

African managers

“Deep down, I know I have relatives where there is poverty”

Many dismiss African managers as “sell-outs” and avaricious climbers willing to auction their services to the highest corporate bidder. **Geoffrey Modisha** argues that this view is far too simplistic.

African managers in South Africa are subject to contradictory imperatives: the company’s need to be competitive, the drive to deracialise, and the desire to improve the treatment of the majority-African workforce. Black economic empowerment and employment equity encourage the emergence of a black management class, but such managers are then associated with worker exploitation.

This article explores the experience of African managers in post-apartheid South Africa. Using interviews with African managers in a range of industries (including the metal, energy, motor assembly and service industries), it argues that the Marxist perspective of class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class is of little relevance in this case.

WHO ARE AFRICAN MANAGERS?

Managing is normally associated with automatic entrance into the middle classes, because managers are seen as linking employers and workers, and because of their earnings. The growth of the African middle class is particularly

interesting because it is happening against the background of apartheid, where Africans had little or no status, and because most poor people are African. African managers’ extended families are often impoverished.

Our survey indicated that African managers often have union backgrounds or formal qualifications, including university degrees. Almost all wanted to have their own businesses within five years.

Most came from ‘middle class’ families under apartheid. Their parents were priests, nurses, teachers or school principals. Most had moved to formerly white areas; a minority remained in the townships.

Their financial status, aspirations and outlook appear to put them squarely in the petit- bourgeoisie. But most refused to categorise themselves as such because they retained close ties with poor or unemployed extended family members.

The survey showed they had an average of five dependants – with the largest number being 20. Most were conscious of their families’

poverty, and were exposed to it by visiting them in townships and rural areas. Said one manager, “I can have tea with a couple of white guys and they look at me and say, ‘Here is a liberal person ... intelligent, all those kind of things’. But deep down, I know I have relatives and families who are staying in areas like boShakung, Mangaung and Mamehlake where there is poverty.”

The contradictions emerge even more clearly in the workplace.

AFRICAN MANAGERS IN THE WORKPLACE

One view, often identified as left-wing, labels African managers ‘sell-outs’, ‘exploiters of the African working class’ or supporters of a capitalist class in a democratic South Africa. Another liberal view tries to reduce the significance of extra-market forces in the labour market like race and gender, blaming black people’s marginal workplace position on inexperience and lack of skills. African managers are seen as greedily chasing the highest bidder in an auction for employment equity candidates among South African companies.

Such views are mostly based on casual observations and defence mechanisms among employers and unionists. Our survey showed that African managers respond differently to the workplace environment. One can identify four groups: the converted, the colonised, the 'play it cool' managers and the rebels.

'The converted' believe in their company and do everything possible to win promotion. They are mostly in BEE or transforming companies and they tend to be happy with their work environment.

The other categories are mostly found in workplaces marked by an "Irish coffee syndrome". Here there are many black people in low occupational scales with limited authority and influence on decision-making. Their influence is often in 'black affairs'. Said an MBA graduate, "I would want our influence to be on business... Even though I deal with customers and all along did things that were not black things... I get calls to discuss black affairs: BEE, corporate social responsibility, or whatever. But then I suppose that's South Africa for you."

In this context, the 'colonised' quickly identify how to gain promotion by joining the social networks of 'the big brass ring' - white managers who decide on policy and promotions. Said one African manager, "You go and play golf with these guys. You start watching rugby with these guys ... And then they'll say, 'Ja, this guy is becoming better, he's cool', and whenever they are looking for a person to promote they'll say, 'Here is a right guy, take him.'"

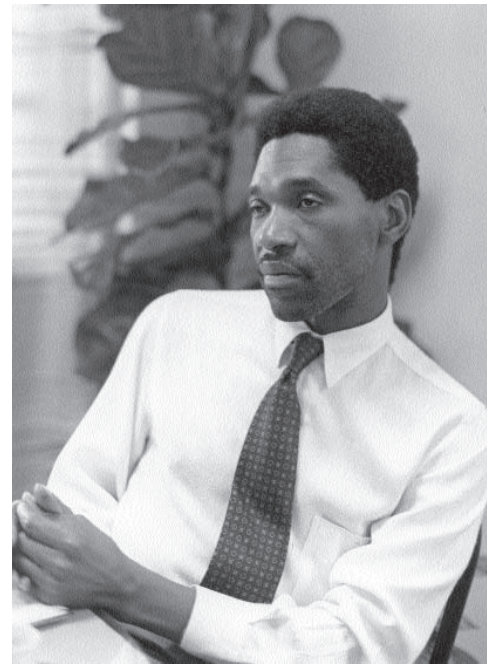
The 'play it cool' managers are highly critical of the lack of

workplace transformation, but feel unable to mount an open challenge. The difficulties such managers face are made worse by the lack of strong support organisations. Indeed, they are critical of unions. One respondent with a union background said, "Unions are involved from the junior level management (supervisors and shop stewards) downwards. However, I don't think there is an impact... because [there is] lack of skills and knowledge and it's easy to [co-opt] the leadership... we give them five cars to do the so-called running around. They will be doing their own private things, rather than focusing on issues of the employees."

The Black Management Forum (BMF) is seen as lacking teeth. Interviewees argued that although it promoted affirmative action and BEE to transform the economy, it had difficulty in monitoring implementation in the workplace. Most BMF members had been co-opted into senior management without initiating real change.

The 'rebels' openly challenge the workplace status quo, and most senior white managers do not like working with them. They either move up or lose their jobs. The 'play it cool' managers and the rebels are more likely to quit and become job-hoppers, and seem to be growing in number.

Black university graduates who naively believe democracy has come to industry frequently encounter the 'the Irish coffee syndrome' and 'the big brass ring'. A 27-year-old engineering graduate said he initially believed the South African workplace had changed. "Because of the treatment white managers gave people I regarded as my fathers, I had to choose



between my work and values... I had to face the reality and show my white colleagues that I'm not going to tolerate this."

This suggests one cannot classify all African managers as sell-outs or open to the highest bidder. Those who are politically conscious play it cool or become rebels; they are critical of both unions and employers.

But what is African managers' experience in communities?

AFRICAN MANAGERS AND COMMUNITIES

South Africa's residential areas comprise formerly white suburbs, new middle-class areas, townships and urban squatter camps, and former homelands. Managers who live in white suburbs find them strange, saying "we don't live like in the townships" and "neighbours don't know each other". Some say the alienation prompts them to initiate "*iculture yase kazi*". Said one manager, "We are four black people in the same block and we always visit each other... watch soccer matches together and tell each other where we are going for weekends. If I don't see you on Saturday and you did not tell



anyone where you are going, I always call and ask: 'Hey, man, where are you?'

Most do not experience open racism, but some say the residue of social segregation comes to the fore. One respondent said white churchgoers would not give his family room to sit in the same church pew, adding, "Some white people don't want to change because we allow them to carry on with these old habits."

Others said that when black people arrived in the neighbourhood, whites moved out. "Black and white people sit together joking and seem to be doing everything together. But, deep down, we all know that we do not have the respect we all deserve from each other."

Some respondents said the way they were perceived in townships and rural areas had not changed. Others said they were viewed as leaders because they were well-off, or were seen as 'trying for white'.

Most managers living in the white suburbs said people in black communities expected them to contribute financially. One said he was expected "to extend a four-room house at home". Said another, "There are lots of hopes and expectations from my family, both in the workplace and at home. At my house, I get visitors who bring CVs. Because you drive *Pajero*, they think you can provide everything, including work and advice... I play a role of an employer, adviser,

counsellor... everything: You are seen as a [source of] hope."

African managers' experience of white suburbs and black communities underscores the continuing impact of segregation. How do they respond?

ROLE IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Almost all respondents said they did not participate in black community activities because they lived too far away or did not have time. Some, mostly those with qualifications from middle-class families, insisted they would not return to their former communities because they 'have different values'. Said one manager, "I struggle to live with those people because of my interpretation of reality, values and views." Another commented, "Honestly, townships and rural areas are not safe."

However, some said they made sure they contributed to their communities. One ran projects, and ensured his home community received preferential treatment. Others were involved in government projects, such as local economic development initiatives. Some wanted to contribute, for example by starting school competitions or giving motivational talks.

One interviewee emphasised the importance of being a role model, "After 1994, I saw people moving to suburbs and I [decided to] remain back because if we all leave the township, our youth will end up having wrong role models; people who are unemployed but getting money from unclean sources."

Another expressed scepticism "about so-called community activities because most are meant for CVs... I do it in an *African way* because I'm not in public relations social responsibility."

All the respondents said they helped extended family members, either by giving money or information, because of their experiences of suffering and in the spirit of *ubuntu*. One remarked, "As a typical black person, I still do a lot. I've got children of my sister, who had passed away, that I'm taking care of. These are people who are going to help me tomorrow."

However, some were disillusioned about such contributions. "We've got a serious... entitlement problem. We always feel [that] because we are needy... we are entitled to help. I'll teach people from ekazi the work and give them advice about how to run a contract business .. after three months they will come late, at 9.30, and at 12 they will take lunch, take a long walk and lastly they will say... 'Hey man, help a black brother'. Some of them will come here to ask for money under the impression that they are going to use it functionally, but they'll spend it on their girlfriends."

FINAL REMARKS

African managers' refusal to classify themselves as middle class flows from their racial social status, and their responses to the workplace shows that one cannot brand them all sell-outs. They demonstrate that class consciousness is not simply a product of the workplace. We should be aware of the forces acting on this stratum if it is to be mobilised for a more democratic South Africa.

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