

Glimmer of hope for national broadcaster

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

24 Jul 2009

A glimmer of hope for the embattled SABC has blinked on brightly with the news that interim board members have not only hit the ground running since their appointment less than two weeks ago but are sending out some very positive messages to the public, Parliament and, most importantly, the staff.



What fascinated me was a comment by Ismail Vadi, chairman of the Portfolio Committee on Communications, who said he was impressed by the fact that the entire interim board flew to Cape Town for a report back to Parliament, in economy seats and were not met by a limousine at the airport but rather a taxi from Gugulethu.

Far-reaching implications

While this might sound trivial and unimportant in the bigger scheme of things, it is actually a far more important statement and indicator of intent than perhaps both the Portfolio Committee and the interim board imagine.

It sends out the message in no uncertain terms that the interim board is not interested in perks, power or playing fat-cat games but getting the job done.

The impact of Irene Charnley, chairman of the interim board, has been immediately apparent. Clearly, her experience on the boards of commercial powerhouses such as MTN and FirstRand have given her the capacity to focus the board on priorities and to get things done immediately.

Remarkable achievement

Judging from its first report back to Parliament, it seems to me that the interim board has achieved in two weeks what other SABC boards haven't been able to manage in months or even years.

And while it has physically achieved a lot, it is the perception it has created that should spell hope to a disappointed public, a grateful parliament and an extremely disgruntled SABC staff.

Hopefully, the interim board, and the more permanent body that will replace it in a few months time, will realise the importance of demonstrating publicly that decisions are being made and action being taken.

For far too long SABC boards have operated like secret societies and this has been part of the problem.

Hounds of hell

If the public are not being kept regularly informed, especially in the case of what is after all a public broadcaster, then the new media will bay for blood like the hounds of hell. If no-one at the SABC tells them what is going on, then they will create their own news, based on rumour and hearsay.

The interim board and its successor will most certainly have to give priority to creating stability, resolving the current wage dispute and impending strike, sorting out - once and for all - issues with the former group chief executive and finding a head of news.

And, most of all, cutting costs and beefing up revenue generation.

Setting examples

This task will be made a lot easier if it is conducted the way the interim board is doing it right now - with transparency, with demonstrations of commitment and by setting examples.

One could even argue that to be successful, all that an SABC board needs to do in future is exactly the opposite of what has been done before.

The days of board members just pitching up to their six mandatory board meetings a year, tucking into the coffee and muffins, doodling on notepads and then going home without giving the corporation a further thought for another two months, are long gone. Non-executive does not mean non-commitment or non-effort.

Here's hoping that the light the interim SABC board has managed to switch on in so short a time gets brighter and brighter to the point where it becomes a bright star in the local media firmament.

And while that might sound like an overoptimistic piece of prose, the reality is that the SABC has to become at least a bright star or it will burn up in this new and frighteningly competitive media world like a piece of obsolete space junk.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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