

# Taking the healthy road to success

Microsoft MD Mteto Nyati, a mechanical engineer by profession, was named by Yale University as one of its World Fellows on Global Leadership in 2004. He tells Mandy Collins why he enjoys being a morning person

**Q** You grew up in a large family with an entrepreneurial mother. How has that influenced you?

**A** If I look at how I live my life today, I'm still a morning person. When I was young, I had to be up at 5am to go and get fresh produce and bring it back for my mother to sell, and that habit has continued.

**What do you do these days when you get up that early?**

I probably spend a good two hours by myself in the early mornings, with no interruptions, and I can achieve a lot in that time.

**What did you want to be when you were growing up?**

Well, I was told I needed to be a doctor. But in Grade 12, I was chosen to represent SA for two weeks in the UK, thanks to the International Science Olympiad, and it was there I decided I wanted to be an engineer.

**How did your parents feel about your decision?**

I remember my father being disappointed, but I later discovered he had always wanted to be a doctor.

**What work stresses do you face?**

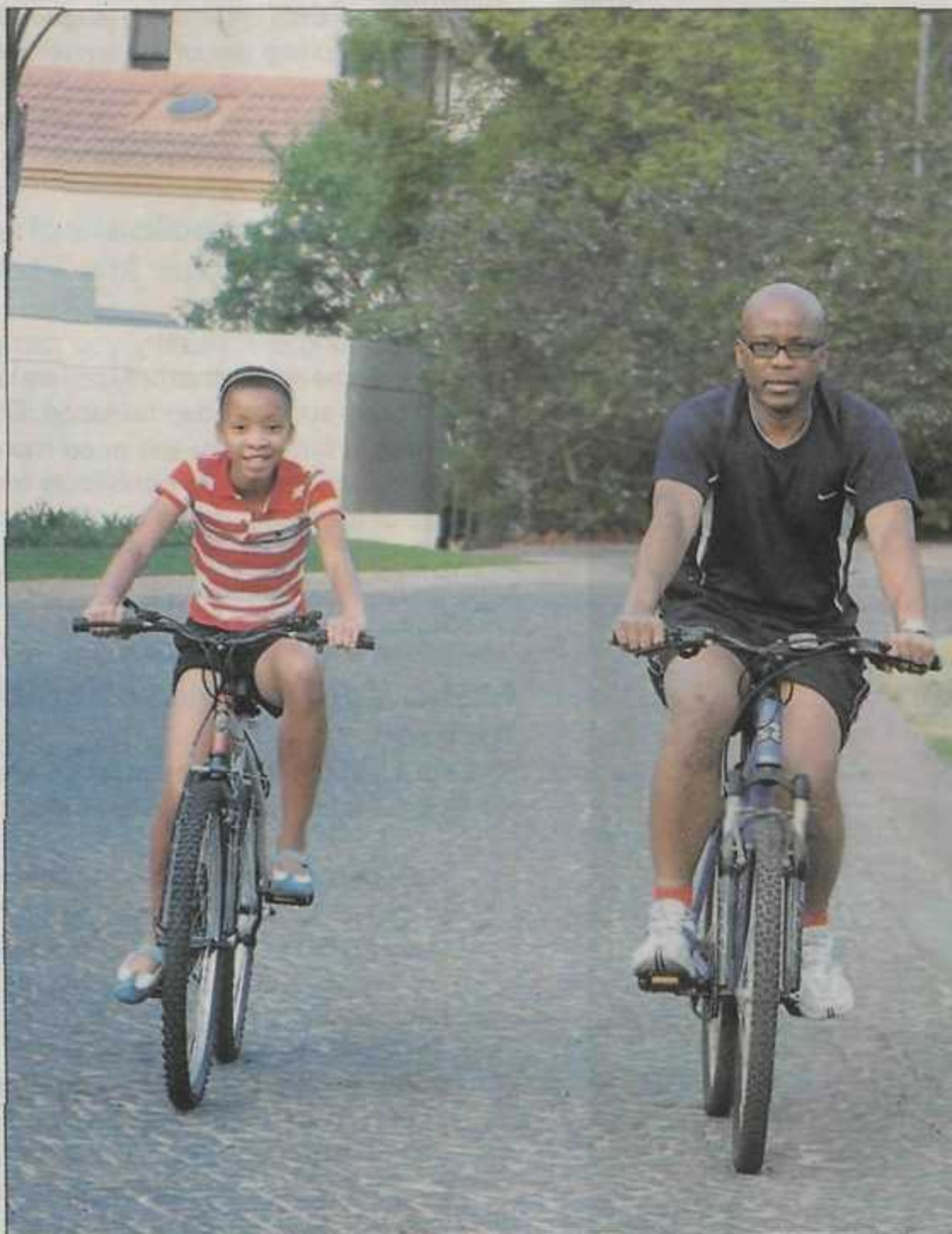
My stress comes from three areas. Firstly, our customers. There is a huge range of them, and within that environment there are a lot of issues to deal with — technical issues, customer satisfaction, service issues, and so on. Secondly, our business works largely with partners — 6 500 of them — who depend on Microsoft in SA. Working with them requires brokering a lot of discussions, and in this economic climate, sometimes helping them to survive.

Thirdly, there are our people, who are engaged with those partners and customers — I have to ensure that they are providing a good service.

**How do you handle stress?**

Fortunately by nature I'm a pretty calm person, and I begin by looking at what is within my control, and what is not. Then I focus on what we can manage as a team. I delegate so that the right people take the right action. I also believe in breaking things down into manageable chunks.

**Do you talk about your feelings?**



I share with people how I feel. It takes people a while to get used to me, but I call things as I see them.

**How is your anger management?**

I don't get angry easily, and when I do, I don't show it. If I'm angry with you I'll take you behind closed doors and sort out the problem one on one, and then I will move on.

**Are you a healthy eater?**

In the past five years, I have been, yes. And my wife, Zoleka, has been my biggest influence here. She's very health-conscious and ensures we all eat healthily.

the right choices.

**How do you stay in shape?**

This is the most difficult thing for me — finding time to exercise during the week. Right now I'm not fit, and while I go to the gym on weekends, my exercise is largely confined to taking the stairs instead of the lift, that sort of thing. There's even a gym here at work, but I've never used it, because I just don't have the time.

**What's the least healthy thing you do?**

I just love dessert. I have no control around desserts.

smoking. I smoked for many years, but gave up about five years ago when we were living in Paris. The environment was simply not conducive to smoking. I had to go about 30 floors down to smoke at work, and it was winter, and bitterly cold. So I just stopped. Today, however, I think I probably drink too much coffee.

Unfortunately it has the effect of keeping me awake at night.

**How often do you take time out?**

We go away twice a year, most recently to India. I use all of my leave time, and I do disconnect when we're away. We tend to

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FINDING THE PATH: Microsoft MD Mteto Nyati decided to become an engineer at high school, after he was selected to represent SA at the International Science Olympiad in the UK. He recalls his father being disappointed that he didn't become a doctor; Picture: MARTIN RHODES; Mteto takes time out to enjoy a relaxing cycle ride with his daughter, Anda. Picture: PUXLEY MAKGATHO

try to choose a country we've never been to in an effort to understand other cultures. When I first moved here from IBM I couldn't believe how much leave time some people had accumulated. I encourage people to take all of their leave.

**Ever read a book that changed your life?**

In around 1996 I read *Born to Succeed* by Colin Turner. **What did you get out of it?** What it taught me was that while we tend to look for answers elsewhere, we have everything within us that we need to be successful. Instead of dwelling on our weaknesses — and we all have them — we need to look for our strengths and leverage those. The book was simple and practical. It also had a bit of planning in it, for short, medium and long-term goals in all spheres of life. I found that once I started to implement that planning, it changed me.

**What are you reading now?**

*Friendship with God: An Uncommon Dialogue* by Neale Donald Walsch.

**Would you describe yourself as a spiritual person?**

I'm interested in spirituality — and this book has helped me to clarify many things about life in general. Sometimes we battle with questions of diversity in the corporate world. We also become dogmatic about the path to God. This book allows us the freedom we all need as human beings. And it even applies to the way I manage people here at Microsoft. I try to give them their space, and I need mine too.

**What was your defining moment?**

I think it was probably in 2004 when I was named as one of the Yale University World Fellows on Global Leadership. We were all mid-career and were exposed to all sorts of issues facing the world — HIV/Aids, environmental issues, those kinds of things. The hope was that as we left the programme six months down the line, we would begin to focus on addressing some of those issues. I wasn't sure I would use what I had learnt once I was back, but a short while after, the Microsoft

opportunity arose, and I realised that I could apply what I had learnt, and make Microsoft relevant to SA.

**What's the best health advice anyone ever gave you?**

To stop smoking.

**What advice do you have for others?**

Be careful of what you take into your body — you can have an impact on your health enormously by the choice of what you put into your mouth.

**What activity is most likely to make you lose track of time?**

Two things: reading a good book, and when I write. Writing really takes me away and sometimes five or six hours might pass without me noticing.

**If you had your life over, what would you change?**

Nothing. I had the kind of parents I needed, and all of my experiences — negative and positive — have brought me where I am today.

**Where is paradise?**

At home, really connecting with my family — Zoleka and our 12-year-old daughter, Anda — to

the exclusion of anything else.

**Any pet peeves?**

Sometimes you can pick up when people are bullshitting you. It drives me mad. It's okay to fail, to make mistakes, but don't try and bullshit your way out of it.

**What are your secret fears?**

I worry about some of the economic policies we are trying to experiment with in SA, instead of going the tried and tested ways. There are many successful countries, and we need to learn from their success. The success of our continent largely depends on whether this country works or not. We need to provide leadership for our continent.

**And hopes and dreams?**

As a business we need to be relevant to SA. We want to be a partner to both government and the private sector, and help both to become successful. A lot of local companies are venturing into Africa, and we want to partner with them as well as helping government to work, and providing leadership.