

Leadership in the management of **HIV/AIDS**

South Africa's power utility – Eskom – has taken a strong leadership stance in the fight against AIDS, both within the organisation and in the wider community. According to the Chief Executive, Thulani Gcabashe, Eskom's strategic focus on improving the situation outside as well as within the organisation, is a business imperative. "When a pandemic like AIDS impacts on a society, it is inevitable that the business community and all the institutions within that society will be adversely affected," he says.

With a total workforce of 30 000 employees spread across the length and breadth of the country, the Eskom leadership made a commitment to confront the epidemic as early as 1987 through the implementation of an integrated response strategy. The underlying objective was to establish a workplace free from discrimination and stigmatisation, and to ensure that all employees had access to AIDS education and medical treatment.

"It was vital that top management take complete ownership of the problem to get results," says Gcabashe. "If boards, executive committees and CEOs don't demonstrate leadership with respect to this issue early on, stigmatisation, misinformation and trivialisation will continue and the lives lost as a result will not only have a significant social impact, but an economic impact as well".

Gcabashe explains that from a strategic viewpoint, "the human resource risk associated with AIDS is too high to sit back and ignore. It takes a lot of time and money to train people; to give them the right exposure and get them to a certain level of productivity in the organisation. Managing AIDS with the inevitable cost that entails, is thus seen as an essential business intervention. The groups that are most at risk fall in the twenty to thirty-year-old category – the very people that constitute our future human resource capital. To have these people withdraw from the system because of illness or death is damaging to the organisation and to the economy at large. There is a point, therefore, where social and economic motivation must meet and spur action".

Gcabashe considers his organisation fortunate in that it recognised the need to make the management of AIDS a strategic priority as far back as 1987. From the chief executive down, management was focussed on providing leadership and guidance so as to ensure that productive interventions were put in place. "Even if interventions were not always optimal," says Gcabashe, "we learnt from these initiatives and amended our strategy accordingly. The fact that we started

early was helpful in achieving the levels of success we have reached today".

"In business, anything that is known can be managed," says Gcabashe. "Therefore we realised that there was a need for reliable information to understand what we were fighting before we could effectively fight it. Initially we extrapolated from national data, but this was too limiting, so we were compelled to commission the first surveillance study within our organisation in 1999. The study projected a 26% HIV prevalence rate within ten years, in the absence of intervention. It also stated that 550 to 600 new AIDS cases a year within the organisation would add R275 to R300 million to the cost of business annually. Through analysis of the data obtained, gained an understanding of the risk areas – the business units that were most exposed, the age groups affected etc, and with this knowledge we were able to tailor our interventions to the situation. The cost of the study in terms of Rands and cents, as well as the time taken to conduct the analysis, was viewed as a worthwhile endeavour in comparison with the financial and business repercussions of losing a significant percentage of our skilled workforce".

A follow up study was conducted in 2003 to gauge the impact of the strategies adopted in 1999. The 2003 study was authorised as a corporate project and positioned at board level as a direct responsibility of the managing director of human resources. This 2003 study revealed a prevalence of 10.7%, which compared favourably with the conservative prediction of a 13.5% prevalence made in the 1999 study. This is particularly significant considering that the provision of ARVs means that many of the employees infected prior to 1999 are still working. The implication is that the level of new infections has decreased considerably. Eskom's prevention and management strategy is therefore proving to be very successful, and the importance of balanced intervention is well understood.

Eskom's experience in the management of HIV/AIDS has both national and global significance. The knowledge gained through years of research and intervention provides a valuable model that other organisations in Africa may take heed of. "We must definitely share our model," says Gcabashe. "I am not saying that every one will be able to implement the same model, but they could certainly learn from our experience. Our other objective is to involve ourselves in local and international debate on the subject of AIDS management. We have a lot to share:

We feel that we have contributed significantly towards the debate and gained insights with regard to what we do and how we implement it". In line with this objective, Eskom was a co-founding member of the South African Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS (SABCAHA) and collaborates at a strategic level with the Global Business Coalition (GBC), the World Economic Forum and the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis (TB) and Malaria (the latter as delegates of the private sector). Other initiatives in which Eskom is actively involved include:

- Funding to the value of R6 million over a three-year period for the training of 5200 health care workers in SADC. This training was undertaken by the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD) when it was recognised that programmes often fail when the expertise to manage them effectively is lacking.
- A donation of over R100 million to the South African Aids Vaccine Initiative (SAAVI), which makes Eskom the largest corporate contributor to HIV/AIDS vaccine development in the world. Set up by Eskom and the South African government to develop and test an affordable, effective and locally relevant preventative HIV/AIDS vaccine for Southern Africa, SAAVI has grown into a global leader and now co-ordinates the activities of approximately 175 people involved in scientific development, clinical trials, immunological assessment, ethical protocols and community education activities.

An additional proposal is currently under consideration looking at the management of AIDS patients, which further illustrates Eskom's diverse reach into the wider community, the country, and indeed the region when it comes to providing assistance in the management of AIDS.

In closing, Gcabashe asserts that AIDS will be beaten. "It is just too costly for it to not be beaten," he says. "While science does its best to find cures, the rest of us can do a lot to manage and prevent further infection. We must focus on behavioural change – knowledge is power. Far too many myths, and far too much stigma and discriminations still exist and these need to be eradicated. We need strong leadership to achieve this".

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