

Affirmative action: reality or fantasy?

Affirmative action has become one of the buzzwords of our time. And like so many others – democracy, political tolerance, non-racialism – the concept has been misunderstood and sometimes deliberately abused.

People describe affirmative action both negatively and positively; some talk about it as reverse discrimination and tokenism, others as the means whereby the historical legacies of apartheid can be addressed – the words equalisation and empowerment come to mind.

Affirmative action means different things to different people, depending on the position they occupy at work or in society broadly. A white employee whose job is threatened by the company's affirmative action policy could conveniently write it off as reverse discrimination. On the other hand, a black employee who did not get promotion, despite the affirmative action policy, could see it as mere tokenism. This is not to suggest that cases of reverse discrimination and tokenism do not occur.

When a black person is employed instead of a more qualified white applicant is that affirmative action or reverse discrimination? When two out of 10 top positions in a company are reserved for blacks, is that affirmative action or tokenism? These are two questions to ponder.

I have observed two approaches to affirmative action:

The first is patronising. It disempowers people and reinforces the victim's apartheid mentality. It amounts to saying, "blacks have really had a hard time under apartheid and we must really help them. Why don't we set aside a million rand or so to establish a bursary fund, a housing subsidy scheme and such things; and why don't we appoint a few black managers and supervisors just to show that we are an equal opportunities company. It would make us look good in the eyes of the world, not to mention the Sullivan Code..."

The following example will demonstrate the consequences of such a patronising approach. A black person I know had been working as an ordinary bank clerk in Johannesburg for a number of years and had always striven for promotion. Two years ago, he was promoted to a managerial position; his salary was increased, he qualified for a more substantial housing loan, he was given a company car – all the benefits which go with the position. Today, two years later, he is on the verge of alcoholism. When asked why, he replies that he cannot cope with the pressures and expectations of his new position. What they did not provide when he was promoted was training for the skills, knowledge and expertise required for the job. When he realised that he was promoted not because of his capabilities but because of his colour, his confidence and self-esteem were further undermined, resulting in the nervous wreck that he is today.

Many of the personnel managers and social responsibility officers responsible for affirmative action policies and programmes are black. This reflects two myths: firstly, that affirmative action is only about blacks and, secondly, that only

blacks know what is good for blacks. True, often those who have been discriminated against understand far better what it means, but it does not necessarily follow that they also know the solutions. Is this not tokenism? Is this not patronising?

The other approach to affirmative action acknowledges the discrepancies of the past and makes a sincere commitment to address them. This is the approach of the companies and institutions that spend millions on education, skills training, management programmes, self-help schemes – without taking out

an advert in a glossy magazine each time they do so. It is often these smaller-scale affirmative action programmes that are more effective, precisely because they are honest and sincere.

Using the analogy of a marathon race, the three key elements of affirmative action can be summarised as:

- acknowledging that in the "new South Africa" marathon the starting blocks are not aligned; in fact some people have no starting blocks
- finding the means to realign, or replace, the starting blocks
- making sure that if runners drop out because they have not been adequately prepared we can provide them with the necessary support to get back in there and continue the race.

But the ultimate question remains: is affirmative action possible? My answer is a resounding YES! One has only to look at the programmes of the extra-parliamentary organisations during the early eighties to see where affirmative action has worked. It is not coincidence that many delegates at Codesa are products of the early eighties. The structures created and programmes launched during that time helped them develop their skills and confidence.

The key elements to these programmes were:

- this is what **we** want to achieve
- this is how **you** can help **us** achieve our goals
- **we** will train **you** to help **us** achieve our goals

In conclusion, I want to refer to an example from Germany. The (former) West Germans complain about the unproductiveness of their (former) East German counterparts. One official I spoke to said, "now that they are part of the Western world, they will just have to learn to work harder....!" The official ignored the fact that the East Germans never had reasons or opportunities to develop initiative. They were, in fact, discouraged from doing so. I think that the parallel with South Africa is clear.

I personally believe affirmative action is about empowerment – about creating opportunities, mechanisms and structures to allow disempowered groups (blacks and, particularly, women) to develop their educational, political, psychological and economic capacities in a sustainable manner.

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