



by Pumulani Ncube

# channelling race issues into successful BEE partnerships

We are a miracle nation indeed. One only has to look at recent national debates to realise that intentionally or otherwise they end up pitting blacks against whites, while at the same time I'm reliably informed that there is a social-cohesion report due to be released soon that came to the conclusion that South Africa has a great degree of social cohesion in that people across all races identify themselves primarily as South Africans before any race classification.

However, all is not doom and gloom as we do have moments when we all push for the same agenda, and when this does happen it is fantastic. The soccer team winning the Africa Cup of Nations comes to mind. For the first time our white counterparts trekked to the FNB stadium in droves, while in 1995 even darkies who didn't know where Ellis Park was stood behind the Bokke. Equally momentous was the awarding of the 2010 World cup to South Africa. For that week there was no talk of crime or the country not being ready to host the soccer World Cup - we were all one nation, happy that at last we had our spot in the sun.

So what are we to make of our "racist" national debates and more importantly how to we manage these debates in the board-rooms where black and white are in business together? How do we harness the nation's willingness to come together for a national cause into a willingness to tackle issues on which we don't have similar views? We must seek ways to harness these issues and find applications in the BEE space.

FNB recently had to pull back their much talked about campaign against crime. I haven't been privy to the internal workings of the bank to make a judgement on what internal governance

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issues had to be cleared to get the advert out in the press, but what I do know is that the bank has a majority black staff and a sprinkling of senior black executives. I also know that the FirstRand Group has some very intelligent people and that they have a black head of the banking group under which the FNB falls.

If the black staff had been consulted, would it have made a difference to the way the advert would have been perceived in the market? As it was we had a whole bunch of white people saying they will open accounts at FNB because it took a stance against the government, and a whole lot of black people threat-

Have you noticed how many brilliant adverts are pulled back because of the perceived negative connotations that they have on the black population? How does that happen? To take an advert from conceptualisation to production without an inkling of these issues seems crazy. Is this a case of a young white executive who has been given the responsibility to understand or claims to know the black market? Why not consult your black colleagues next door?

On cultural issue, Tony Yengeni decides to slaughter an ox to cleanse himself from "prison" and the ensuing debate splits our rainbow nation between black people defending their "culture" and white people trying to "civilise" the natives. This civilisation debate assumes that before the advent of Christianity Africa was uncivilised and barbaric - how sad! Interestingly this debate also had a different dynamic in that you had a sprinkling of natives saying that they don't know what culture these other black people were talking about as they didn't believe in slaughtering period.

Back to the boardroom - imagine a scenario where the BEE partner and the black staff decided to appease their spirits for a BEE transaction that has gone so well by slaughtering on the premises? In Sandton nogal!

On the political front we can highlight reactions to the appointments of two black people who have gone on to be truly outstanding in their positions. When our president was first appointed deputy president certain sections of our society (particularly the media) were not happy at all. He was labelled all sorts of names including being a communist who was out to nationalise all the assets in white hands. Needless to say five years later he was a darling of that same section of the society.

In his eleventh year as finance minister, Trevor Manuel is being hailed as one of the finest ministers we have ever had in this country. Yet at the time of his appointment I remember defending the man amongst my colleagues and clients who happened to be predominantly white and questioned the appointment of a person without a degree to such a critical position. The adage that leaders are born went completely over their heads.

Are we being naïve to expect and assume that these mindsets have gone in terms of black people being appointed to senior positions in 2007? We continue to have senior black appointments questioned and this is compounded by companies being unwilling to take a calculated risk to appoint black people. How then do subordinates have faith in their leader if they do not believe in his

ening to pull their accounts from the bank because it chastised the government.

Disregarding the fact that FNB got free advertising for a whole two weeks (even the president mentioned them in his interview) what can we learn from this in the context of BEE? I believe the FNB scenario called for a consultative process. If my organisation is going to undertake a decision that will impact stakeholders whose profiles are reflected in my staff complement, perhaps it's worthwhile consulting with them to judge their reaction.

capabilities? Although, in most cases this perceived incapability has no substance. By the way, this perception is meted out by black employees on black executives as well.

In the BEE space the prospective target company needs to carefully look at their options and once they have made their choices they should back their BEE partners and stop looking behind their backs all the time. To my fellow BEE entrepreneurs, we need to know our limitations and stop promising to deliver tenders. As a BEE partner in an area where several competing companies are equally empowered, the best you can do for your company is to give them access to the game that they wouldn't have ordinarily been allowed to play in.

In sport we see that rugby is still being hauled in front of the parliamentary committee for sports. The implementing cast might have changed a number of times but the script remains the same. The latest argument is that you need at least 15 years to train a player to reach international quality. Really! If truth be told we have black people in their twenties who have been playing rugby all their lives. Bryan Habana, Chiliboy and company had many black team mates and talented black players that they looked up to, some of whom were better than them. The question is, what has happened to these players?

Are there instances in business where we have played the man instead of playing the game? The rugby example demonstrates that as long as we have a "them" versus "us" approach we will not quite get to the core of the issues affecting us. As more and more deals are structured to include staff, a consultative process needs to be put into place where a broad spectrum of issues are discussed openly outside of the parliamentary committees and board meetings.

As long as the inner workings of how decisions are arrived at are not communicated we will have the shop stewards leading the fight against the bosses. Super 14 and Currie Cup coaches are incentivised to win matches and trophies, and hence they will not go out of their way to focus on identifying and developing black talent or they will be jobless, as Chester Williams would testify. Change the remuneration structure to have a significant portion of it linked to the development of black talent and you will start getting the required numbers coming through. Ditto the corporate world.

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