

GENERAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Q&A WITH OLD MUTUAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY (SOUTH AFRICA) LIMITED EXECUTIVES



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BROADER HORIZONS REQUIRE BROADER SKILLS

Business professionals who succeed and advance in the early stages of their careers often do so by building expertise in specialized functions. But when they enter the world of general management, they may find that their skills are narrowly defined because continued success now hinges on broader knowledge and deeper skills. To help executives expand their perspectives and develop stronger leadership styles, Harvard Business School (HBS) offers the General Management Program (GMP). In this interview, GMP program participants Raimund Snyders, Rojie Kisten, and Pieter Hugo—executives of the

Old Mutual Life Assurance Company (South Africa) Limited—share their thoughts on the program.



Pieter Hugo
Managing Director



Rojie Kisten
Head of Distribution



Raimund Snyders
Executive General
Manager

What interested you in the General Management Program at this point in your career?

SNYDERS: This was something that I had wanted to do for a long time. Years ago at Old Mutual, we had leaders who came to Harvard. I remember thinking that I would love to attend a program at Harvard, and wondered how I would go about it. A couple of years ago, my previous boss in Namibia attended GMP. When he came back, he immediately told me that it was something I should do. But then I changed jobs and changed countries. Fortunately, my current manager also attended GMP and was supportive of having me attend. For me, this was a longtime dream come true.

What did you expect from the program, and how did GMP compare with your expectations?

HUGO: Before I came here, I read a lot about the program and discussed it with people who had already attended. That gave me a pretty good idea of what to expect. I also had ideas of my own about how it would be different from what I was used to. I was a little anxious about the living group idea because it's such an integral part of the learning experience as a student. Who would be in my living group? Would it add the value that everyone says it adds?

SNYDERS: GMP has the right balance of what they call “knowing, doing, and being.” That means working on knowledge, understanding, and insight—across industries, leadership challenges, and organizational issues. I can do the reading to understand theory, but the bigger issue is getting help on the practical side—seeing examples of companies that I can relate to and understand. My company may have many of the same problems, so it's helpful to understand the theory and learn what I can do in practice to resolve these issues.

HUGO: If you've been in a leadership role, there's a tendency to go over the speed limit—to try to move too fast. This program provides the luxury of slowing things down, putting business experience into context, understanding theory, and engaging in discussions with your living group. You get the “ah-ha” moments, which are just tremendous in GMP, because there are so many of them. When these moments come, it's fantastic to connect them to the realities back at the company.



KISTEN: And it's more than just the case studies. It's also the amazing groups—not just your own group, but the extension of the learnings from people across different countries and diverse industries.

HUGO: When you read through a case study, you form an opinion. You're obviously biased because of your background and education. But then you have a discussion with people from completely different angles—engineers, marketers, whatever the case may be, and from various parts of the world. And that's where you learn quite a lot by seeing things from other sides. I'm told that I look at a problem in a completely new way, but now I see 10 different ways of looking at any problem.

KISTEN: The application form requires a number of years of experience, and I remember wondering why. When I came here I understood—if I had come earlier in my career, I may not have benefited. Running a business, I look at the bottom, the top, and the middle lines. A lot of what we learn can be taken back to our company and applied. But 10 years ago, I'm not sure it would have had the same impact.

HUGO: When you've actually wrestled with some issues, that experience allows you to take more from the program. And when you have a group attend from the same organization, it helps generate energy. The program doesn't make you think the same way—it provides stimulation and insight into ways of thinking about things and approaching problems. When you get a group in a room, you have a peer group challenge as you tackle some of the real issues you face as an organization.

SNYDERS: The first group who attends from any company will probably face an uphill battle when they go back because they will see various issues in different ways. At first, it will be difficult to influence other people, but there's a common language among those who attend GMP. They can address problems in a different way and understand where everyone is coming from. This will be very helpful in generating momentum within the organization.

Now that you've had a group of people come through the program, are you optimistic that you can bring a new perspective to your organization's challenges and initiate change?

HUGO: I hope that's what actually happens. But that's our challenge—to get ourselves out of the day-to-day operations and think about the bigger issues. I don't think that's going to be easy, by any means. Maybe we can remind each other to step away a bit and think about the big issues—the big elephants in the room that we actually need to deal with—and stop worrying about the ants that are running around.

KISTEN: That's a very important point. There are enough of us in the group now, and we should make a point of gathering our little Harvard club once a month or every two months. We can share our work challenges and think about which case studies might apply to them.

SNYDERS: I agree. I'd like to get the group together and ask, "Where do we take this thing from here?" There are two more people from our organization coming next year. So this is the start of something that can build and become a movement. And that can make a difference.

Why has your company chosen to come to Harvard Business School rather than an educational institution or organization in Europe?

SNYDERS: Our company's history with Harvard goes back a long time. At Harvard, we get access to diversity—across geographies, nationalities, industries, disciplines, and experiences. That's a key advantage. Another advantage, to me, is the recipe. It's not just about providing knowledge; it's about actually making us think deeply about the organization and its challenges—and what to do with that knowledge.



KISTEN: Also, Harvard has a worldwide reputation. Recently, I was in China. When I said that I went to Harvard Business School, the conversation changed. Everyone wanted to know more about Harvard.

HUGO: For me it was slightly different. I don't think I came here because others in the organization did. I looked at other business schools as well as Harvard, and I chose the one that I thought would best benefit both the organization and me as an individual.

What elements of the program have you found particularly interesting or challenging? What do you think will be the most useful in your job?

SNYDERS: As a general manager in the middle, I tend to take on more responsibilities. The result is that I try to move too fast. The program actually forces me to slow down, and that has made a difference. Also, the more you put into GMP, the more you're going to get out of it. So it's important to prepare for each day of classes. You have a solid discussion in your living group, then you go to the classroom and continue the debate, and then you go back and find time to reflect on it. What does this mean for me? How does it apply to the organization? What I'm coming away with here is profound.

HUGO: Clearly, you get a lot of theoretical knowledge behind the scenes, and that helps. But what resonates most with me is the interplay between theory and practice. This comes from the fact that many of the faculty not only are academics, but also are involved in practices, sit on many boards, and do consulting. Their experience adds weight to their comments. For me, it's all about how to implement what I'm learning.

KISTEN: That's a key difference at Harvard. The faculty is actively involved in real companies with real operational challenges.

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