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Zondo Commission – Motsoeneng’s ‘people skills’ helped him rapidly climb the ladder

“Everything was done in good faith, on the understanding that it was helping the SABC.” This is the justification given by former SABC board chairperson Dr Ben Ngubane on Monday for the appointment of Hlaudi Motsoeneng as acting COO in 2011. It was his strong people skills that won Motsoeneng the confidence of the board. Ngubane was testifying before the commission of inquiry into state capture.

“He was very valuable to us in terms of stopping money leaving the SABC illegally,” he added, when asked by commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo what made Motsoeneng stand out.

Motsoeneng had come from the SABC’s Free State regional office, which he had joined in 1995 on the invitation of then group CEO Solly Mokoetle in late 2011. His appointment at the SABC’s Johannesburg headquarters as stakeholder relations manager in Mokoetle’s office was based on the positive feedback received from Motsoeneng’s superiors of his exceptional skills that helped turn around Lesedi FM’s news division.

Having identified the cause of poor performance from regional offices across the country as low staff morale, Mokoetle saw fit to appoint Motsoeneng as stakeholder relations manager in his office in Johannesburg.

Ngubane told the commission that at the point of Motsoeneng’s arrival, the atmosphere was such that there was little trust between the board and senior management, as the board was at the planning stages of a turnaround strategy to aid a struggling SABC. Motsoeneng then had the unique position of being the conduit between the board and management, and in it was in this regard, said Ngubane, that he helped unearth the criminality that had become part of the organisational culture.

“Hlaudi was seen as a troubleshooter and he was very proactive. I mean, with all the issues that came up, he would be there and hands-on.”

At the time that Ngubane’s board came into the picture, the wage bill at the SABC stood at R300-million per month, part of the reason being a badly controlled structure. Irregular expenditure was at R22-million. In view of Motsoeneng’s strong skills in the position, Ngubane then invited him to start attending board meetings, so as to give insight into areas of the organisation that needed the board’s attention. This was in a climate, according to Ngubane, where there was deep animosity between senior managers and the board. Thanks to Motsoeneng’s help of in implementing the turnaround strategy, as many as 1 400 employees were discovered to have been doing business with the SABC.

“In my view, whoever is going to communicate on our behalf must know exactly what we are talking about”, was how Ngubane justified Motsoeneng’s participation in board meetings despite him not being a member. Evidence leader Advocate Thandi Norman asked what role would the company secretary have

then if Motsoeneng was trusted as the conduit, to which Ngubane responded by saying the incumbent at the time would not have made the impression on staff that Motsoeneng did.

What then, asked Norman further, inspired what on paper looks like the parachuting of Motsoeneng to the next post he held, that of acting group executive of stakeholder relations. Ngubane acknowledged that he had indeed skipped several levels, but it was again his people skills that must have inspired the attitude of his seniors, which led to his promotion when the position was vacated.

Motsoeneng's next position, the commission heard, was that of acting COO, which was recommended by the board to then minister of communications, Dinah Pule, and approved.

Earlier in the day, Ngubane had told the commission that the arrangement between the SABC and the Gupta-owned TNA Media to broadcast breakfast briefings in SABC2 was so good for the public broadcaster's commercial viability, it actually earned good profit in terms of advertising sales.

The added value of the briefings was that the SABC saw an improvement in airtime sales at higher prices.

Asked by Norman if he was acquainted with members of the Gupta family outside of the relationship between the SABC and TNA, Ngubane said he attended several of the family's social functions at their Johannesburg home.

But he was never approached to do any favours, or to influence for businesses, said Ngubane. "I did not have the power to do business, I guess I was irrelevant."

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