

FIND THE LOGIC and win a bakkie

The hidden agendas are everything at the SABC writes **SYLVIA VOLLENHOVEN**

A man with a vacant look and an exceptionally clean desk the size of a table tennis board, pulls out a piece of paper from his drawer and says triumphantly: "You are not on this organogram."

The SABC has all the elements of a bad science fiction movie. The intelligent beings have left and they did not bother to take their organograms. Now, these pieces of paper with their neat blocks and rigid lines have fallen into the leadership vacuum.

The smarter mortals have realised that seizing the pieces of paper gives the power of meetings. The power of the papers and the power of the meetings rule everything. The political bosses have left. There are no new ones on the way. The meaning of catchwords like empowerment is slowly sinking in.

For management empowerment means they don't have to fear the phone call from the Union Buildings. So they play with the organograms, have more and more meetings and do vague brave new things.

Hiring some heavyweight journalists with clout from the print media out there – the papers they barely bother to read or respond to – is one of the vague things.

"Is Solomon Mahlangu a homeland leader?", a senior producer asks me one day.

It is one of many questions. We are the walking remnants of a time they never knew.

For the battered staff empowerment means they can call their own meetings. They can even send suggestions to management. If you link empowerment with the buzz of accessibility, it even means you could possibly lay your case at the door of Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri.

This leads to some ironic tendencies. A group of black men form an African Forum. Coloureds and Indians are excluded because the old pigmentocracy favoured them. The aim of the forum is vague. It seems as if they banded together to erase

the memory of their collaborator status and lash out at racism wherever they perceive it.

One of the new black journalists – excluded from the forum probably because they fear his struggle stripes – calls it "post traumatic stress black consciousness".

But it is not easy to deal with the craziness. A senior member of the forum objects to a documentary because there are no white people in it. The documentary is not aired on Newsline as a result. His colleagues say it is because he used to work for Military Intelligence. Find the logic and win a bakkie.

Every day there are new rumours. In the beginning I found it amusing.

"Did you know Jan used his brother, a boss in the Military to get Joe out of jail. He is serving time for terrorism!"

The knowledge is mildly fascinating until you are in a meeting with Jan and Joe and you cannot make any headway with sound suggestions. There are no real agendas at the meetings. The hidden agendas are everything.

"I'm sure that when they go to bed at night they are secretly surprised that television happened today," says a colleague who has since left.

Everybody knows the culture is wrong. Few people know why. Like crazed philanthropists they throw away money and resources at the moral poverty, hoping the headache will go away.

They hire people from a different culture, the milieu that fought apartheid. Perhaps, with luck and a bit of African magic, the new and the old will merge and produce healthy offspring.

There is no grand plan anywhere, but, like mindless followers of a weird religion, they talk all the time of the plan that is to come.

Last year they were on their knees waiting for the new Board to give them guidance. Bits of paper fluttered down on their



heads with worthy phrases. Vision and values. Mission statement. Editorial independence. They held the papers and repeated the new cant fervently.

"I am different, because I have vision," an executive tells me. He outlines his vision on a piece of paper. He draws blocks, circles, lines and arrows and his eyes are shining.

But no matter how hard they chant the new litany, it does not automatically translate into brave new programming. In the meetings they talk time slots. They talk structure. They talk of the next meeting. Content and quality is hardly ever discussed.

But slowly it dawns that little or nothing is coming from the brave new Board. Those in the know talk cynically about the splits between progressives and the old guard.

"The progressives don't turn up at meetings and Ivy is too scared to put things to the vote," somebody says. These bits of wisdom fertilise the grapevine.

Like teenagers mesmerised by fads, they finally turn their devotions to the chair. Dr Ivy is the new deity. She is imbued with awesome qualities. Few know who she is or where she comes from. It really does not matter.

It is enough to get a message from Dr Ivy's office. It implies you have the blessing of the new people. I get the feeling some of the messages left lying around are fake.



An executive producer tells his staff he is lunching with the chairperson.

It sounds intimate. The staff held back on their protests about working conditions. The executive neglects to mention that there will be a 100 other people at the lunch. Distorted communication is the order of the day.

But soon the worship of Dr Ivy and the promises of what she can deliver, fade. There is a new star in the SABC firmament. Perhaps heir apparent Zwelakhe Sisulu will break the awful spell of anomie. He even plans to have crusaders and he will call them the Transformation Unit.

Now, the awful wait on a sign from the new unit. The new guiding light will take them from the quagmire into which they were led by the National Party and lead them to the brave new dawn of credible journalism and quality programming.

But meanwhile they wait. Potential broadcasters watch gleefully and millions of South Africans realise daily why they do not feel compelled to pay their licences.

There was even a time when senior management put proposals on hold because they did not know what the Independent Broadcasting Authority would command them to do. The notion that the IBA could leave it up to the SABC to carve their turf as a public broadcaster is a difficult one.

It seems easier to self destruct and watch their turf disappear in great big chunks to

people who know the simple truths of quality broadcasting that reflects South Africans to themselves: broadcasters who will snap up the talented people in the SABC and move the Auckland Park towers dangerously close to becoming apartment blocks.

"You can't do a documentary in so many languages, because we have to wait on the Board's language policy," says a senior manager.

The Board in turn is waiting on the government. It is unthinkable that perhaps the SABC could from time to time devise a sensible approach which just might become a de facto language situation that could impact on the decision-making process of the awesome powers that be.

SABC thought processes go round in circles, mostly very small ones. There are those whose intellectual activity is caught up in neat boxes, but let's not put too fine a definition on these things. The bottom line is that the circles and boxes search ceaselessly for creative activity so that they can move in geometrically for the kill.

Recently a group of SABC producers, camera people, video editors, journalists and researchers went on a course.

"TV is a co-operative medium," said the enthusiastic trainer from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "You have to learn to work together in teams."

The teams formed but soon fell apart. There are many reasons. White racism. Black racism. Poor communication. Intolerance. Newism. Oldism. One day I am reduced to tears. The woman from the ABC says matter-of-factly: "I think there have been people crying in every group."

But the truth can be found in the Agenda department. Each person sits in a tiny cubicle. The cubicles are crammed into what used to be an open-plan office. The once-open office is separated from hermetically sealed executives in bigger boxes that cut out the light from the only windows. The sun shines only on management the way it was always intended.

Apartheid was the ultimate compartmentalisation. If you gave thought processes free reign you ran the risk of realising the evil and the danger of the fences. In turn the world isolated apartheid and the compartments grew bigger and better. And then, there was the ostracisation of the SABC in particular. Cut off from their colleagues – we hardly even talked to the SABC crews at press conferences – and cut off from other broadcasters internationally.

Now these people are told to work in teams, to embrace new ideas and to think creatively. What about the apartheid damage? What about the elevation of mediocrity? What about the absence of a journalistic culture?

I am on an assignment. A researcher tells me she is not sure if one can use coloured people in a documentary. "Because of affirmative action." Somebody else, on the same assignment, gives me a technical tip: "TV cameras love Asian skins."

An Agenda executive surveys the staff. Do they want the cubicles removed? A brave start. The majority say "no". We talk to a consultant who specialises in change management and ask him what is really needed to get the SABC moving forward. He jokes about mass psychotherapy and nobody laughs.

There is of course always the East German option: fire the whole lot and let them reapply for their jobs and appoint people on merit. And, don't forget to burn all the organograms.

■ Formerly a print journalist, Sylvia Vollenhoven recently joined the SABC as a specialist producer for Agenda.