TOKENISM IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA
AN ADDRESS TO THE BMF – MMF CONFERENCE ON
'THE CUTTING EDGE OF FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES'
24 OCTOBER 1983

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject TOKENISM is an emotive one. Most would-be commentators would be inclined to feel rather than think things about the subject. The broadness and looseness of the theme would also tempt many to over-generalise about it. The subject is also fraught with controversy because of its socio-political overtones. In a sincere attempt to avoid the almost irresistible temptation to peddle my own subjective observations and experiences about tokenism I consulted several researched sources which I wish to acknowledge at the onset:

> *Black Life in Corporate America: Swimming in the Mainstream by George Davis & Glegg Watson*

> *The Black Manager: Making It in the Corporate World by Floyd Dickens, Jr and Jacqueline B Dickens*

> *A Comparative Study of Perceptions Concerning the Upward Mobility of Black Managers, a 1982 MBA dissertation by Mthetho Marshall Mncedisi Swana, a BMF Director*

Before anyone cries academic!! may I point out that the above references were used merely as a sound and solid backdrop – no more no less. The real villain (I hate to say hero) guilty of any errors of commission or omission in this address is me. Some of the ideas propounded here stem from a group discussion I conducted recently for the sole purpose of discussing the theme of this conference 'The Cutting Edge of Fair Employment Practices'. Participants in the group were black managers from a variety of corporations and representing various walks of management life.

2. TOKENISM DESCRIBED: SOME REFLECTIONS

A subject as emotive, broad and controversial as tokenism is almost impossible to define. However, manifestations of token black Management are in evidence, token black managers are a reality. These are the creations of South African Commerce and Industry who are experiencing and can tell tales of the agonies and ecstasies of being 'front men', filling a position which is not a real managerial power base; enduring the scourge of heavy responsibility without commensurate authority.

The object of this address is not to provide statistics on this crucial issue, but to bring to light the signs and symptoms – the syndrome – of this malaise; and to recommend ways and means of eliminating it and bringing about effective and productive management by people who are black. Note: effective management by people who are black, and not

black managers. Now, how does one identify token black managers, what are the practical manifestations? I submit that the following will generate some light:

Token black managers are those black managers who got employed in terms of the unwritten corporate mandate that they should approximate their white recruiters as much as possible in general outlook. Employed for decorative rather than functional purposes, the token black managers serve their purposes just as well in powerless junior positions as in senior positions where they might have real control and influence over the company. The nub of the problem is not so much that they don't get promoted, but that they are not given jobs in the mainline of the company's business in the first place.

Token black managers are black managers whose cardinal function in the corporation is to educate and advise whites about black people. Fundis or gurus on black employees, black consumers and black other things. Those whose main function is to take white management on a guided tour of 'black suburbia' like they were taking them through a zoo. A white guide who took black managers on a guided tour of the northern suburbs would hardly merit consideration as manager.

Black tokens in commerce and industry, like the other famous black tokens in South Africa's macro socio-political situation, do not control a budget centre, their job is soft-core. They pull no financial strings. They cannot spend company money without the explicit approval of some white superior – even on a business lunch entertaining a potential client.

Token black managers are managers so employed because the company wishes to 'make a statement' about social conscience, corporate social responsibility, etc. and because the Reverend Leon Sullivan says so. The tendency here is for companies to employ black people with nice public faces and next to zero management substance.

Token black managers are those black managers who never question the rightness of whiteness. Those black managers who cannot afford to be angry and are not allowed to be angry with the corporation.

Enough said on the observable manifestations of token black management and managers. Now let us turn out attention to the corporate scenario that makes for tokenism.

3. THE CORPORATE SCENARIO

'The corporate climate is filled with the assumption that the black manager is a 'deficit model'' said Dr Price M Cobbs, the co-author with William Grier of Black Rage, to a meeting of the Black Alumni Association of Harvard Business School. 'Most black managers with whom we talk tell us that they feel that they are viewed in their organisations as 'deficit models', and that they are assumed to be incompetent until they prove the opposite'.

Cobbs is commenting on the Black American experience in the corporate world. The situation out there is bad despite a common educational background and other positive factors that should ensure a much better plight for the Black American manager. The problem in here is compounded by the fact that virtually all black would-be managers and managers are products not of education but Bantu Education.

Scepticism abounds in corporate South Africa. The black graduates churned out by

rural tribal universities and emerging from what is perceived as a culture of poverty are viewed as patently and blatantly ill-equipped to enter the corporate world and perform satisfactorily.

In a racially polarised society such as ours, prejudices do not only thrive, they are actively nurtured. It is not uncommon for one to hear or read about so-called thorough-bred academics from respectable universities asserting that black people – all black people – lack the achievement motive. Or that all blacks suffer from a pervasive and ubiquitous time neurosis: Blacks cannot keep time. The stereotype of African time is bandied around with relish. All such prejudices are developed and peddled with no serious effort to fully understand black people's existential situations.

There was consensus among the group of black managers I discussed the subject of tokenism with, that to both the average white and the average black person managers in corporate South Africa are white. It is still inconceivable to many for one to be black and manager at the same time. Add to this the legacy of black subjugation and then you have aberrations such as black managers getting phobic about managing whites.

Another aspect of the corporate scenario that perturbs black managers is political reluctance and the inevitable conflict between corporate policy and the implementation of policy down the line. For example, and please take this as purely an example, Anglo American Headquarters in Johannesburg (with a PFP orientation) might propagate a sound and commendable, corporate policy: as it were, wax lyrical about fair employment practices, equal opportunity, corporate social conscience, etc. And this could be effectively sabotaged at implementation level by some middle managers at the OFS Gold Fields (with a CP or HNP orientation). Thus black managers must brace themselves for much hostility and much hypocrisy, and the hostility will increase as blacks make more advances into those areas in which white South Africa's sense of superiority rests.

George Davis and Glegg Watson, commenting on new entrants (whom they call waders) to corporate America have the following to say, and the parallels to what I have observed in corporate South African are so striking that I can do no better than quote them directly:

'Most waders expect, after a while, to shove off and swim toward midstream and then start swimming upstream. In the beginning most do not know that the stream is full of turbulent currents and stagnant pools, so full of well-tailored flotsam and jetsam, so perilous and undertows, and eddies, so crowded with false promises and poor drainage that it is much more difficult to swim than the wader at first imagines'.

By way of concluding this section on the corporate scenario, may I make a passing comment on culture and the various guises in which it colours and influences black behaviour in corporate life. Because another speaker will dwell at length on the subject, mine will be a cursory reflection on culture as it affects black men and women operating in foreign social space with unfamiliar protocol, with practices, manners, values and modes of thinking that until recently were very new to them. The following are some of the more important aspects:

>   *Assimilation*
>   *The complete merging of an individual into a different culture. Fundamental questions about the desirability or possibility of cultural assimilation perennially plague black managers in corporate South Africa. Particularly because white South Africa tends to view*

white culture as synonymous with corporate culture. Another such narrow view is captured in the following Rastafarian saying: 'How can African man live in IBM without losing himself?'

Culture Conflict
The mental conflict within an individual living between two cultures both of which are partially accepted and which provide certain contradictory standards and opposing loyalties. Racial and political polarisation in a country such as ours compound this problem.

Over-conformity
Excessive or compulsive insistence on conforming to a set of standards. Faced with a barrage of criticisms and scepticism from corporate South Africa about inadequacy, inefficiency, etc, some black managers fall prey to the temptation to over-conform in a bid to compensate for these 'deficiencies'.

Culture Shock
The often-severe psychological and social maladjustment many individuals experience when they enter or live in a society different from their own. White managers tend to blow this phenomenon out of all proportions in perceiving blacks entering the corporate world.

Cultural Blindness
A predisposition to not see things that people from other cultures see. White managers tend to suffer more from this malaise than black managers, because the former, coming as they do from the dominant culture do not, out of contempt of the subordinate black culture, care to understand it much.

Explicit Culture
Recognised and easily observable standards or typical behaviour standards of a group. This aspect of corporate culture is quickly mastered by black managers entering the corporate world.

Implicit Culture
Underlying assumptions, not usually articulated, often not even recognised because they form for a group the 'way things are done'. This aspect of corporate culture presents a perennial problem to black management trainees since their interface with (white) corporate management tends to be confined to formal transactions. Assimilation of implicit aspects of any culture thrives in informal settings.'

Lastly, it is asserted by some commentators that the black manager's problem in this sphere is compounded by the fact that he experiences both Future Shock and Culture Shock simultaneously. Makes one think!

4. TOKENISM: A DREAM DENIED OR AN OPPORTUNITY WASTED?

The scenario painted above would seem to suggest that if you are black and in South Africa, hoping to be a corporate manager is like chasing an illusion and at the end of the rainbow there is a pot of nothing. Sounds very much like a dream denied.

The most tempting question would appear to be: 'Why do so many aspirant black managers

fight hard to enter managerial life, to suffer the alienation, the culture shock, the racism, the all-consuming work load, the psychological discomforts of the adaptation period and the prospect that even after the adjustment period a tremendously pressure filled life awaits those who hope to succeed?'

The most practical answer is a rhetorical question: 'If they do not enter the corporate world where will they work?' There is no other world large enough to hold them but the corporate world. Black would-be managers crave to enter corporate South Africa for the same reason that their white counterparts do: Like it or not, corporations dominate modern life. For example, the way corporations develop their managers will dictate the lifestyle and value preferences of the entire middle class – both black and white – of the nation, and in a modern democracy, which South African will inevitably become to avoid a national catastrophe, middle class values are national values.

What is more, sheer survival dictates that corporate South Africa develops black managers. White South Africans as a pool for management material is inevitably fast drying up. But the economy continues to cry loud and clear for more management material which will invariably have to be drawn from the largely untapped black pool.

Thus there is no such thing as a dream denied for any serious-minded aspirant black manager. The developing economic situation will ensure that young black managers are given, not alms, but opportunity. Such opportunity will come in various guises. In some instances it will present itself in a nakedly real fashion, in other instances it will come cloaked in tokenism. Whatever form the opportunity assumes, young black managers must grab it and utilise it to good effect in learning the ins-and-outs of corporate life.

5. FROM TOKENISM TO EFFECTIVE BLACK MANAGEMENT

The real challenge facing black management in the making is to transform tokenism into effective management; to seize the opportunities that present themselves in whatever guise and to use them as launching pads to soar to greater heights.

The immediate and crucial question is how? What strategies and tactics need to be employed to ensure upward mobility, advancement? The following ideas are worthy of consideration:

When it comes to playing the corporate political game, says Doug Holloway of TV Cableweek, 'You have to work with it, around it, through it. You do whatever you have to do to achieve your career goals'. 'Unless you make a concerted effort to manage your career like a business' he explains, 'you'll be taken advantage of by the competition every time'. I suppose what Holloway and the black corporate employees I interviewed are finding out is that launching a successful career in management, like starting a new business, requires a three-step process beyond obtaining the right credentials. It takes a lot of planning, politicking and promoting.

Good education certainly is a key. You need it as a base. One of the biggest benefits is that it gives you confidence – a trait so essential to management development.

The traditional approach to success in the corporate world lays much emphasis on outstanding performance/meritocracy, loyalty to the corporation, deference to superiors,

etc. The new approach however postulates that working hard might not be nearly as important as working smart. The new breed of managers are in step with Eugene Jennings' model of a mobile manager, who uses a rear-view mirror to remind him of what he has done successfully and a telescope to tell him what he must prepare for in future. 'At any given time he is addressing himself to the past, present and future. He thinks and acts in triple time. He utilises this trifocal orientation for personal gain'. The past is meaningful because it has contributed to his present skills, the future because his vision of it motivates him to optimise his present experience. The new breed manager knows that image is often more important than reality.

However, the current situation in corporate South Africa appears to demand that the black manager be both traditional and 'new breed'. The climate in most corporations is not racially open enough for blacks to insist on all of the options and opportunities, to exploit career possibilities as new-breed white managers can.

Blacks still have to 'prove' themselves in situations where white managers are assumed to be capable. Black managers must seem more grateful for opportunities. They must appear to have mastered and accepted the traditional attitudes and values of business life. In order to survive and prosper, black managers must be aware not only of the options and the possibilities in a corporate situation, but also of the traditional requirements for acceptance in that situation.

Up and coming black managers also need to recognise that contrary to what many young go-getters believe, most executives do not get to the top on their own. Behind almost every high-level manager will be found a mentor, a 'godfather', as these men and women are sometimes called, guiding the protégé through the complex corporate maze. The fact remains that although the Sullivans, the Saceolas and EEC codes supposedly open the doors of corporate South Africa to all qualified job applicants, the keys to the executive boardrooms are certainly not part of the usual personnel package.

George Davis and Glegg Watson observe that 'corporations are cauldrons of greed, anger, pettiness, mutual sabotage, frustration, alienation and other emotions that short-circuit the machine in all those places where human compassion, some sentimentality and some devotion to people do not win out'.

Given this scenario, the need for seriously strategizing for advancement and upward mobility cannot be overemphasised.

6. CONCLUSION

I am told that the Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters, one signifying danger, the other opportunity.

The crisis of the black manager (call it tokenism if you will) in corporate South Africa is a danger-opportunity in the original sense of the word. For the seismic shifts in the political economy of racism in this country have created gaping pitfalls for the unskilled and the systematically underprepared and mountains of opportunity for the bold, determined and prepared.

The few successful real managers who are black are beacons of hope. They tell us

what numerous potential black managers could do if they were unshackled and given opportunity. And unshackled and given opportunity they will be – economic necessity will demand and ensure that.

The message for any keen observer is that young black eager beavers who are prepared, determined and confident cannot hope too much and dare too much. No effort should be spared.

This is the black man's dilemma. He who starts behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. A major dilemma. It is a call to do the impossible. It is enough to cause the black man to give up in despair.

And yet there are times when life demands the perpetual doing of the impossible. The life of our unskilled forebears is eternal testimony to the ability of men and women to achieve the impossible. So, too, we must embark upon this difficult, trying, and sometimes bewildering course. With a dynamic will, we must transform our minus into a plus, and move on with determination through the storms of injustice and the jostling winds of daily handicaps, towards the beaconing lights of fulfilment. Our dilemma is serious and our handicaps are real, but equally real is the power of a creative will and its ability to give us the courage to go on 'inspite of'.

Allow me to conclude with this quotation from Frederick Douglas, an Afro-American thinker and writer of the nineteenth century, on self-determination :

'Our destiny is largely in our own hands. If we find, we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the race of life it must be by our own energies, and our own exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life.

If we remain poor and dependent, the riches of other men will not avail us. If we are ignorant, the intelligence of other men will do but little for us. If we are foolish, the wisdom of other men will not guide us. If we are wasteful of time and money, the economy of other men will only make our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful'.