



## **Business**

### **The man in the mirror**

By KENNETH HYNES

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This Friday ten very special firms from across the Caribbean will converge upon Montego Bay to compete for the Pioneers of Prosperity (POP) Regional Grand Prize Award of US \$100,000. POP is a global awards programme that celebrates the critical role small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play in fostering growth and prosperity.

Spatial Innovision and Totally Male Limited will represent Jamaica. These two firms, along with eight other finalists from across the Caribbean, emerged as Pioneers of Prosperity from a pool of 580 applicants.

A POP Award winner is an entrepreneur whose business provides sustained value to its customers, workers, owners, and future generations, and whose commercial success and entrepreneurial spirit make them a role model to their peers. The success of these SMEs should not only inspire us, it should challenge each and every one of us to think about how we can contribute to the economic growth of Jamaica and the broader Caribbean.

For donors and development practitioners like myself, the competitive spirit and commercial success of these ten firms tell us that we have a lot to learn from local businesses when it comes to fostering economic growth that has real meaning to the average citizen - ie in the form of good jobs and higher wages.

Obviously they are doing something right whereas the track record of the development community in this regard has been disappointing. The current downturn in most developing economies has further undermined the development community's ability to play the role of expert on matters of economic growth. Perhaps development practitioners should play the role of student more often; seeking to identify and understand local success stories as opposed to introducing cookie-cutter remedies from abroad that never quite turn out as planned. However, what is promising is that some in the development community, such as the Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank and the John Templeton Foundation, have embraced their role as student. As programme sponsors, they are seeking to better understand these local success stories so that there can be more like them throughout Jamaica and the Caribbean.

But here is the rub: It's not just the donor community that needs to change its ways. Jamaican firms and policymakers must also think about what they can learn from the success of these

Pioneers of Prosperity. Based on my five years on the island and what I have learned from these ten companies over the last six months, I've identified three patterns of self-defeating behaviour which Jamaica must break if it is to realise its full growth potential:

1. If it's foreign, it must be better. Jamaicans and their peers throughout the Caribbean are too quick to look abroad for answers and validation. Too often local products or service providers are assumed to be inferior to anything from the US or Europe. Firms like Spatial Innovision or AIC Insurance from Haiti are proof that great companies, which can compete with the very best international firms, exist right here in the region.

2. The 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' trap. Entrepreneurs in the region can never win. If they're a commercial failure they'll carry that stigma for years - perhaps generations. If they succeed, they must endure the whispers of their peers who question how they became so successful. "They must know someone" is the underlying assumption. No wonder both failure and success are closely guarded secrets in Jamaica. Unfortunately, in both cases, valuable opportunities for learning and improvement are lost. These pioneering firms are proof that's its not all about who you know.

3. Poor understanding of the customer. The numerous constraints to doing business in the region, such as access to capital, the lack of skilled labour, and crime, can be all-consuming, but these "supply side" challenges should never distract firms from understanding - or even predicting - the needs of their customers. An outward-looking approach to business is key. I realise this is a lot easier said than done but it's the reality of the market. Too many firms in Jamaica and the wider region can tell you all about what doesn't work, but know far too little about the needs of their customers. That's not a recipe for success. The ten finalists to be honoured on Friday are fixated on the needs of their customers.

Change is never easy. None of these patterns will be easy to break, but I can point to ten examples that prove it can be done.

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