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The modern mining professional – a mining CEO's perspective

I had the opportunity of attending the Annual General Meeting of the Association of Mine Managers of South Africa (AMMSA) on 31 March 2017. Mr Steve Phiri, the Chief Executive Officer of Royal Bafokeng Platinum (RBPlat) delivered the keynote address, which he titled 'Towards a lasting legacy: the modern mine manager'. This insightful address resonated with my President's Corner in the May edition of the *Journal*, in which I wrote about 'the Mine of the Future'. Although his address spoke directly to mine managers, I sensed that it was also aimed at mining professionals within the ranks of the SAIMM. I will now draw some parallels between his message to modern mine managers and its implications for modern professionals in the SAIMM.

Mining has, still is and will continue to play a significant role through backward, forward, and lateral linkages into other sectors of the South African economy, as indicated by the often-quoted approximate 8% direct and 18% indirect contribution to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Accordingly, and as noted by Mr Phiri, the role of the mine manager remains vital, and when the challenges facing the industry are considered, this role is a formidable one. The mine manager relies on technical input from mining professionals in order to deliver on his or her mandate. This makes the role of the mining professional equally vital and formidable if we are to strategically steer the industry forward into the future.

Whatever we do as managers or professionals in carefully navigating the future, Mr Phiri challenged us all to ensure that we leave behind a positive legacy for future generations. This includes going beyond compliance for our social licences to operate, and integrating sustainability into the very fibre of our business strategy in order to leave a positive legacy. Are we advocating this view as professionals in the mining industry?

Lower commodity prices compounded by low productivity continue to be challenges that severely affect the global competiveness of the country's mining industry. These challenges require us as an industry to continuously explore effective cost-containing strategies. It is therefore imperative that we regularly optimize and build flexibility into our business systems, respond to these challenges, and leverage the role of new technology and mechanization into our production processes so that we can mine more safely and productively. The modern mine manager (and by extension the modern mining professional) is one who works smarter, adapts to new technologies, is responsive to the changing business environment, allows for flexibility in their business model, and innovates to transform the mining business model. Does this vision by a mining CEO resonate with your vision as a mining professional?

Mr Phiri also argued that the modern mine manager would become irrelevant if he or she cannot combine their technical skills with people skills in order to navigate an increasingly complex and combative labour and industrial relations and stakeholder landscape. He therefore proposed that an organization such as AMMSA (and by extension the SAIMM) should be pushing for training at our educational institutions that emphasizes these skills in the curricula to adequately prepare mine managers (and mining professionals) for the environment in which they will operate. How much attention do we as mining professionals pay to training in integrating technical and soft skills? Have you ever attended an SAIMM conference on this subject?

In his concluding remarks, Mr Phiri emphasised that it is not always possible to predict with certainty what the world and the mining industry will look like in the future, as there is no 'crystal ball' for this kind of thing. Therefore, we each have our own vision of the future of our companies, but we can collectively work towards a common purpose and broader vision of mining, that of leaving a positive legacy for future generations.

The papers in this edition of the Journal address some of the pertinent issues alluded to by Mr Phiri. For example, one paper presents a systems approach to achieving a relative balance between safety and productivity; another presents findings on the value of steel cabling and mesh wrapped around pillars to improve stability and safety; and another paper calls for curriculum adjustments to address changing skills needs as demanded by the evolving mining landscape. The overall message is simple and clear – whatever we do in our personal capacities or as a professional organization, we need to continually pause, reflect, and ask ourselves if we really are creating a positive legacy for future generations.

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