



grow



CREATIVE STONE
coupling inc. inc.
RECEPTION



Creative Stone

From scaling-up to succession



20 years ago, husband and wife team, Alison and Friedel Weihe, started designing and manufacturing a small range of paving stones in a small shed on a field in Amalgam, South of Johannesburg. From small beginnings, the company has grown to become a multi-million Rand business with over 130 staff members, that's on a path to outliving its founders.

Starting with an idea and a will to try

Creative Stone is the award-winning brain child of Friedel Weihe and his wife, Alison. Founded in 1998, the company prides itself on a long legacy of manufacturing high quality, highly engineered stone, paving, flagstone, cobble and cladding products. The team has grown to over 130 staff, with two inspiring showrooms in Honeydew and Fourways.

Both Alison and Friedel had full time employment in 1998, in fields unrelated to the building industry. Realising that there was a gap in the market for good quality paving stones, they decided to be the ones to close it.

Friedel, a natural entrepreneur and creative, already had experience in design development as a partner in the wood manufacturing industry and wanted to do something of his own. Alison at the time, was working as a change management consultant. "Neither of us had a financial business background, but we had an absolute passion to create and to do it well," Alison recalled.

They started by testing the market at a décor show with a small range of simulated stone products. The positive response told them that they were certainly on to something and could make a real difference in the industry.

After a year of operations, they had grown enough to warrant resigning from their day jobs, and moving to a factory which could accommodate their growth. Nevertheless, the pair still experienced some resistance during this time.

"We had a lot of people saying to us, "What do you know about business?" Despite this, we said to ourselves that if we fail, we'll have egg on our face. But if we don't try, we'll never know.

We gave it our everything and we've never looked back. Nobody in their wildest dreams thought we would last more than a year or 2 – and here we are, 19 years later – still growing, still developing."

■ Building a world-class business that is set apart

Alison attributes Creative Stone's early growth to extremely hard work and adding value to their clients from the very beginning. "We would go to people's houses and offer more than just paving. We would give them ideas and design layouts.

People loved the fact that we offered so much and were so hands-on." The company continues to stand out from its competitors – partly due to their inspiring premises that sparks great design ideas, but also because of their passion for design and their love for people and service. Expanding on this, Alison said "Right from the outset, we were driven more by the passion to design and make a difference, than by the bottom line. We've always done inspiring, beautiful projects and get very involved in the work we do."

Due to their passion for product development and their meticulous attention to detail, Creative Stone has worked on many prestigious corporate and residential projects. Their simulated stone products feature in many buildings across Gauteng, including the Oliver Tambo Memorial Complex, Monte Casino, the Anglo-American Head Office, Broadacres Shopping Centre, Kyalami Equestrian Centre as well as many office parks and residential estates.

Naturally, the company has scooped up numerous awards for their stunning work from the likes of Decorex, Home Makers Expo and Grand Designs. They've also been featured in the media on platforms like Top Billing, House and Leisure Magazine, SA Homeowner, The Sunday Times, Destiny Magazine, Business Woman's Leadership and Business Day.

■ A retention-yielding hiring philosophy

Since the beginning, the team has made it their mission to develop their staff members – a philosophy that has contributed to staff retention. One of their earliest employees had previously worked as a general worker assisting with renovations at Alison and Friedel's house. "We recognised his work ethic and technical ability and took him under our wing. Friedel taught him how to use CAD (a design software)", Alison recalled. "He became one of our design consultants and worked with us for 19 years. He has recently left to start his own company, but he was a big part of our journey, and we were part of his. It's not easy to grow people in a small business without many departments to move people to, but we have always tried as far as possible to give people some form of growth."

Their second employee started as a basic admin staff member and then progressed to manager of their orders department and, with training and support, then became their financial manager. She stayed with the company for 18 years before emigrating. "When people work for us, we hope that we are an avenue for their growth. If they are helpful to us during the time when they are with us, and they choose to then go somewhere else, we're happy for them and celebrate their journey," Alison said. "We also like to create an environment where people enjoy coming to work. We want to honour their humanity, presence and contribution through small things like celebrating their birthdays. We also give away many timeshare weekends as a celebration of merit / assistance in some form. And when people have gone through difficult times, we've always tried to be supportive and helpful."



Discovering business coaching

As the business grew, Creative Stone had to learn to deal with different sets of challenges.

Alison heard of Grow six years ago from someone she was working with at the time. She decided to attend a talk by one of Grow's business coaches. "I got our management team to go to another talk, after which, we signed up with Grow. What appealed to us was that Grow wasn't just helping you with one aspect of business. They weren't just financial coaches, for example, dealing with the bottom line. They were tackling team building, leadership and other, more human aspects. That is what drew us initially, and continues to be one of the things that has kept us with Grow all these years."



Some people say that they can't afford a coach. My philosophy is – you can't afford not to have a coach

Scaling up to record revenues and succession planning

The initial coaching sessions with Creative Stone were around freeing up Alison's time so she could work more on the business than in it. The business also didn't have efficient processes at the time, which often made it prone to errors across various aspects, including orders, deliveries and cash management.

Alison said, "Since joining as a Grow client, our coach has helped us on a lot of things, like how to recruit better, how to conduct better interviews and how to screen better." That was a big step forward for us because our recruiting and interviewing process was not that effective." Creative Stone and Grow also worked on revamping their sales process to make it more structured and incentivising, which helped to improve revenues.

With growing revenues and teams, Creative Stone also worked on the discipline of how to structure meeting rhythms and how to build functional, high-performance teams. "What has been really helpful is the human understanding of personalities – not just structures and processes. That for me, is what sets Grow apart from a lot of other companies. We've learnt to understand how different personalities bring different things to the table, and how to play to everybody's strengths."

All the work they put in with their coach allowed them to double their revenues. "We had a record year in 2015," said Alison. "We managed to grow the business substantially through being much more systematic and adopting a more rigorous approach to costing, budgeting and managing staff. We would have never achieved these heights without coaching. This year we have been helped by two other coaches from Grow, where we looked at how we can develop a more effective marketing budget, as well as how to improve our customer service. We are now working on a succession plan with our coach and it's reassuring to know that our coach has helped to put a lot of checks and balances in place to ensure the long-term success of our plans."

Growing through the difficult times

“We have grown through tough times over the years,” Alison said. “What has kept us going is that we have always been very careful in how we’ve managed our finances, to allow for stability in the company. Prior to meeting our coach, we had also experienced some internal theft and with Grow’s help, we’ve managed to create far more rigorous financial controls.

The market for building products has toughened even more now, and honestly, if it weren’t for the ongoing coaching, it would be easy to get demoralized as opposed to being strategic and action-orientated.

Our coach’s quiet, humane reality check is what is guiding us through this time. His exposure to international companies, seminars, trends and readings makes us feel less alone. In the current market, there are some very tough decisions to be made, but we are not making them alone. We are guided by the wisdom of our coach.”

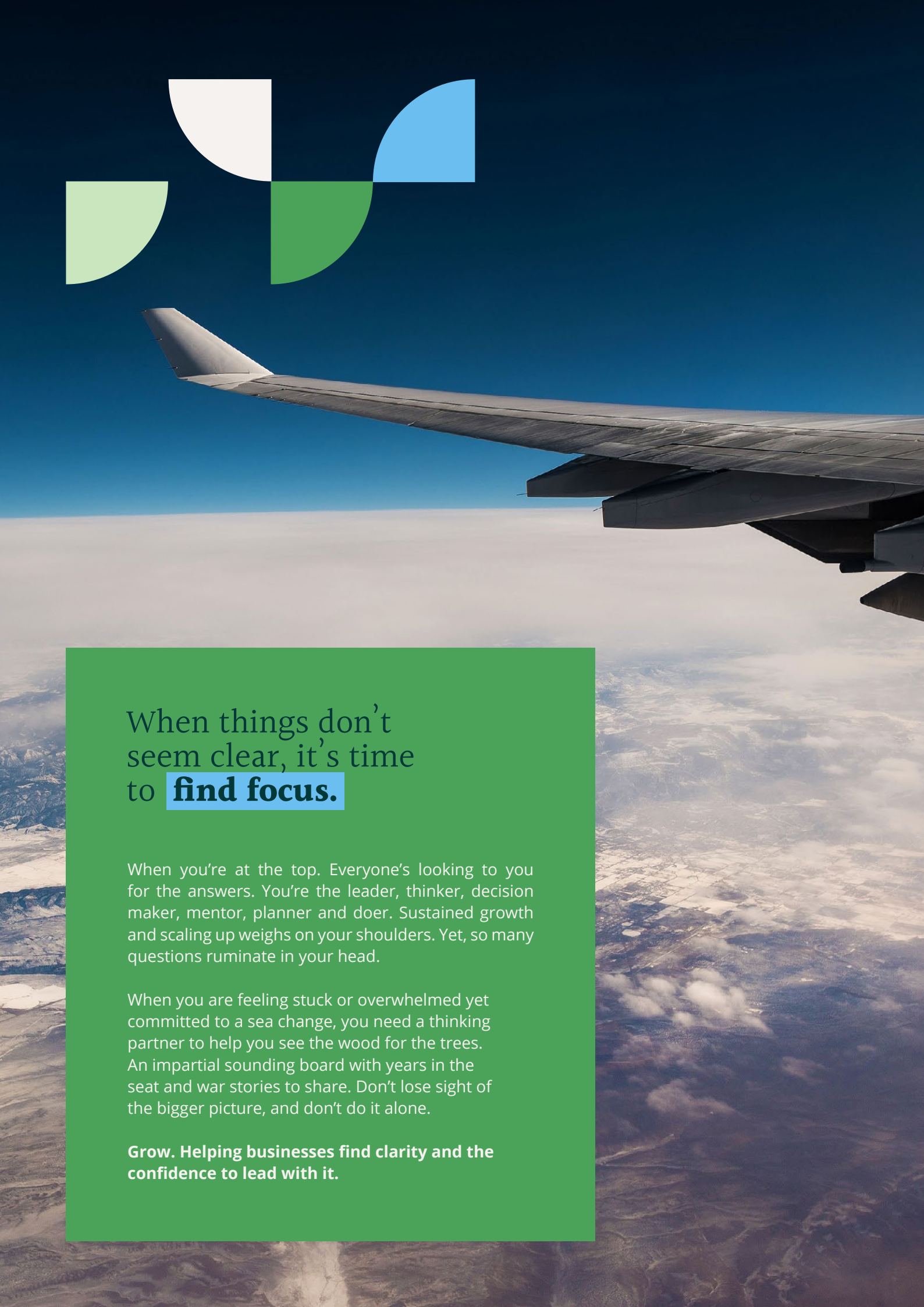
Expanding on the value of having a business coach, Alison said. “Some people say that they can’t afford a coach. My philosophy is – you can’t afford not to have a coach. Based on my 6 year journey, I cannot even begin to put a price on the insight, perspective and the concrete tools coaching has given us.

Coaching has also helped me to have greater peace of mind, solace and a clear way forward – that is priceless. It’s also important, now, that we are not just being coached to cope in a difficult market, but we are also being forced to be strategic about growing the business further, developing new product lines and diversifying. You can celebrate the peaks, but you have to learn and be strategic in the troughs.”

The learning never stops

Alison emphasised **the importance of continuous self-improvement**, “What we’ve really enjoyed with Grow are their bi-annual Grow Summits and all their workshops. We never miss a workshop unless we are away, and we find them incredibly helpful and inspiring. We love meeting with other fellow entrepreneurs which helps us feel less alone in our journey, because we often find that we are all going through the same challenges. Even after 19 years in business, we just never stop learning.”





When things don't seem clear, it's time to **find focus.**

When you're at the top. Everyone's looking to you for the answers. You're the leader, thinker, decision maker, mentor, planner and doer. Sustained growth and scaling up weighs on your shoulders. Yet, so many questions ruminate in your head.

When you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed yet committed to a sea change, you need a thinking partner to help you see the wood for the trees. An impartial sounding board with years in the seat and war stories to share. Don't lose sight of the bigger picture, and don't do it alone.

Grow. Helping businesses find clarity and the confidence to lead with it.



The Growth Formula is an easy-to-understand model that sets out what you need to master to build a truly successful, profitable, and enjoyable business.



You the Leader

This is about your effectiveness as a leader. The success of your business is directly proportional to your capabilities as a leader.

Setting Direction

This is about disciplined thinking and having clarity on where you are taking your business to, and ensuring everyone in the business is clear and aligned around this direction.

Winning Team

Your business is bigger than just you. To build a successful business, you need a talented and engaged team of people.

Operational Excellence

This is about disciplined action to ensure everything is working in your business to allow it to grow without drama.



Build your business with **clarity and confidence.**



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