



Well here it is! This is the last of my 'President's Corner' contributions for my 2014/2015 term of office and, as I commented earlier this year, time moves at an accelerated rate when you are busy. I have thoroughly enjoyed the past year. It has been characterized by the usual highs and lows in terms of our efforts to grow the reach of the Institute geographically as well as building greater relevance to industry and offering value to our members. The latter is critical. After 121 years of successful existence, our Institutional environment is changing faster than ever before. My message here is that we have to be proactive. The status quo is no longer acceptable.

As a result of deep structural changes to the mining industry in Southern Africa in recent years, we have begun to continuously examine how we operate as an Institute and ask ourselves the question: 'What do we need to do to adapt to changing circumstances?'. For example, several of the larger mining 'houses' have reduced the number of staff employed in their corporate offices, with some capacity moving to other geographies; and swings in commodity prices and the ageing of mining assets have curtailed capital expenditure. At the same time, many new junior and mid-tier mining companies have entered our region and we have seen significant shifts in the demographics of our membership. Employment opportunities for our young professionals are a matter of serious concern.

Actions undertaken by the SAIMM to respond to the above, and which you should ALL be well aware of, include the change from 'South African' to 'Southern African' in our name; the development of many new Branches throughout the region; the establishment of the Young Professionals Council (YPC); the appointment of a Regional Development role within the SAIMM office; and re-writing our by-laws to bring them in line and to create the required organizational flexibility.

The results so far? Well, we are financially secure for the present. We now have 10 formally established branches; more than 25% of our membership is in the Student category; our YPC is already adding value in terms of its guidance to office-bearers and Council. These are all by design, and represent some of the achievements for this and recent years. Is it sufficient? No, it is NOT sufficient. My comment has to be understood against the backdrop of a depressed global mining industry and some significant regional challenges that impact on the operation of the Institute, as reflected in the overall attendance at our conferences, which has been somewhat of a low point during the year.

In my first contribution to the President's Corner last year, I closed my article with the following short paragraph:

'As I have pointed out in my Presidential address, the challenges are severe and the need for action acute. Now is not the time for insular thinking, it is time for greater levels of collaborative thinking and investment than at any time in our mining history. The speed with which we are able to find the collaborative structures and make changes to the mining process in hard rock mines will be the measure of success.'

Mining is an outcome of geological processes, and sometimes I feel as though the much-needed changes in our industry are moving by the geological timescale! I have no qualms in being critical of activities that demonstrate personal and political self-serving interests and which result in this inexplicable inability to move forward, when some of the solutions seem so clear. Now I am sounding like a sports fan critiquing the team coach from the sideline – nonetheless, many successful coaches listen to their fans.

It is far too easy to fall in to a critical mind-set when the attractiveness of South Africa as a mining destination is dropping in the rankings year after year. When many of our critical indicators of success as a nation are failing in the mining sector. For example, the ability (or inability) to create a stable environment that encourages long-term, risk-based investments; the ability to get national infrastructure in place, not only to create jobs but to create opportunity to grow internationally competitive industries in mining, energy, logistics, and manufacturing; the ability to reduce social conflict and hardship in and around mining communities, etc. These seem to be complex and, at times, intractable issues with few solutions.

However, it is heartening to learn that the Cabinet has given the go-ahead for the Operation Phakisa 'mining laboratory' with the objective of identifying problems/issues that are fundamentally constraining growth in the South African mining sector. One would fervently hope that the participants can leave parochial agendas at the door and focus on what is critical to the nation for the sustainable development and exploitation of our natural resources. Anglo CEO Mark Cutifani declares that he will be an 'enthusiastic participant in the Phakisa Mining Lab'. Can we expect public statements of commitment from other leaders? Are there other multi-stakeholder initiatives that can further the development of concrete actions and not just end in more empty words and reports to be filed away?

As members of the SAIMM it is no longer good enough for us to sit on the sidelines and complain, since we are ALL part of the problem. I invite our members to submit constructive suggestions to the Journal on what YOU believe we should be doing to contribute as a role-player in the mining industry. What can we do to move the issues forward and contribute to activities such as the Mining Laboratory? Is it through the Mining Dialogues 360 initiative, or other vehicles?

We have many highly knowledgeable and experienced members in our ranks who would like to find a way to be engaged. Let us hear your thoughts, ideas and suggestions ...

Finally, for those of you who have taken the time to read my President's Corner over the past year – thank you for your interest and support.

J.L. Porter
President, SAIMM