



Illustration: Peter Midlane

RORY WILSON

At the end of 1989, Sowetan's non-editorial executive team was all white. At the end of this year there will be three white faces out of 11 people.

Statistically, that might seem to be a reasonable achievement and I suppose it is not a bad effort. However, behind the systematic and almost relentless search for black executives at Sowetan there has been much heartache and much disappointment.

Of course, the exercise of giving disadvantaged people a real opportunity has been so much easier at Sowetan than at other newspapers. After all, it is a newspaper serving the disadvantaged communities of South Africa. This has given us something that few other companies have had: a non-racist rationale for advancing people in the organisation. We have simply been able to say that we need executives who know and understand the markets that we serve. I know that affirmative action has been so much easier at Sowetan because of this simple, arguable and obvious rationale.

I pity those companies who must now overcome their racist pasts with an equally racist rationale for affirmative action.

There are many, many other rationales that float around in South African companies — and in our newsrooms — all of which explain why affirmative action is not being done. They go something like this: "It's irresponsible to promote people who are not ready for it." "We must train people before we promote them." "We must advance people slowly, at the pace they can handle."

These — and others like them — are the arguments of the benign racists who hold almost all (yes, almost all) the positions of authority in our businesses and in our newspaper companies. And I unhesitatingly include myself in this category.

In my experience, there is only one way to achieve affirmative action: Just do it!

Once you can acknowledge that you inherently a racist, all those fatuous ar-

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TRIPTYCH

guments about inverse racism, concern for the guy you are promoting etc just fall away. Then you are free to find good people, give them a chance and — very importantly — support them in their new jobs emotionally, physically and with whatever training they might need.

Good people who are given a chance, always take it. And almost all of them do well in the right supportive environment.

Yes, we made a number of mistakes at Sowetan and all of them were painful for me, for the people appointed and for the newspaper. But every company in the world makes its share of mistakes when employing new people....

I know that this is probably a simplistic approach. I also suspect that it will anger many people, specially those who make a living out of giving advice about these matters. It will probably also anger all those benign racists who were indeed Progs back in the 60's and 70's. I'm sorry if that's the case.

But if you don't buy my argument, test it. Ask any personnel manager or consultant why affirmative action has been so slow and listen carefully to the kind of reasons which are given. I'll bet that many or most of the reasons given will be mildly paternalistic, patronising and benignly racist. And not very convincing.

My bet is that there will soon be employment quotas in SA, simply because we are doing things too slowly and with too little commitment for our new rulers. So the sooner we all just do it the better — at least that way we'll have control over the process.

Rory Wilson is general manager of the Sowetan.

LAKELA KAUNDA

The democratisation of South Africa has brought new challenges to the print media, particularly white liberal newspapers which are more influential because of their wide readership.

Political changes have brought a crisis of identity and direction. Liberal newspapers in the past filled a vacuum as a platform for the voiceless. This was also a role filled by liberal MP's who made it their duty to speak out on human rights abuses on behalf of black people who could not speak for themselves, and whose leaders were often in detention or on Robben Island.

But all that changed on April 27: black people can now speak for themselves. Except, that is, in newspapers. Newspapers fill volumes of space with stories and features on affirmative action and restructuring. However, they are lagging behind in doing it themselves.

A lot has been said by influential figures such as deputy president Thabo Mbeki and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu about the need for the print media to transform itself for the sake of credibility. As it is, any form of criticism, be it constructive or not, is seen against the background of a white-owned, white-controlled and white-run establishment. Criticism of the new order is seen as the views of disgruntled whites who cannot accept change. People tend to shrug it off with the comment: "What can you expect?"

As it is, black journalists not in management positions are usually too powerless and unable to dictate how their stories should be used. They are often unable to convince news and sub editors that readers may be interested in a

feature on a weekend stokvel at Phola Park or Khayelitsha.

This is not to say some newspapers are not trying. The Star has started a regular front page anchor of ordinary people and it is quite informative of what the average person does with his or her life from day to day. It shows that the ordinary resident of Soweto or Umlazi is not a car hijacker, bank-robber, mass killer, rapist or thief.

But heads of departments remain white and male. Very few black people are encouraged to go into subbing or editing which results in embarrassing wrong spellings of African names which, in turn, serves to perpetuate a myth that the press does not care.

If newspapers want the type of transformation that happened in parliament in Cape Town, they will have to recognise the need for formal restructuring and affirmative action policies formulated democratically with the involvement of all who will be affected. For, because of historical reasons, we have different experiences and backgrounds and despite good intentions and ability to empathise, there are certain changes that can only be brought to newspapers by people of a certain background.

But this does not mean grabbing the first black face in the street to change the colour mix in newsrooms. We need people who can contribute to the development of the newspaper. They should be either qualified and experienced, or have potential to learn and grow.

This should not end at editorial departments only. Boards of directors of various newspaper groups and independent newspapers remain largely white, middle class and male. If they draw in black people, they are mainly middle class, and usually conservative, males.

Newspapers must once again realise they have no option regarding the hiring of black journalists. The opportunity has now presented itself to the print media to move with the rest of the country and realise that South Africa is an African country — and not an European enclave.

Lakela Kaunda is political correspondent of the Natal Witness.

PETER SULLIVAN

Affirmative action is easily one of the most challenging paradoxes facing business. We need to face this dilemma in responding to critics' perceptions of success and failure.

On one hand is the legitimate expectation that people at work — especially in senior positions — must reflect all South Africa's population groups. On the other is the demand — from minority groups in particular — that competence and merit must underpin recruitment and promotion. While antagonists of affirmative action may want to ignore this plea for fairness, it's hard to imagine any self-respecting individual would want employment smacking of nepotism nor would they want a temporary form of preferential treatment.

These premises don't necessarily present a paradox. But add a time restriction and the dilemma springs up. The challenge facing committed organisations, and those legislating on affirmative action, is to reconcile the relationship between competence and the time needed to acquire skills and develop talent. The year 2000, suggested as a target date to achieve a more representative balance of blacks, women and whites in serious management positions, is on our doorstep. Yes, we have to take action and set targets. But beware, if the time frame is inappropriate, we will be setting up talented people to fail.

The premises of this paradox may also leave us feeling helpless about engineering real change at work. I can already imagine the disclaimers lying in wait from organisations not serious about empowering working minorities. The range will be endless, from "not being able to find the right people" to company downsizing, high speed gravy trains, altogether different work ethics, "African time", glass ceilings and whatever else.

Then there are the criteria in judging commitment to, and success with, affirmative action. Again, the range of options is wide. Included here could be money spent on training, development and the identification of potential, the ratio of blacks, women and whites at all levels of the organisation and at senior positions in particular, the degree to which racist practice has been eliminated from corporate culture, board representation, delaying the promotion of competent people not defined as affirmative action candidates, actively seeking out the skills, services and products of entrepreneurs not previously considered, unambiguous employment advertising, "transparent" policy and decision-making, and so on.

Those faced with the challenge of affirmative action feel like a stringless Theseus in the Minotaur's lair. But there is an important difference — every organisation is in a position to make decisions with potential to take the sting out of the paradox. For example The Star's staff attitude survey said it was clear people want to be employed, promoted and judged on competence and merit. Assuming organisations practise valid and reliable performance management systems, which pay careful atten-

tion to specific processes of work, previously disadvantaged groups — in theory at least — should have a better chance of succeeding with an opportunity to explore the boundaries of their abilities in a job they enjoy.

We have made this commitment at The Star; the need to take in or promote more black people into senior positions is high on the agenda, but we are not going to back down on competence. To do so would be to condone mediocrity. Worse still is the message management would be sending its staff — if you want to succeed here, "anything goes". I cannot imagine a more irresponsible and

uncaring approach to people who make The Star what it is. And I don't think the newspaper's management would ever be forgiven.

Much of what is written about affirmative action seems to imply a collective South African psyche, mostly white and probably unconscious, upholding the myth of incompetence among previously disadvantaged people. It is an unfortunate perception, despite almost irrefutable evidence of the strong correlation between competence on one hand, and the time, effort, training and commitment needed to gain the skills necessary to succeed at work.

Finally, I have to respond to Joe Thloloe's comments in a previous "Review" that The Star's editorial management team is "almost lily-white". There would be more blacks but many have been "stolen" from us. South Africa's leading black journalists — and Joe Thloloe is one — grew up in Argus or SAAN mainstream newsrooms. Has any other newspaper group trained more black journalists?

Affirmative action will be here for a long time. We are serious about it. I hope others follow.

Peter Sullivan is editor of The Star.



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