



LEADING STRATEGICALLY FOR SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

**ADDRESSING THE INITIAL CHALLENGES FACING GENERAL
MANGWASHI PHIYEGA, SAPS POLICE COMMISSIONER**

DR GRANT SIEFF

grant@icgrowth.co.za

Infochoice Growth (Pty) Ltd

Research, Education & Consulting

June 2012

General Mangwashi Phiyega has just stepped in to the top policing job in South Africa, the first woman to take on the role. She does so in the face of intense past and present public scrutiny of the alleged and proven fraudulent behaviour of the failed leadership of both of her last two predecessors. Given the circumstances, the morale and trust of leadership within the SAPS is likely to be very low. Suspicion, the opposite of high trust, of leadership competence and integrity must therefore be very high, making the job of leadership all the more challenging. It is an unenviable leadership role for any seasoned leader, and is surely all the more daunting for someone with no prior experience in policing, and little leadership experience at this level and scale. In taking on what is effectively the equivalent of the CEO position of the organisation of SAPS, Police Commissioner Phiyega has close to 200,000 employees under her supervision and guidance, and they are unquestionably in need of strong and wise leadership.

Commissioner Phiyega worked previously at Transnet under the leadership of the then CEO, Maria Ramos. At that time, Phiyega left her role before she had completed her five year contract, ostensibly a result of a Ramos shake-up of leadership in the struggling parastatal. It was not the only clash of two powerful women in leadership at Transnet.

Far more prominently in the news then was the controversial departure of Dolly Mokgatle, Spoornet CEO, in March 2005, only 18 months into her five year contract. It was widely speculated that Mokgatle had also left because of a clash of personalities and strategic direction between herself and Ramos, who had taken over the helm of Transnet just 12 months earlier.

While all three women leaders have gone on separately to achieve and contribute significantly in other arenas of South African society, there are some important lessons of leadership for Phiyega that arise out of that troubled time at Transnet, when Ramos, Mokgatle and Phiyega did not seem

to be able to find a way to work effectively for the greater good of the organisation.

In particular, Phiyega would do well to consider the circumstances that faced Mokgatle when she took on the CEO role at Spoornet, in September 2003. There is an interesting similarity between those circumstances that faced Mokgatle then, and the environment that challenges Phiyega now at SAPS.

Mokgatle had been head-hunted from a much smaller leadership role at Eskom, where she was responsible for the Transmission Division, a group of less than 2000 staff, to the top job at Spoornet, an organisation almost 20 times larger. Eskom at the time was considered to be a successfully run organisation with a cohesive culture, and Mokgatle had the close guidance, mentorship and support of the then CEO, Allen Morgan. When Mokgatle stepped into the Spoornet role, Transnet was governed by a Board headed up by Bongani Khumalo. Spoornet was in trouble, having failed to recapitalise, it was losing customers to road transport, and losing money. Within the first year of Mokgatle's appointment, Khumalo and the Transnet Board were fired for governance infractions and alleged fraud.

So too, Phiyega has stepped up from a significantly smaller role in terms of scope and staff. Like Mokgatle then, she faces a large organisation critical to the stable functioning of South African society, where leadership has been found wanting and morale is low. A critical lack of relevant experience was the challenge facing Mokgatle then and is Phiyega's challenge now.

To Phiyega's credit, she has acknowledged the enormity of her challenge upfront. At her news briefing, when presented to the media by Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa, Phiyega's messages suggested that she is setting off on the right leadership track. She made it clear that she is ready to listen and learn, to win the support of key stakeholders within SAPS. "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much...In order to succeed, I acknowledge that it is necessary to consult, listen and learn." (SAPA, 14 June 2012). She also

resisted the temptation to reveal her strategic direction and intent too early, indicating that she would first meet with police senior management before giving details on strategies going forward.

In contrast, when Mokgatle stepped in to her Spoornet role, flushed with past success in shaping strategic direction and managing change in a very different and much more contained environment at Eskom, she had ambitiously taken on the overdue change management challenge at Spoornet herself, without professional input and assistance. She had also outlined a five-point strategic vision for Spoornet at the very start. While these initial leadership actions for strategy and change in a troubled organisation had suggested a strong start for Mokgatle, there was a critical lack of buy-in. By the end of her first year on the job, Spoornet losses had grown, and she had had to fire a number of her directors for insubordination and fraud. Mokgatle had a fine reputation as a people person at Eskom, demonstrating an ability to listen and consult, but the scale of the problem and her initial approach had set her up for failure.

Phiyega needs to avoid being pressured by various lobby groups into articulating her strategy prematurely. She needs to ensure that she enlists competent professionals to assist her to engage effectively to listen and consult at all levels of SAPS. In an organisation of close to 200,000 staff, she cannot possibly expect to be able to take on this role solo.

Unlike at Eskom, at Spoornet, Mokgatle did not have the support and guidance she needed and was entitled to from the Transnet Board. She did not have access to mentors experienced and connected enough to assist her in grappling with the tough dilemmas and decisions of leadership. She had not negotiated the terms of her engagement in her leadership role to set her up for success. She ended up being blamed for past failures and losses at Spoornet, over which she could not possibly have had any influence.

Mokgatle has gone on to achieve great success in other roles, no doubt all the wiser from her troubled tenure at Spoornet.

These are important challenges of leadership that need to be considered now by General Mangwashi Phiyega, for her own sake, and for the critical role that she needs to play on behalf of all South Africans as our new Commissioner of Police.

About the author

Dr Grant Sieff is CEO of the IC Growth Group, a research, strategy and leadership development consultancy. He teaches at leading business schools as a visiting professor and senior lecturer. Grant has worked as a vice-president for Citibank in Australia and a partner for Accenture. He consults to leaders at the top levels of organisations across African continent and abroad.

IC Growth Group (icgrowth.co.za) has initiated an Africa-based research, market insight and strategy development online portal, dedicated to development and growth in Africa (africamarketinsight.co.za). Grant can be contacted at grant@icgrowth.co.za or on +2721 462 7902.