

# will of iron

Thabisile Mchunu of Evraz Highveld Steel and Vanadium may just be one of the most influential transformation pioneers in South African mining. BY KERRY DIMMER

**The balance between the earth and the life it supports is never more apparent than when mining is undertaken.** Evraz Highveld Steel and Vanadium, including its Mapochs mine, is executing projects that are so way beyond the corporate social responsibility and broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) requirements in South Africa's Mining Charter, they could be considered life changing.

Any number of mining houses can talk the talk when it comes to compliance with government policies, but Evraz says it differs in that it wants to make a real impact by developing small towns into productive farming communities, such as Roossenekal in Limpopo and eMalahleni in Mpumalanga, both of which are hosts to Mapochs mine.

A little under two years ago, Evraz Highveld Steel and Vanadium head-hunted Thabisile Mchunu from a senior position at Accenture Management Consulting to lead the company's transformation process in this region. When you consider the extraordinary number of achievements Mchunu amassed as a corporate management consultant, it is startling that she would be attracted to a world of industry and small town mining life.

'Most people gravitate towards glamour, but I chose to leave that behind,' she says.

'What swung it for me is that Evraz has really made the decision to commit to transformation and has been prepared to spend whatever it takes to escalate the spirit of empowerment and, in so doing, change the perception that mining operations are greedy and careless.'

As transformation manager, Mchunu positioned Evraz as a Level 5 BEE company from its previous Level 8 score within four months. Soon after and as a trustee of the Mapochs Community Trust, she orchestrated an empowerment deal that saw the realisation of 26% black ownership, two years ahead of the scheduled deadline.

Dynamic doesn't even begin to describe Mchunu. She has international experience, innumerable certifications, an ex-client list that reads like a 'Who's Who' and a clear set of ethics that ground her. There is no doubt that Mchunu defines leadership. Her secret? 'Human resources and business consulting,' she says. 'If you have a good understanding of human resources, your skills become dynamic and complex,' says Mchunu.

'In a very fast-paced environment, such as consulting, where you are charging by the hour, customers look for solutions that wow them and that is how you learn to turn around business quickly. It also

teaches you to become a good team leader and if, like me, you can expose yourself to many industries, you will have a collage of experiences with a mixed masala of skills.'

Being responsible for transformation, Mchunu has managed millions of dollars for projects. And there's no end in sight. The momentum of projects being implemented will not stop until a legacy of social and environmental consciousness has impacted on generations of local residents, says Mchunu.

'We decided from the start that we wouldn't invest in short-term projects,' she says. 'The Mapochs Combined School is an adoption programme that we fully maintain. We have supplied ablutions, laptops and refrigeration, as well as solar power and big screens so that the school is able to offer evening classes and broadcast educational DVDs in support of our locally sponsored ABET programme, which is run by Media Works.'

Thirty schools in the area are learning about HIV/Aids as part of the curriculum in a collaboration between Evraz, Regency Network Foundation and the Department of Education. 'By doing so we are addressing our future business leaders, helping them to

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understand the risks, the symptoms and the stigmas around this disease. Mining towns struggle with HIV/Aids education.'

Evraz's integrated plan for community development surprisingly does not (yet) include housing.

'Anyone can build beautiful houses, but we decided to go back to basics: food and nutrition. What is the point of living in a rural environment if you cannot use the land effectively enough to sustain yourself and your family?' asks Mchunu. 'With the right guidance, skills training and dialogue, we have joined forces with the municipality to introduce critical food creation ventures.'

Partnering with Umsizi Sustainable Solutions, a company that has assisted Mapochs mine with its local economic development programmes for a number of years, and together with experienced agriculturists, Evraz has determined, through land assessment, soil analysis and other research, that hydroponic farming techniques are ideally suited for the development of commercial farming practices.

Evraz has enabled 350 households in Makwana village to become self-sufficient by helping them grow their own produce. These farmers have been provided with basic skills to understand methods of plantation, ploughing and seeding.

They have also been given seeds, greenhouses, manure and specially designed ground-level water-storage tanks to capture rain that is piped through underground tunnels into the soil by a simple pump system.

'This is not expensive technology, just simple low-maintenance processes that are yielding high-quality organic produce,' says Mchunu.

Evraz has begun rolling out this system to four other villages, but the model won't end here. 'It's going commercial. We have identified a piece of land to create a real enterprise development hub with stores, processing facilities and distribution so that the locally produced organic products can be accessible to towns, major supermarket chains, even export parties,' says Mchunu.

'The downstream economic benefits are obvious, especially when you see the quality: beetroot the size of your head, crisp spring onions, hearty potatoes, spinach and soon, fruit.'

Land rehabilitation on cessation of mining operations is standard practice, but Evraz, in inimitable style, believes it pointless to have to source indigenous flora that had been destroyed. 'Why not save the flora first?' asks Mchunu.

The erection of its own nursery allows the mining group to undertake plant

rescue for rehabilitation at a later date. This provides further employment opportunities and will also be operated on a commercial basis.

'Ultimately, a diverse range of plants will be available for purchase by Evraz and other mining companies for their revitalisation programmes; and will become a source for other nurseries and related buyers,' explains Mchunu.

But it's not all rosy, she says. 'Everyone talks about spending money on rural community development, but often the money just isn't available, so you have to be creative.'

'Social projects make sense because they actualise jobs and provide skills. A pure donation really has no value if it does not have an economic benefit and ownership advantages for the communities its supposed to serve.'

Mchunu describes the past two years as a serious rollercoaster ride. 'It can be great, you're having fun but screaming because you wonder if the journey is safe. There is still so much we at Evraz want to do, so many areas and targets for improvement.'

'No matter where this journey takes us though, we will continue to keep our promises and follow through on our commitment to create a legacy of transformation, in the true spirit of empowerment.' **MD**