

Despondency: BEE's Most potent enemy

“At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realization by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Once the latter has been so effectively manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do that will really scare the powerful masters” — Steve Biko.

There are many disturbing experiences daily for anyone trying to facilitate Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), be it at a conceptual or implementation level. These include resistance to change that one might be tempted to call racism, tokenism, fronting, the list is endless. They all lead to confusion and effectively slow BEE down.

Some whites have termed BEE “apartheid in reverse”, mainly out of fear or anxiety. Others insist that they need more certainty and direction, as a result are reluctant to commit to any particular standpoint. There are even those who subtly oppose it, taking advantage of their power to stall or undo the gains made so far. But you have not seen the real, and even more insipid, enemy of BEE if you have not met black pessimists.

My work as a transformation executive, and consultant earlier on, brought me in contact with the worst forms of faithlessness among black people. At a business breakfast in late 2003 I battled to concentrate on the speaker after hearing some astonishing sentiments expressed by two young black women at my table. These two women, one a merchant banker and another a chartered accountant with one of the big four South African audit firms, virtually said to me in not many words: “BEE? Thanks, but no thanks”;

In trying to elicit their response to the targets set for female representation in the financial sector in the financial sector charter (released October 2003) I expected them to say they were too low. For a country with as high a proportion of females to males, any women management target below 10% is unacceptable — considering what excellent business leaders women are. However, these two black women simply did not see the fuss about setting targets for women participation in the management and control of financial institutions. Their reason? They wanted to be appointed on merit! Try as desperately as I did to show them that their merit would not be worth much if apartheid was still in place, especially for women, they were far from convinced.

This kind of indifference is not uncommon among some black people - who believe that BEE is not quite necessary. So all the damage of the centuries of segregation and lack of opportunities for blacks will simply disappear now that we have a new political dispensation.

I have even heard blacks say that BEE must be abandoned as part of the South African policy framework after a definite period of time; this irrespective of whether or not it would have achieved its objectives. Others argue that BEE has so far only produced the “black elite”, and should therefore be done away with. When black people have so little faith in BEE — when it is intended to uplift them — how can we expect whites to be enthusiastic about it?

Our stance as blacks is too despondent and lethargic; it is the undoing of our economic struggle. Basically, with what we say and do, we cast a doubt on the ability, potential and the value of anything black.

This can only explain why Steve Biko argued that the essence of Black Consciousness is “the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation — the blackness of their skin — and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude”. Economic liberation shall remain a distant fantasy unless most of us change our attitude. As it is, our very stance is our worst enemy in many ways.

Take some of the successful black executives and entrepreneurs you know and ask yourself how much responsibility we are willing to accept to make BEE a reality. How many hours do we spend working in the townships and the villages to serve as mentors for black youth as opposed to engaging in bourgeois pastimes? Are we accessible to these “future leaders” or are do our secretaries filter them out with that indifferent question: “what is your call in connection with?” How about the black junior employees in our companies? Do we set aside a moment of our precious time to coach them to get where we are?

Another proof of how incredulous we are of our own potential is when we are called upon to appoint black suppliers or managers. We, not the whites, lock them out with the same high standards that we complained about when we were out in the cold. These are the same standards we could train or coach them to attain. Suddenly we behave in a way that suggests “black is equal to the lowering of standards”.

The other edition of our despondency is how black people are willing to settle for second best as customers. So

prevalent is this mentality that a black waiter or cashier seems to lower their standards when servicing a black customer. If you want to prove it, try asking for better service and see how begrudgingly it gets tossed at you. Even worse, ask many black managers and they bemoan the lack of respect displayed by their colleagues in the world of work. I have even seen it in some domestic workers, who often ditch diligence when working for a black person even if they receive better pay and treatment than what they used to get from a white employer.

Often we are told that black communities such as Soweto and Mdantsane, each with millions of black residents, could become formidable self-reliant economies. Biko emphasized how black people could use their "economic power to their advantage". Consumer boycotts in the 1980s proved just how much buying power blacks have.

Have these communities harnessed it to build its own entrepreneurs? Why is it that the general dealers and supermarket operators have not graduated from the world of micro-enterprises? Why have the taxi owners not been able to rise above the battle of associations soon enough to take control of the transport industry? Biko's take was that the "the white systems have produced through the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people".

Until we wake up, through objective research, analysis and debate, to the impediment that the subservience of blacks is to BEE there is little hope that much will change. Through Black Consciousness, leaders such as Steve Biko attempted to "infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook on life". This is happening, although the intensity is not enough to make a difference.

Black executives, even those of us in charge of driving transformation in corporate South Africa, are not talking among themselves consistently enough. As a result we cannot distil the essence of what BEE is about and what our role should be. We are not backing structures, organizations and platforms intended to unify a black response to the slow progress made by BEE, such as the Black Management Forum (BMF).

Instead, we have succumbed to the very luxuries that Steve Biko cautioned against: "inter-group suspicions and stereotypes" that render Africans, Coloureds and Indians enemies. These stereotypes overlook the fact that we were oppressed by the same system. Biko's contention was that the varying degrees of oppression were meant to divide black people further.

While we are fighting the inconsequential ethnic battles, BEE is stalling further and the marginalized masses are growing more disillusioned. Unemployment and poverty are scattering black people to the extent that the possibility of a unified black response or what Biko called "a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale" is diminishing and black people remain in economic bondage. BEE faces many challenges, but none as impervious as the lack of cohesive optimism among black people.