

Upskilling the heroes of the mining industry



I recently had the pleasure and opportunity to listen to one of the most well-known and admired person in South Africa; the former Public Protector, Advocate Thuli Madonsela. She gave keynote addresses at the International Women's Day celebration hosted by the Motsepe Foundation and at the pre-AGM dinner for the Chamber of Mines (now known as the Minerals Council South Africa, or MCSA). On both occasions, she gave a remarkably inspiring and thought-provoking speech on what it means to lead and fight for what you believe in. At the MCSA dinner, she not only spoke of the need for ethical leadership but also discussed the importance of being attuned to the needs and realities of a country. She talked of being persecuted for her stance on corruption, and I realized that South Africa admires her for her stance and the contribution she made to the betterment of the country. In her speech at the Women's Day celebration event, she spoke of some unsung and unseen heroes; those 'signposts' that make huge differences for others without much benefit to themselves.

During Advocate Madonsela's talk, my thoughts wandered to the unsung heroes in the mining and minerals sector. The unsung heroes that oftentimes work under challenging environments and conditions in order to build a legacy for future generations. Not the managers and executive officers but the low-skilled and semi-skilled employees like miners, drivers and operators that work at the 'coalface' of all the operations. These are an incredible underrated group of people that are the invisible driving force behind countless measures that contribute to the bottom line. They play an unrecognized, and very often, unacknowledged, but very significant role in the mining sector and hence, in unlocking economic growth and development in countries that are dependent on mining.

It is worthy of note that because the individuals in this workforce are semi-skilled, they are usually the first to lose their jobs when mining companies face challenging downturns and have to downsize. And since they usually do not have other critical skills or knowledge other than mining, they are not insulated against job loss and find themselves faced with a depressing future. In addition, the changing mining landscape, depth of mining, and technological advances suggest that mining operations will need to move from labour-intensive to knowledge-based operations as mechanization and automation become inevitable. Such an approach needs a workforce that possesses more than basic skills. However, there is currently a major disconnect between the low-skilled and semi-skilled nature of the workforce and the skills that the industry needs to ensure its future success. As a result, skills development is very crucial. Stakeholders such as industry, educators, and government need to work together to ensure an upskilled and future-ready workforce. By offering meaningful as well as stimulating work and opportunities for development through training and upskilling, the industry will be able to attract and retain the best talent, thus eliminating uncertainty in the market. A further significant benefit is that skills development can assist in enabling workers to find alternative forms of employment when the industry moves through cyclic downturns and moreover, when it moves into a more mechanized space in the future. In addition, the entire economy can benefit because of the potential transportability of skills to other sectors.

The skills development approach requires flexibility on the part of the mining companies and educational sector. Most mainstream educational institutions have fixed curricula and requirements that are not very accommodative to training and upskilling low-skilled and semi-skilled groups of workers. The Technical Vocational Educational and Training Colleges, although designed to fill such a gap, are not very well funded and struggle to successfully run these training programmes. Government intervention in this respect is needed. Mining companies tend to cite the loss in production time associated with skills development and training, and are thus sometimes reluctant to release workers for training opportunities. An alternative approach is for more company on-site training and investment in training academies to address the skills problem in the mining industry. As Advocate Thuli Madonsela emphasized, it takes a leadership that is attuned to the needs and realities of a country for a new dawn to emerge. If mining companies and countries want to remain more competitive and stay ahead of the race, then training at all levels remains an imperative. And in all this, our hero who has steadfastly held the anchor at the forefront of the operations should not be forgotten.

S. Ndlovu
President, SAIMM