

PROFILE | ERIC RATSHIKHOPHA



CORPORATE TRANSFORMER

Eric Ratshikhopha's diary would make interesting reading to say the least. Symbolic of South Africa's fresh approach to business, he is a corporate culturist of note. Kerry Dimmer speaks to the man determined to make a difference

If the strength of a company could be epitomised by the sagacity of one person, Xstrata would have to choose its executive director of corporate development, Eric Ratshikhophla, as its representative. Ratshikhophla is responsible for taking the company way beyond the general principles contained in the Mining Charter. Having ensured that the basic prescriptions of the charter had been fulfilled ('the numbers were right, for instance,' he says), it was obvious to Ratshikhophla that more was needed.

'We had implemented the charter without taking into account where we were committed. We appointed many black people into senior positions, ensured that more women came into the organisation and were buying from black suppliers. We made good progress. But doing the right thing resulted in a few new problems.'

'For instance, a number of black employees felt that the company was discriminating against them, citing specific incidents ... and I had no reason to doubt them. But equally, white supervisors and managers passionately expressed their commitment to transformation, believing that all employees, irrespective of race, should be advanced. Again, I had no reason to doubt them. I realised what was really going on was that we were all talking past one another.'

Ratshikhophla communicated to his fellow executives that a second phase of transformation was required — that of changing the corporate culture. 'We were supposed to be providing leadership but it appeared that our employees saw things differently. This is when we turned our focus to the internal corporate culture and really began to understand the diversity that existed.'

Ratshikhophla explains that 'if transformation becomes tyrannical, it can unintentionally affect the workforce negatively. Besides, I was also getting tired of talking this "black/white" language ... constantly trying to get the figures right. Now we are creating an environment where our employees can look in the same direction. They now have a common understanding and commitment to our objectives, enabling Xstrata to achieve all its goals. We have, in other words, engaged our people.'

Ratshikhophla has always been 'for the people' and has a deep love of history. After graduating with a masters in sociology from the University of the North in Limpopo, he entered the scholastic world of lecturing. He was an idealistic young man who refused to fail his students (as he was instructed to do) for boycotting lectures during the 1976 uprisings.

His studies qualified him for a human resources position at the then rather progressive Anglo American coal division in Witbank followed by an impressive climb through the organisational charts of Gencor, Bllifton, Gensec and, of course, Xstrata.



Ratshikhophla believes that successful South Africans have a responsibility to help others. 'The biggest thing is access — access to information, education and health. We must remember that we can open many doors for young people without necessarily providing or donating money.'

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“ We underestimate the number and importance of the contacts we make in life and then forget that we are able to influence the development of others through these connections. People only remain ignorant if they don't have access to information. It is up to us to help them by pointing them in the right direction.”

“ Corporates that need to be pointed in the right direction should heed Ratshikhophla's advice on the way forward: 'Africans have an incredible ability to work as a team. We only need to harness that. I often see an imbalance between individuals and the organisations they work for. We have come out of the darkness of the past. We have moved out of apartheid. Surely there is nothing that we cannot overcome.' ”