



Business

Who are you looking at?

By Kenneth Hynes

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Consider the following: as part of a survey conducted earlier this year by the Pioneers of Prosperity (POP) Caribbean Awards Programme, 586 successful small business owners throughout the region were asked to identify their most important role model. The results are fascinating: 56 per cent of all respondents from Jamaica cited a family member as their biggest role model. Only in Belize was family more important, where 63 per cent cited a family member.



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But here is what is really interesting: only six per cent of successful small business owners in Jamaica cited a colleague or business leader as their most important role model. This is the lowest such number in the region. Only three per cent cited a teacher, again the lowest such number in the region.

Contrast this with survey results from North America and Europe. For example, 25 per cent of respondents to a 2006 survey of 500 small business owners in the United Kingdom voted the business tycoon Richard Branson as their top role model. Others voted for Ronald Reagan, Jesus Christ, and noted musician Jay-Z. A much lower number, just 18 per cent, of respondents identified a family member as the person who most inspired them.

Why is this important? Research from the fields of psychology and education has proven that effective role models, ie people whose actions inform and inspire others, are one of the greatest agents of change in any free society. Role models are individuals who can lead the type of national change required for greater economic growth to take root.

Given the ability of role models to drive change, what should we make of the survey results out of Jamaica, and the differences between Jamaican role models and North American/European role models? I come away with three conclusions:

First, business leaders are dramatically underrepresented in Jamaican culture. If economic growth is an imperative and growth is driven by small to medium-sized firms, Jamaica needs to celebrate its successful entrepreneurs and small business owners. The good news is that these individuals already exist in abundance. You need only spend five minutes with Sandra Samuels of Totally Male Ltd or Silburn Clarke of Spatial Innovision, both winners of the Pioneers of

Prosperity Award, to come away inspired by the knowledge that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in Jamaica.

Second, academic institutions on the island need to rethink their approach. Universities can be the most formative years in an individual's development. The fact that very few people cited a professor as an important role model should give pause for thought regarding the relevance of the higher education programmes being offered in Jamaica. Again, there is good news on this front. People like Dr Rosalea Hamilton at the University of Technology are making it their mission to break down the walls of the ivory tower by developing programmes where innovative ideas - the type that inspire - are actively cultivated.

Finally, although it should come as no surprise that none of the Caribbean survey respondents chose a foreign consultant or government official as their role model, you'd never know it by who dominates the conversation in Jamaica regarding economic growth. I'll be the first one to admit that consultants always have a lot to say, but that doesn't mean anyone is listening.

Given the ability of role models to spark positive change in a society, it's critically important that Jamaica gives them a greater voice - particularly those who can inspire the entrepreneurship and innovation needed to drive growth and prosperity on the island.

Perhaps the greatest impact a role model can have is their ability to influence one's perceived ability to succeed. I'm told the technical term for this is "self-efficacy". In other words, it's the sense an individual has of what is possible. Influencing a sense of what's possible is critical because all real change begins with a belief that change is possible.

That message can't come from a policymaker, donor community, or foreign consultant. To truly resonate, it needs to come from local role models like Sandra or Silburn who are living proof that any challenge, no matter how daunting, can be overcome. But don't take my word for it. Just get to know them better.

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