

# Leadership stability in the public sector

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*Sandiso Gcwabe, a CA(SA) and the CFO of the Western Cape Liquor Authority, calls on peers to help bolster and strengthen the civil service.*

President Cyril Ramaphosa said earlier this year that the public service must be staffed by men and women who are professional, skilled, selfless and honest, committed to upholding the values of the Constitution and serving no other cause than that of the public.



*Sandiso Gcwabe*

Lack of accountability, mismanagement and corruption are persistent problems in our public entities. As someone with ambitions to make a difference in the public sector, and to positively impact people's lives as a public servant, Sandiso Gcwabe, the chief financial officer of the Western Cape Liquor Authority (WCLA), is deeply committed to his work, his aim being to improve operations and delivery of services.

His love for numbers, and his ability to analyse them, was ignited by passionate teachers at his primary and secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Sandiso was in grade 11, at Msobomvu Senior Secondary School in Butterworth, when a team from Thuthuka, SAICA's programme to drive transformation in the chartered accountancy profession, held a workshop, introducing learners from schools around Butterworth to the idea of a career as a CA(SA) for the first time.

When Sandiso matriculated as the top student in the district and received a scholarship from the Eastern Cape Office of the Premier, it was a life-changing event. Being able to study at the University of Cape Town (UCT) paved the way for him to better himself and have a career he could be proud of.

"I describe myself as a rural boy who went to a township school and a world-class university," Sandiso says. "UCT was a major transition for me. From an academic point of view, I coped well, but the social adjustment was quite a challenge. I was lucky to be in a residence where I met people from similar backgrounds and where there were support systems in place to help us deal with this new reality."

After graduating with a BCom in Financial Accounting degree, he joined the Western Cape office of the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) where he completed his articles. This was his first foray into the public sector. While there, he completed his CTA through UNISA. He stayed at the AGSA until 2015 before moving to the Saldanha Bay Municipality on the West Coast.

"At the AGSA I was part of a team that wrote the general reports that came out after the municipalities' annual audit reports," he says. "The general reports analysed the drivers of the results and made recommendations about what ought to be done to turn around poor financial performance and audit outcomes. When in conversation with municipality leadership, they said we were good at making recommendations, and challenged us to implement the recommendations ourselves at a municipal level. It was a challenge I could not resist."

Sandiso spent four years at the Saldanha Bay Municipality as the financial manager, learning to understand what it is like to be 'on the other side'. What was most refreshing, he says, was that instead of having to listen to excuses, he was able to remain true to the principles he believed would improve the operations of municipalities and achieve the results that were outlined in his earlier recommendations.

“As a financial manager, your contribution is similar to that of an auditor,” he says. “You record and report on transactions after the fact – when the decision-making process has already been concluded. I wanted to be part of the planning, strategy development and decision-making process that happens at the beginning of the financial year because that is where the real opportunities to implement change lie.”

In December 2019, he was appointed CFO at the WCLA. Moving from finance manager to CFO is one of the most natural career paths, with the financial expertise and managerial experience building a solid foundation to grow. However, to truly rise through the ranks, you have to remould yourself from 'manager' to 'leader'. “I was ready to step into a strategic role,” says Sandiso. “There was alignment between my career goals and the values of the WCLA.”

The pandemic hit our shores just months after Sandiso joined the organisation. “I am proud to be a part of the leadership team during a time of enormous uncertainty, and to help change the perception of the entity, which contributed significantly to reducing alcohol-related harm during the national state of disaster brought on by COVID-19,” he says. Sandiso has a track record of success, which includes leading the entity to two successive clean audits – an unqualified audit opinion with no findings – in the two years that he has taken on the CFO role. This is his fifth clean audit in the six years he has been in the public service.

The WCLA has increased license fees and is moving closer towards its aim of self-sustainability while reducing the harms associated with alcohol in a province where it is the most frequently abused substance. “Self-sustainability is important because taxpayers who do not have an interest in the liquor industry should not have to contribute to the costs of regulation,” Sandiso says. “We aim to be part of a solution to reduce the negative impact of alcohol on citizens, while not unreasonably impacting the industry’s contribution to the GDP or limiting prospective employment opportunities.”

### The need for professionalism and stability

In public sector departments where there is leadership stability, audit outcomes tend to be positive and public funds can be accounted for. “We do not even begin to realise the need for the skills we have as CAs(SA) in the public entities,” Sandiso says. “We speak about the skills gap, but seldom do we want to be part of the solution. What drives me is the ability to apply my skills instead of simply being a critic. I can evaluate processes and contribute to positive changes that have an impact on planning and resources and may alter the trajectory of the public sector in this country.”

The core drivers of decay in the public sector, he says, are lack of skills, ethics and consequences for wrongdoing. “Imagine the role that ethical public sector professionals could play in undoing, correcting and preventing the wrongs that have been done,” he adds.

Sandiso believes that public service is the key to unlocking the value that lies in the Constitution of this country. “It’s inspiring to be part of something bigger than myself and to think about leaving a lasting legacy. I encourage young people to become part of the solution that South Africa needs.”

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