



by Pumulani Ncube

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are blacks empowering blacks?

A few weeks ago I was sitting in my dentist's rooms and was lucky enough to have a conversation with her after she had finished drilling my teeth and doing all the good things that come with a visit to the dentist.

Being one of the few black dentists in private practice I thought she would have a significant number of black people coming to support her practice, however, this was not the case at all. Approximately 90% of her clientelle is white - how could this be?

One of the pillars in the BEE codes of good governance is preferential procurement. The basis of this pillar is to stimulate the growth of black-owned enterprises by getting corporates to direct a portion of their spend to these companies. If this is the case how do we expect the corporate world to comply to these codes when we ourselves do not seem believe in these codes?

Being the eternal optimist I at first thought maybe I was being too harsh to black people and the case of the dentist was an isolated one. Alternatively I thought as black people perhaps we didn't have much discretionary spend that we could direct to emerging black enterprises and practitioners.

I looked at the various facets of our lives to identify the areas of discretionary spend. I looked at the average household, and on the face of it one might think there isn't much but when you think about it there are quite a few areas. From a health perspective how many people will actively go out and look for a black GP, paediatrician or dentist? In terms of specialist services how many people will seek out a black lawyer or accountant to do their books.

Ask yourself the last time you bought a car would you have been worse off if you had bought it from a black salesman or a black-owned garage (the few that are there)? That German luxury car that you bought in Sandton is still the same as the one that's sold in downtown Jozi - after all, the warranties are applicable wherever you buy the car. To the above list you can add household insurance, furniture, clothing, car service and repairs, personal insurance and life policies.

In the work environment have you noticed how many senior black executives have white PAs? I used to think that this was caused by the shortage of black skills but I had the opportunity to discuss this tendency with some of the "guilty" executives. Some of their answers were very interesting. By far the most common of these was that white PAs are loyal; because of the affirmative action policies they value their jobs and wouldn't do anything to jeopardise them by being late and expecting the boss to understand.

In a different context the reserve bank governor seemed to agree with this notion when he said he would rather hire Afrikaners than black people because black people come in for a short time and wait for the next offer.

The second reason given was that if you had a black PA the chances are that you would find your personal affairs and confidential transactions being discussed in public, particularly within your social circles, purely because you share those very same circles with your PA. I'm sure black PAs would have a lot to say about that. My question is simple, is the leaking of information (if it does happen) any different in the white community?

In terms of education, why are we spending so much money to develop schools in areas where we don't even reside? Having been one of those township kids who had the opportunity to go to schools in the suburbs I suppose I shouldn't complain. When I look back I could have had more time to sleep, more time to rest, more time to study if I had gone to a school within walking distance from where I stayed. Did the kids in the suburbs have an advantage over me because they could wake up later, go home and rest at lunch time and do their homework before sports? Truth is I'll never know, suffice to say the lack of the above luxuries motivated me to do better than them.

Why aren't we using the money spent (fees, transport and inevitably extra lessons) taking the kids to the suburbs to develop the schools in our community (townships)? We could, for example, be improving the learning facilities and paying for better and extra teachers.

Or could the problem be deeper than that? It's probably a case of schools in the suburbs having a head-start as a result of having been well funded in the previous regime.

We have lots of BEE millionaires (and billionaires) - why aren't they putting back into the community? Stellenbosch is reputed to be one of the best funded universities in the country and part of the reason is that it has a very active alumni that participate in the financial well-being of the school. In this respect, Shanduka's adopt a school programme is commendable.

Soccer is the number one sport in the black community. So, what should we make of the fact that the top three teams in the country are coached by white coaches? In fact half the teams in the PSL have white coaches! What's happened to all the black talent that has gone through the various leagues in years gone by. Is it a case of them not being given the opportunities? A lack of trust from the club bosses? Or a lack of will on the part of black coaches to go through the rigorous process of getting FIFA badges?

Similar to soccer, rugby has the same following in the white community of the South African Super 14 teams. Chester Williams is the only coach who had a brief stint coaching the Cats. Why aren't the soccer bosses willing to develop local coaching talent? For example, get corporate sponsorships and take some of the yester-year stars through the FIFA coaching qualification to the ultimate levels?

Before I get crucified for being racist by both black and white I'll give you the reasons why we should actively seek to redress the above situations. Firstly, black people have a tendency to say that black people always seem to let them down when given opportunities. How many times have they been let down by white corporates and still went back to the same enterprise?

Secondly, how do we expect anyone to go out of their way to conform with preferential procurement when we ourselves do not practice what we preach? Thirdly, through preferential procurement we are actually helping black enterprises to establish themselves in predominantly white-dominated industries. Fourthly, the use of black practitioners provides role models for kids through visual affirmation. It might seem trivial but some kids go through school and have no idea what an accountant does for a living.

Finally the more people use the services of black people the more they will improve their offering and hopefully all the lessons learnt will grow their businesses. Therefore, the next time you complain that you haven't been able to access business from a white company look at the man in the mirror and ask him if he is doing his bit for affirmative procurement and enterprise development.

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