

DEAN & DIRECTOR PROFILE

PROF CHRIS VAN DER HOVEN

STELLENBOSCH
BUSINESS SCHOOL

CRACKING THE CODE OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

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So says Prof. Chris van der Hoven who is the Senior Director at Stellenbosch Business School. Amongst his own interests he has most valued his work with leaders who have stepped into elevated roles – moments of so-called “executive transitions”. Paradoxically, he points out that successful leadership transitions are also about recognising that you don’t need to have all the answers from the start.



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For example, he suggests they “develop a ‘strategy frame’ and test their ideas with former CEOs or people familiar with the context they’re entering.” That they “avoid assuming that what worked before will work again in a new business, market or industry.” He says it’s important to also grasp the cycle time and pace required in the new context to manage expectations

effectively.

Over his career, Chris has worked on the onboarding of CEOs, country managers and GMs, supporting and preparing them for their first 100 days with new teams. His expertise is in working with leadership designates to smooth the transition. He has also worked with teams facing pivots brought about by disruption, new markets, product launches and acquisition integration.

When he reflects on his own career, he is clear that he has been extremely lucky at his own transition moments. In every case it was a gift to have someone to talk to, someone who would let him walk through his own ideas as part of a sensemaking process.

Importance of learning

His academic career spans over two decades at iconic institutions. He was appointed to Senior Director of Stellenbosch Business School in January 2025 and has been the CEO of the school’s Executive Development company, where he has served since 2018. He has also been the Chair of SBS-ED Botswana Pty Ltd for several years. Previously, he was the Academic Director at Wits Business School, where he led the reshaping of the MBA curriculum and headed up the strategy department. Locally, he has been a visiting lecturer at UCT Graduate School of Business and at GIBS.

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~ Prof Chris van der Hoven



Prior to his time at Wits, he was a Senior Fellow at Cambridge University's Centre for Technology Management having previously been full time faculty at Cranfield School of Management. Chris has worked in over 40 countries and been visiting faculty at 10 business schools. He has also consulted globally through Aspley InnoStrat and held leadership roles in industry, including Managing Director (Europe) for X-Pert Group and key positions at Eskom and Group Five. He holds a PhD from Cambridge, an MBA from Cranfield and a BSc QS from the University of Cape Town.

His PhD supervisions have covered themes ranging from dynamic capabilities to blockchain and financial inclusion. He says that PhD students often find cutting edge research questions that help him to stretch his own learning in the field of strategy. Chris feels he has been privileged to have access to these exceptional PhD candidates over the years.

"I do not presume to be a specialist, but I do try to encourage PhD candidates to think of their PhD work as a 'research apprenticeship. If they take this seriously, they will be empowered to continue delivering impactful and cutting-edge research into the future. In a world where evidence is often lacking, their contributions will keep society on track."



When reflecting on business school curricula, he notes that not all schools have successfully navigated business education disruptions. There have been several 'bubbles'. For example, in the UK some years ago, many schools closed their MBA programmes as they were no longer viable. The UK, Western Europe and the US are currently undergoing a significant shakeup. Their tailwinds are making them look hard at opportunities in Africa.

The often-cited criticism of academia in general is also targeted at the MBA – that the learning is too theoretical. However, Chris points to Clayton Christensen's idea that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. To understand this, he says that one must recognise that practice is almost never perfect. "In fact, it's natural that management and leadership are subjected to ongoing entropy. That good practice is a moving target. Learning, therefore, must focus as much on 'how to learn' as on perceived 'universal truths'. This is as true for students and executive delegates, as it is for business schools."

According to Chris, business schools are themselves subject to market shifts and need to be prepared to adapt. Their contribution to business in SA and on the continent cannot be left to chance and in the case of Stellenbosch University, there is a non-negotiable expectation that society will be served. So, the expectation is that phrenetic leadership and prosocial values will be embedded in all business school learning at Stellenbosch.

Leadership and board dynamics

In 2019, Chris co-authored *Why Good Directors Make Bad Decisions*, with Prof Kalu Ojah – a contribution which examined, among other insights, boardroom decision-making. In their modest contribution, they set out the case for prosocial leadership, specifically endorsing the concept of the phrenetic leader.

"We highlighted the need for practical wisdom in the boardroom. Directors are socialised in ways that can be problematic and the antidote is strong leadership applied with practical wisdom."

Shaping responsible leaders

Located in the winelands of the Western Cape, Stellenbosch Business School, with its Triple Crown of international accreditations, offers a premier learning environment for business executives. The school is also a founding member of the Association of African Business Schools (AABS).

"We are delighted to be among the 1% of global business schools with the Triple Crown, while remaining deeply proud of our African roots," says Chris. "These benchmarks are aspirational and signal to stakeholders that the Stellenbosch University brand is not only potent but backed by trusted external accreditations. At heart, we want our students to be ambassadors for responsible leadership, shaping every aspect of their lives and service."

As the newly appointed Senior Director, Chris says Stellenbosch University is ambitious in its mission to advance learning and research for the benefit of society.

"As part of this remarkable institution, we aim to reflect that ambition. The country and continent need well-run, world-class institutions to reduce poverty and promote prosperity. We want to grow, to gain further critical mass and momentum, while focusing on sustainability. We are fortunate to have an accomplished alumni network and strong business ties. These relationships enable us to support the global ESG agenda in an African context. Our real impact lies in shaping responsible leaders who carry these principles forward," he says.



Snapshot Questions

1. How do you spend your free time when you are not working?

In recent years my wife and I have visited Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia in successive years on overlanding trips with friends. When time permits my e-bike is a lot of fun, especially given I live within range of Franschhoek in the Berg River Valley.

2. What would you tell your younger self about career development and leadership in academia?

Deep, long-term thematic research is a critical investment. Don't let short-term projects derail a coherent body of work.

3. What book, or podcast is currently on your nightstand or playlist?

Enlightenment Now by Steven Pinker and The Tyranny of Merit by Michael Sandel are wonderful books to read. I also think every business leader need to read Vulture Capitalism by Grace Blakey. There are so many great books that are building blocks of an informed perspective.

4. What keeps you energised outside of your academic and leadership responsibilities?

Family and friends – a braai and supporting the Boks!

5. If you weren't in academia, what alternative career would you have pursued and why?

Given I didn't make the cut as the world's number one golfer and I lacked the talent to be the lead guitarist in a rock band, I have had to make a few adjustments. Even so I feel very lucky to have had a fantastic career. I do have a tiny bit of envy for dealmakers who evaluate companies – fund managers, but more specifically the chief investment officers who shape portfolios. I also think that entrepreneurs are a special breed and serial entrepreneurs are unicorns who deserve our admiration.