

Embracing the principles and programme of transformation continues to be central to workplace practice and corporate culture in South Africa. There are serious challenges facing corporate South Africa, in particular to meet targets that individual companies have set for themselves in the implementation of critical plans such as the employment equity plan. These challenges and failure to deliver on the stated quantitative targets have overshadowed resounding successes in the quality of the emerging cadre of women leaders and managers in particular.

How to Cope

in the South African Workplace

by Basil Sikhakhane



The South African corporate culture seems to have successfully accepted the championing of the transformation agenda as one of the high-level performance milestones of senior management. This development has aligned public and private sector requirements for the workplace environment to be receptive and supportive of new leadership. In other words, the workplace has been prepared and it now accepts that change in leadership is the only guaranteed prediction among all other variables.

The South African workplace, which is regulated and closely monitored, gives hope to present and future graduates. Legislated tools such as the employment equity plan seem to suggest to aspirant managers and leaders that the workplace has space and answers for the future cadres. In fact, the size of the space is considered to be sufficient to attract and retain some of the skills that left our shores for supposedly greener pastures elsewhere in the developed world. The theoretical perspective paints a picture of a workplace environment that is not only committed to the achievement of transformation objectives, but is expanding with an abundance of opportunities and nurturing support structures in place.

The recession has sharply brought home the true picture and the harsh realities of the South African workplace environment. Terms such as “right-sizing”, “down-sizing”, “outsourcing” and other terms associated with the limiting of opportunity, were almost synonymous with the South African workplace environment long before the recession.

In response to the recession, the South African workplace environment now dictates to the new cadres of leaders and managers, who are themselves beneficiaries of transformation, to be extremely risk averse and frugal. These managers find themselves compelled to outsource activities and to cut down on training and related budgets, which have negative impacts on the recruitment of young graduates and their ongoing nurturing. All activities in the workplace have to demonstrate contribution to the bottom line more than before. The workplace shows a definite shift from high-level focus on transformation objectives to pure business survival.

The ability to add value seems to be critical to management and workforce retention in the workplace. To cope and be retained in the workplace, managers and the workforce must not only be satisfied with the ability to add value to the core business of the enterprise. They must be able to clearly demonstrate to critical stakeholders that they are indeed adding value and that they are indispensable.

Multi-skilling and the ability to be versatile in juggling different assignments are emerging as further coping mechanisms in the South African workplace. Both the public and private sectors have endorsed a performance appraisal system that identifies employees with the tendency to “tackle complex tasks falling outside of their allocated scope of work”. This refers to employees who, after successful execution of their task, literally approach their colleagues and their supervisors or managers for additional work. Such employees are likely to be multi-skilled and they are consequently able to deal with complex assignments and tasks.

Technical specialisation is another potential survival and coping escape route in the workplace. Employees with specific technical skills enjoy guaranteed space in project teams. The recession seems to have increased the operating space of project teams with

clear terms of reference, scope of work and delivery timelines. Young graduates must be advised to continue studying in the work environment. The days of the generic broad knowledge base without any specialisation are definitely over.

Attitude and appropriate work ethic will always conclude all discussions on how to cope in a particular workplace environment. The workplace environment,

The future managers and workforce in the country can only benefit from the impact of the recession and the harsh workplace environment if positive attitude and appropriate work ethic is maintained.

during and after the recession, is no exception. All the suggestions discussed above will fail in the absence of positive attitude and good work ethic. The future managers and workforce in the country can only benefit from the impact of the recession and the harsh workplace environment if a positive attitude and an appropriate work ethic are maintained. Lastly, the workplace cannot escape local, regional and global environmental impacts. Coping in the workplace environment remains the only activity that will recur in response to change. □

Basil Sikhakhane is the Chairman of First Metro Housing and MD of Enhance Strategies International.