

'Shed the past'

the NPI and transformation

Bulletin: You arrived at the NPI as a transformation specialist. What is your history?

Dladla: I have always been fascinated by the way organisations impact on the environment and the environment impacts on organisations. This interaction affects the individual and the type of organisation that we end up with. My doctorate focused on organisational behaviour.

It was also the focus of my work. I started as a clinical social worker at a hospital. I was then a management development specialist building the capacity of NGOs [non-governmental organisations], tertiary institutions and local government. I was then appointed to do the transformation at National Parks.

So I came to the NPI with a diverse background regarding transformation. But the key issue remains the same: how do you help individuals to change their work environment. Also, how do you make the work situation support your aims as an organisation? This is critical because transformation is not only about the human element. An organisation also needs to change the systems, processes and organisational culture to transform. You transform so you can be effective at your new role.

Bulletin: What are the features of a successful transformation process?

*Etienne Vlok interviews
Yvonne Dladla, executive
director of the National
Productivity Institute (NPI).*

Dladla: That is a very difficult question. It varies depending on what we are trying to transform. The key feature is that you have to get the buy-in of everybody – from the top through to all levels. This is quite difficult because different people get into the process at different points.

Another feature is getting to a common vision of what it is that you are trying to transform. If you don't have a vision, you are likely to encounter a lot of problems.

You also need to identify a process of how you are going to transform. Most of the time this process is gradual – you don't know how it is going to play itself out. But it must be a process. You cannot go in today and move a chair from one corner to the other and think you have transformed.

Bulletin: How does one ensure real transformation takes place?

Dladla: Real transformation must be according to the goals of key stakeholders. These stakeholders should agree on what to transform and how to transform it. If



Yvonne Dladla.

you don't know what to transform, you will be forever doing transformation.

In South Africa you have to look at key features regarding transformation. The organisation, or the individuals in it, should be in line with the country's direction and vision. Also you need to shed South Africa's past and come up with a truly South African situation. The organisation needs to reflect values and aspirations that every South African in the organisation can identify with.

Bulletin: If a company were entering a transformation process now, what suggestions would you have for it?

Dladla: Start by identifying what the company wants to transform and how it wants to do it. It is also critical to specify up front what the end results will be. This process should not just involve senior

management. All key people inside and outside the organisation should be part of this process. That done you will come up with a shared vision. Then you need to identify key people to champion the transformation process. These people need to make sure everybody comes on board. You should also create forums to determine what needs to be done, who should do it and how to do it.

I would also emphasise the communication side of it. You might think you have communicated enough but then you realise that a lot of people are still not feeling part of it. This comes up continuously as an issue of transformation because you can't communicate enough.

Bulletin: What are the respective roles of unions, employers and workers in transformation?

Dladla: All of them are key role-players in the transformation process. Transformation will not happen without unions, employers or workers. Where transformation has been successful is where they have all participated and shared the same vision. I don't think one is more important than the other.

Bulletin: Is transformation different in the public and private sectors?

Dladla: No, I don't think it is different. The only difference is that you are reporting to different stakeholders. In both sectors you want a South African organisation that is in line with the country itself.

In the private sector transformation needs to take into consideration the

interests of its shareholders and make the organisation sustainable. In this way you can impact positively on the bottom line.

With the public sector the transformation is more critical because the shareholders are the taxpayers. You are accountable to the taxpayers. So you have to make sure that the transformation makes the organisation accessible to the taxpayers.

Bulletin: *What are the aims of the NPI?*

Dladla: The NPI's broad aim is to help companies and individuals improve their productivity. We promote the notion of productivity so people become aware of it and ensure they have the right skills and knowledge and access to the right infrastructure and legislation. This will ensure the country becomes productive.

Bulletin: *Why was it necessary to appoint someone like yourself at the NPI?*

Dladla: I don't know. I assume that the board needed my experience and my expertise to help transform the organisation.

The board wanted me to open up the organisation to South Africa and other countries. As productivity is directly linked to economic growth, the board wanted to popularise the concept. The board wanted to make sure it is not just an intellectual exercise.

Bulletin: *What did the transformation process at the NPI involve?*

Dladla: We started with an exercise that looked at the vision of the NPI. It involved all the staff. The board and the Social Plan and Productivity Advisory Council then came up with the final vision for the organisation.

They did this using the information from the staff workshop and their own workshop. We regarded this final vision as the transformation vision. It provided the parameters for transformation. We then aligned this vision with the mission and developed a structure to complement the new vision and mission. Finally, we appointed staff to implement the mission and vision.

Bulletin: *How did this process go?*

Dladla: It went relatively okay – like any other process of transformation. It is not an easy thing. You're not just transforming a structure but you are requesting, demanding or pushing people to change. A difficulty with such a process is that change is not just an intellectual exercise. It is also an emotional one and different people reacted differently to it.

There were those who accepted the change and those who sat on the fence. There were those who felt that the change was too fast for them and those who felt the change was creating a completely different environment. There were those who strongly opposed the change and those who wanted to know what was happening. Those who wanted to see what was happening were actually trying to ensure that the change did not affect them negatively.

Some of the people opted out and decided to leave the organisation. Others tried resisting the change from within by continuously blocking it. Others moved on with the changes.

In summary, the NPI transformation process went as expected. It was normal.

Bulletin: *In the past, workers and unions might have perceived the NPI as an employers' mouthpiece. Was this justified? How are you changing it?*



The NPI wants to ensure people have the right skills and knowledge.

Dladla: We have had a lot of feedback from the unions and other people on this. They perceived the NPI as an employers' mouthpiece that looked at labour productivity from the employer's point of view rather than looking at total factor productivity. So yes, we have received that criticism and we are trying to change that.

In the new NPI we emphasise the role of the social partners, that is business, labour and government. The tripartite approach is now used in consulting and training programmes.

Right now we suggest that all the NPI employees who work in enterprises make sure they take the interests of labour and of business into consideration. It should not be one against the other.

Bulletin: *The NPI is now involved in the Workplace Challenge and the Social Plan. Can you tell us about that involvement?*

Dladla: The NPI's involvement in the Workplace Challenge is that of project

manager. The project aims to transform the workplace and ensure employers and labour are part of this transformation process. We have been involved in quite a few different sectors already. We make sure labour and management talk about what they need to transform and how they need to do it. They also look at how they can transform the different sectors. The Jobs Summit initiated the Social Plan. The NPI provides technical support to ensure we take steps as early as possible to prevent job losses. In cases where retrenchments will take place, we find creative ideas to make sure that there is minimum job loss.

Bulletin: *Has this contributed to the NPI's image changing among workers and unions?*

Dladla: Yes, we have lots of examples where jobs have been saved and the unions empowered. With the Social Plan we empowered the unions to come up with alternatives to job losses. ★