

'I'm a manager but some bosses still regard me as a shopsteward'

Over the last few years a lot has been said and written about top union leaders leaving to join politics, business or the civil service. But little is known about developments at lower levels of union leadership, particularly shopstewards. This article focuses on an ex-shopsteward who is now a manager at Novartis, in Johannesburg.

Humble background

Joe Mahlangu is not an ordinary manager. His rise to the position of industrial relations manager at Novartis, a pharmaceutical company born out of a merger of Swiss company Ciba Geigy and Sandoz, did not follow the normal route to the top. To begin with, he comes from a very humble background. Born in Springs in 1947 from a working class family, he grew up in Winterveld where he attended school up to standard nine. Unfortunately, he could not finish because his family did not have money. On leaving school at the end of 1969 he retraced his steps to Springs in search of employment. 'It was very difficult,' he recalls. 'Because of the influx control I couldn't get a job as I was supposed to get a reference book first.'

Eventually Mahlangu got his first job as a temporary labourer at Checkers in Brakpan. He worked there for three years before getting a permanent job at Ciba Geigy in 1973 as a chef in the canteen. He held this job for ten years. Neither he nor

Sakhela Bublangu interviewed Joe Mahlangu, former CWIU shopsteward and now a manager. Mahlangu explains how he is still able to use his union experience to support workers and influence other managers.

those to whom he served food in the canteen would have imagined that he would later become a manager in the same company. The story of his rise to a managerial position is intimately related to the history of trade unionism for black workers in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Early in 1985 the workforce at Ciba Geigy joined the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). 'The conditions were bad and things were just pushed to us employees. Everything was non-negotiable, like wages and all conditions of employment. Nothing was negotiated then.'

The 'very toothless' liaison committee that the company had established had made the workers wiser by making them see the necessity of a trade union. By this time the canteen workers had spotted the leadership qualities in Mahlangu and elected him to be

a shopsteward. Soon thereafter he became the chairperson of the shopstewards committee at the company.

A worker leader

Mahlangu became involved in the practice and politics of militant unionism and mass mobilisation. He found the experience enriching and liberating. He admired the way unions operated. They had policy documents to guide and regulate the behaviour of all members and leaders, and most importantly, he was at ease with the democratic culture of the union: 'In the union you have got many structures, starting from shopfloor level. You debate issues until you reach consensus. You need to debate issues and proposals, you can't just come with your own proposals. You need to carry the mandate.'

Mahlangu's activism, particularly as a shopsteward, gave him the opportunity to develop his leadership skills in a way that more than made up for his lack of formal managerial training.

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This experience enabled him to grasp the complex nature of leadership and accountability, namely, that while leaders have to lead, they also have to be good followers. 'As a shopsteward you are a leader but at the same time you need to discuss issues with the workers themselves. You can't take a decision on your own. You need a mandate. But this does not say that you need to hold back.' For him, loyalty to the workers and the

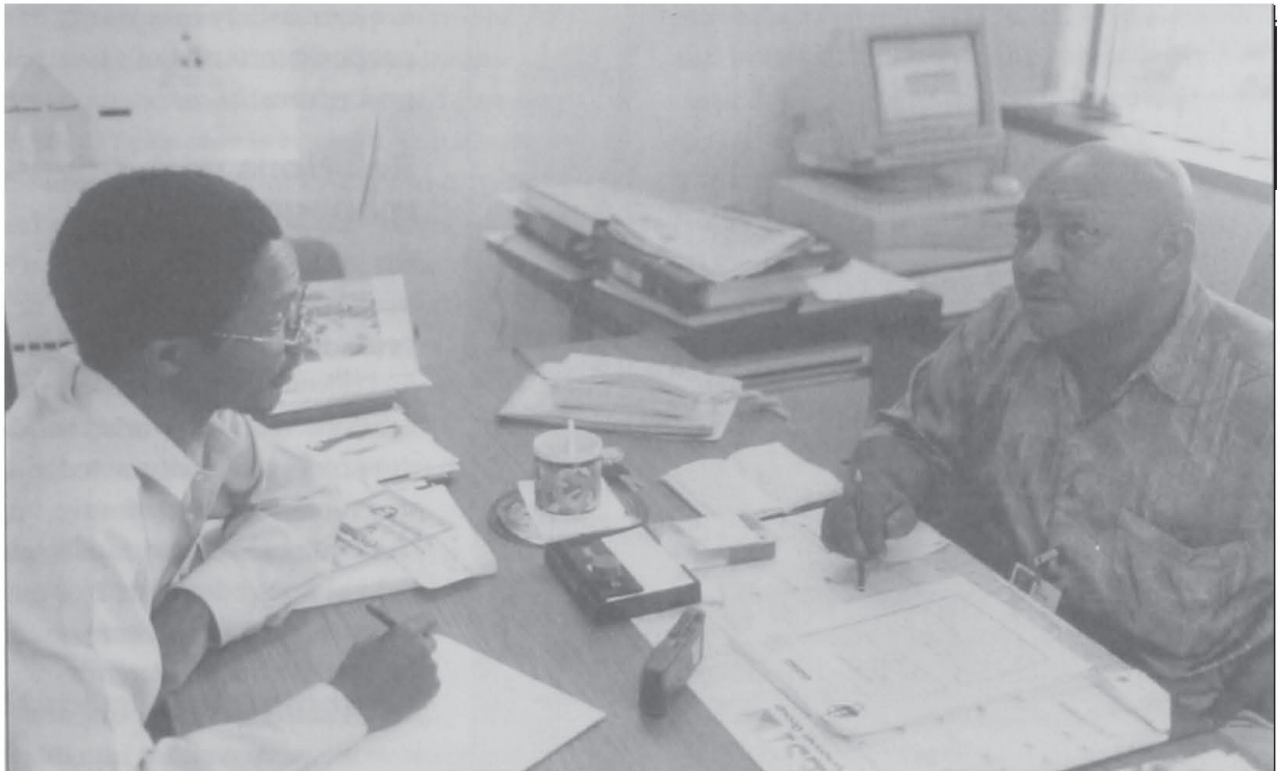
mandate did not mean 'running to and fro. Somewhere along the line you need to say, "with this decision, which I'm taking now, I'm going to achieve something". I didn't have the mandate from the workers, but we are negotiating within the parameters. You need to say "look, as your leader I'm putting my head on the block". In certain instances this may mean that where a leader takes a decision without a specific mandate, but acts within the broad parameters of the original mandate, he or she must go back and sell it to the workers.'

There were many proud moments during Mahlangu's term as a shopsteward. The one that stands out above all is the workers' victory in a strike that he led in 1990, when management refused to allow workers to join the Chemical Industries National Provident Fund (CINPF). This campaign took him to Switzerland to address the congress of the then International Chemical and Energy Federation. While in Geneva, the Ciba Geigy directors invited Mahlangu to lunch. The managing director, who was feared by all at headquarters, provoked him by telling him never to take the workers out on strike again. 'I didn't even eat their lunch. I was furious. I was very hot, *broer*. I said, "Schneider, I'm not here for this plate of food, you must understand me correctly". I overturned the table there. Nobody had the lunch that day. I said, "I can't fly from South Africa for this plate of food. You can have your food. Here!" They were surprised to see a black person doing this. But I did it!'

Soon after his return, management acceded to their demand and Mahlangu was elected the first full-time shopsteward at his factory.

Becoming a manager

How then did this militant unionist swap the shopfloor for the boardroom?



Sakhela Buhlungu interviewing Joe Mahlangu.

Mahlangu explains that it was a tough decision. When Ciba Geigy merged with Sandoz in 1996, the new management looked for someone to handle the portfolio of industrial relations at the plant. Most of the Ciba Geigy managers had left because they were not happy with the terms of the merger. The new managers were looking for a person who knew the environment and the people at the plant. They identified Mahlangu as the right person and asked him to take up the new position. 'I had been in the company for 23 years by then, from 1973 to 1996.' At this time he was a central figure in the union, sitting in numerous structures from the shopfloor to the NEC. He consulted with all these structures and they all agreed that he could take the position. NEC delegates expressed their appreciation to him for consulting the structures which many other unionists today do not bother to do. 'I was given the green light by our fellow comrades,' he says. 'They said, "look, that is why we need

to develop our people in order that tomorrow they are able to govern".'

Relations with the workforce

The change of roles has not affected Mahlangu's relations with workers. He still interacts with union members and leaders at different levels. In February this year he was among many ex-unionists who were recognised as veterans at the launch of CEPPWAWU. 'It was great because you can see that our fellow comrades still remember those of us who have contributed to the liberation struggle. That is why I'm not ashamed even to put this certificate in my office. And there is nobody who can question it. I'm proud of that.'

Workers on the shopfloor have a lot of confidence in Mahlangu. He trains shopstewards, advises and gives ideas on how to approach certain issues and performs the role of advisor and social worker. He also finds himself intervening in favour of workers - for example, he



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me is to satisfy everybody properly, in terms of procedures, *klaar*.'

Relations with other managers

His relations with other managers are polite and professional. Although some feel uneasy with his close relations with the workers and the union, most acknowledge that it works. It is obviously something that their training did not equip them for. By contrast, serving workers is precisely what Mahlangu's union activism was about, and it works very well for him in his new position. He says that recently he wanted to move to a department closer to the

counsels workers instead of giving them warnings and reprimands shopfloor managers for their negative anti-worker attitudes. 'That is why some of the bosses say I'm still a shopsteward. But, it's not to say when I'm introducing an issue it's because I'm a shopsteward. It affects everybody,' he says.

It is not often that a manager has lunch with workers in their canteen or joins them on social occasions such as parties. Mahlangu does. He uses these occasions to discuss issues with them as he used to when he was a shopsteward. There is always a buzz in his office as workers come in to consult about all sorts of issues. 'In this company, I've still got my constituency.

My base is very, very strong. I don't think there is any other person in management who can give me problems here. Even if these bosses can leave and others come and find me in the same spot, I'll still be comfortable. All it takes for

shopfloor, but the human resources director disagreed. 'I wanted to be closer to the workers but my boss refused flatly. He said, "no, be here. ... even these whites here need you. It's not just the workers who need you." Hence I'm saying that I'm also a social worker.'

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Mahlangu's independence and refusal to do things just to please other managers is a trait that comes from his time as a union leader. He says he does not feel obliged to ingratiate himself to others, and thus he does not go out of his way to fit into the existing social networks of the

managerial class 'I don't buy somebody's face, and I hate to do that. Sometimes there are social gatherings here I just go there, ten minutes is enough You know the talk there is about cricket and rugby and things like that. We are soccer fans When they talk about things like that you don't really fit. But I am able to acclimatise with all managers very easily And it's simple. My interest is to talk about issues of the country. Even if we are talking about sport, you must politicise the issues and make them discuss on your terms You make them realise that it does not mean that just because I am a manager I want to change my lifestyle.'

State of the unions

Mahlangu believes that union strength has been declining since the first democratic elections in 1994. 'Things started to decline, particularly the commitment from some of our fellow comrades I would say it is mainly the membership It is really embarrassing The structures are collapsing The higher structures are functioning But from the lower levels, locals, *bayi broer*. They even mentioned it at the [merger] congress [John] Gomomo mentioned it.'

He should know because before he left the union at the end of 1996 he sat in most of these structures 'We saw that thing, from 1994. As chairperson I would go to meetings and few comrades would come. People said everything is okay, the ANC has won and everything is going to come on a silver plate. But they don't realise what is ahead Now is the beginning of the struggle. The bosses are strategising *broer*, make no mistake.'

What advice would he give to the unions? 'We should be strong here on the shopfloor We should push issues here. But right now we rely on the LRA because it covers us. We leave everything that is why

our structures are collapsing Negotiations end at the CCMA Since we introduced central bargaining forums, workers are saying, go and see how you resolve things there There is no mobilisation Nothing!'

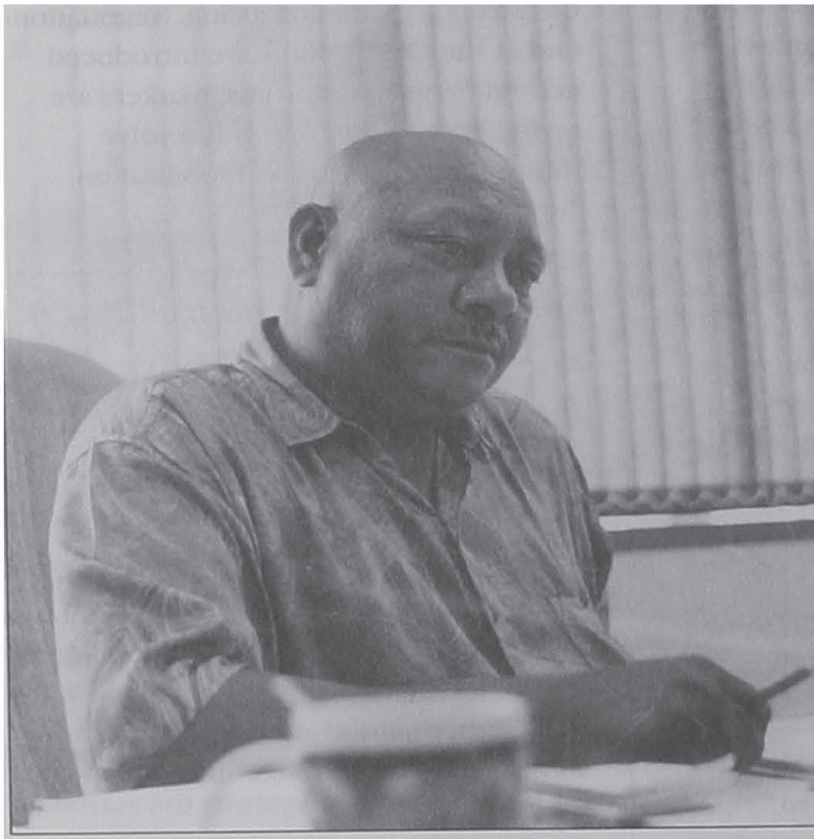
'You make them realise that it does not mean that just because I am a manager I want to change my lifestyle.'

He gives the example of union organisation at his own plant Even though he is now in management he often finds himself planning meeting schedules for the shopstewards. He finds that the shopstewards committee meets only when they are in crisis

New style of managing?

Mahlangu insists that his style of managing is different from that of white managers and black personnel officers who worked at his company before him His guiding principle is that a manager must be firm and fair. He is critical of many black personnel officers and managers such as the ones who used to work for his company 'We used to call them moderates I'm sorry to say this about them, but whatever they were doing they were trying to please the bosses, which is wrong You must never please your boss at the expense of another person Never do that! That is something that some of us don't do these days because we know our rights, and they [the bosses] can do nothing'

Unlike those managers who have policy documents locked up in their cupboards and which they never bother to read, he prefers to do what the documents prescribe. However, he also argues that the managers



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need to be flexible and open-minded in applying policies. He gives the example of discipline. Instead of seeking to punish, he prefers counselling because the objective is to correct a person. He recalls a case of a white manager who fought with a shopsteward in his department. He called both of them in, 'I talked heart out there! I said to him "you know, those days are gone when you don't have respect and trust for each other. If you are going to continue with your attitudes, I don't think this company will be able to accommodate you. This is a multinational company, it's not a local company where a boss will just come and say *bler is my maatskapy, jy kan doen wat jy wil of wat jou baadjie en fokof*. We don't do that." Yo!, *utbambe njengetamati manje!* (He is as tame as a lamb now). I'm telling you!'

This even-handed approach applies to all. 'There are still workers who like to take

advantage of the fact that now the IR manager is a fellow comrade. *Broer*, deal with that person accordingly. You have got a document, it's there and everybody abides by it. Once you condone wrong things, *broer*, then the blame is going to be on you. You must never condone them. Be strict on discipline, be fair and firm, *klaar!*'

Some will argue that Mahlangu is being naïve about his position in management and that he will soon outgrow the influence of militant unionism that has shaped his approach to his job. Radical unionists will argue that management is a class role that does not depend

on the role of individuals and that company policies reflect class positions and interests. Traditional managers will see him as someone who does not fully understand his role. But he does not believe so. He sees himself as someone standing between the workers, on the one hand, and traditional managers (conservative whites and 'moderate' blacks), on the other. He accepts that he is on the side of management but he sees his role as that of changing the mind sets of his fellow managers so there is fairness in the workplace. But fairness does not mean taking sides. All it means for him is 'You must be approachable and you must be able to approach the workers.' ★

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