that are both notorious for corruption, she is a shining example of how to do business that is both principled and profitable.

At the awards ceremony, attended by numerous dignitaries and media



▶▶ representatives, Kenneth Hynes, an MD in the OTF Group commented, ‘Not only are these ten firms a source of innovation, job creation, and tax revenue, they are a source of hope and inspiration to countless other aspiring entrepreneurs. Their stories need to be told.’

The media have needed no persuading. Swathes of reporters and commentators have told Adenica’s story, projecting Carolina Lopez to the status of a Miss World (or, more accurately, a ‘POP star’) in Central America. She has thereby become exactly what the programme designers intend – a role model in the region to would-be entrepreneurs.



Carolina Lopez, Pioneer of Prosperity

The authors of scripture also grasped the importance of role models. In fact, the Bible is replete with stories of people who, despite their faults, are worthy of emulation. Many of them are women and some of these women are entrepreneurs.

One of the less well-known is Tabitha, or Dorcas. She is introduced with a short but striking description: ‘In Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha (which when translated into Greek, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor’ (Acts 9.36).

Tabitha in Hebrew and Dorcas in Greek mean ‘gazelle’, the small antelope that is common in Asia and Africa. In ancient culture, the gazelle was an emblem of beauty because of its graceful movements and lustrous eyes. It was an image of female loveliness.

We don’t know whether Dorcas had graceful movements or lustrous eyes. But we do know she lived a beautiful life and that both her movements and her eyes reflected God’s grace and compassion. We know this not only from the one-line description of her but because of the affection in which she evidently was held by those around her.

We also know that she used her entrepreneurial skills as a seamstress in the

service of Christ. When she falls ill and dies and the Apostle Peter is called in to help, we read that ‘all the widows stood around him crying and showing him the robes and other clothing Dorcas had made’ (Acts 9. 39).

For Dorcas, the needle in her hand was evidently her primary means of serving Christ and bringing deliverance and blessing to the poor. This was how she put her faith into action and obeyed the religious injunction to care for widows.

Serving Christ in and through the workplace is a pattern we find throughout the New Testament. Luke, himself a

doctor, often notes the trade of the people he chronicles in Acts. He writes, for instance, about ‘Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth’ (Acts 16.14); ‘a silversmith named Demetrius’ (Acts 19.24); ‘a tanner named Simon’ (Acts 9.43); and about Paul, who ‘because he was a tentmaker’ stayed with Aquila and Priscilla and worked with them, as they too were tentmakers (Acts 18.3).

Without falling into the trap typical of hagiography by which human failings are airbrushed out of the picture, the Bible and Christian history bear witness to the transformative power of role modelling. Christ, of course, is the ultimate role model. But it is a role model that replicates itself through the lives of each of his followers. That is why Paul the tentmaker can write: ‘Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ’ (1 Cor 11.1).

The Pioneers of Prosperity programme is not looking for saints but for people who, despite their failings, model more than financial prowess. It looks for exemplars of determination and discipline, commitment and compassion, honesty and hard work, stewardship and servanthood, fortitude and future mindedness. For these qualities are essential if entrepreneurs are to be ‘a source of hope and inspiration’ in pioneering prosperity amongst the poor. ■

Dr Peter Heslam is Director of Transforming Business (a project at Cambridge University on enterprise solutions to poverty) and author of Transforming Capitalism: Entrepreneurship and the Renewal of Thrift.