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# Is South Africa becoming a lazy country?

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**V**ISITED Professor Maureen Coetzee at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases at Wits. She took me into a room with one of the world's largest collection of mosquitoes (outside of the Smithsonian Institution, which is the world's largest museum and research complex).

In 2011, a mosquito was named after her – *Coetzeemyia*. I couldn't but be in awe of a life dedicated to eradicating malaria. I also had the privilege of working with Professor Wiseman Nkuhlu, and his dedication to the accountancy profession was also intriguing. He was the first black person to qualify as a chartered accountant (CA). So dedicated is he to the profession that he became part of a global group that discussed the threat of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification to the CA profession, despite being an MBA graduate.

At Wits, I used to admire a Golf GTi always parked by the student union complex a few metres from the science lab. Eventually I began to ask myself who this man was who was always on campus, including on weekends. It was Professor Phillip Tobias, the world-renowned palaeoanthropologist.

Professor Michael Katz (of Edward Nathan Sonnenbergs) inspired me when we worked together as a consortium bidding to advise Sasria (the government reinsurer). We dropped off a five-page brief at 8pm in his home study/office. The following day at 7am, he had doubled the size of our presentation and deepened its argument. This was a tax and company law mind that is so dedicated to the profession.

My mother was a nurse for more than 40 years. And unlike many of her generation born in the first half of the last century, who are now dying or retiring, I wonder whether the generations coming after are not slacking off.

Even at her advanced age, she is still part of three committees at church and three committees in the community, including the burial society. And she has a hectic travel schedule. These old

people, professionals or not, can't rest because they have an admirable work ethic.

Lee Kuan Yew has often stated that Singapore's only natural resources are its people and their strong work ethic.

In his book *From Third World to First World, the Singapore Story*, he tells of how they benchmarked themselves against the Japanese.

In an interview in June 2005 with China Central Television, he said: "My job really was to find my successors. I found them, they are there; their job is to find their successors. So there must be this continuous renewal of talented, dedicated, honest, able people who will do things not for themselves but for their people and for their country. If they can do that, they will carry on for another generation and so it goes on. The moment that breaks, it's gone."

Look at how countries like South Korea and Ireland turned their fortunes around in the Nineties. The global economic recession has had a negative impact on many developing countries and Japan suffered an earthquake. But because of the dedication of its people, it will be quick to recover. Japan will rebuild its infrastructure faster than us, even though many of our plans have been under way for a while.

I chatted recently with Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel, and said some people felt the government had been "juniorised", and perhaps that was why some things were coming off the rails. He said there must be other factors because he and a corps of then young, inexperienced professionals like Maria Ramos, Lesetja Kganya-

go and others took over the finance department and transformed it into one of the best in the world. Their heart was in it and their dedication to a better South Africa was unimpeachable. I was telling my friends that what strikes me the most about Nelson Mandela and his generation is their accomplishments and the amount of hard work they put into the fight for freedom during their mid-thirties to mid-forties before life imprisonment. I wonder how many people are this dedicated to a cause in the government or business.

The challenge of slacking off is apparent in the government, private sector and civil society. It is a national challenge. Deadlines are not respected, calls are not returned, the quality of work is not inspiring.

Has the chain of hard-working successors broken? Do we have leaders who are passing the baton to the young generation?

Are we going to sustain the ethic of the calibre of Coetzee, Katz, Tobias, Nkuhlu and ordinary hard-working forebears like my mother?

Or are we going to stay a second-rate country that has failed to seize the opportunity to be a world leader? Do we have a national psyche committed to success? We need to stem the decline.

■ *Kekana is chairman of Ithala Ltd and the National Development Agency. He writes in his personal capacity.*