

THE DYNAMICS OF ASSUMING A NEW CEO OR LEADERSHIP ROLE UNDER GLOBAL LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS

CEO PERSPECTIVES AND HORIZONS AS COVID-19 TAKES A GRIP

The SAHPRA CEO, Dr. Boitumelo Semete-Makokotlela shares her journey since she assumed the position of CEO. She unpacks how she had to face a “sink or swim” situation as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped South Africa and the world at large. It was through sheer resilience and developing coping mechanisms that she was able to forge ahead. In today’s world, responsible and decisive leadership is virtually obligatory in order to ensure that an organisation such as SAHPRA remains relevant and adds value. It is this decisive stance that ensures a “make or break” situation.

SAHPRA was a fledgling health products regulator. Getting SAHPRA off the ground was certainly a daunting task. What was the game plan? Where does one start? What was the best strategy? In answering these questions, this is what Dr. Semete has to share.

December of 2019 was filled with a lot of reading in preparation for this exciting role of CEO of the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA). I spent days reviewing the historical and current context of the authority, planning my first 100 days, and strategising on priority areas I needed to focus on to ensure urgent quick fixes could be achieved whilst assuming this role. As my appointment was announced around November 2019, those who knew me began requesting meetings with me so they could share their ideas, suggestions, and perceptions of the regulator as well as propose synergy and partnerships. This made me feel less intimidated!

When assuming the role in January 2020, I had a clear and decisive plan and was ready to execute the plan. I had about one or two staff meetings between January and March 2020, followed by several unit-specific meetings focused on listening to the staff perspectives and counterbalancing them with opportunities for SAHPRA. I was also keen to hear about their challenges as well as to hear what their expectations of the CEO were.

When the first COVID-19 positive case was reported in South Africa, I was at the Aspen Leadership Initiative, SA (ALI-SA) for our first seminar as ALI-SA fellows. This was for me, arguably, a platform that I was thrilled about. I psyched myself to be ready to learn, contribute what I could, and be part of the future African change makers who are focused on turning their success to impact their communities, countries, and the world. Thus, being part of ALI-SA was opportune as it was very aligned with my personal journey and why I accepted the role of CEO of SAHPRA.

My 100-day plan included the following:

1. Demonstrate engaged leadership through structured yet regular engagement with staff and all relevant stakeholders prioritised for that period.
2. Communicate unequivocally my vision for the entity and communicate a plan of action on how we will work as a team to co-create a SAHPRA vision aligned with our goals for the organisation.
3. Since SAHPRA was in a transition from the Medicines Control Council (MCC), my focus was on steering this proverbial ship by devising a clear change management plan aligned to the culture we would want to establish at SAHPRA.
4. Capacitating my Executive team and Senior Management team was critical to ensuring my success. Fortunately, I was in a position where there were a number of vacancies in these roles, and I had to quickly implement my recruitment plan to ensure that I attracted and appointed an excellent team.
5. Lastly, I had to accelerate the plan to secure long-term offices for SAHPRA, in an effort to define the transition we began to traverse. Our new corporate identity for this fledgling entity would epitomise professionalism as we assumed a brand-new identity.

As you read this, you will note that for me to be successful in implementing this plan, I had to have face-to-face engagements and this would necessitate, at times, to travel outside of Gauteng and South Africa, for that matter. When COVID hit us, this was one of the luxuries that many of us clearly took for granted.

When South Africa went into lockdown on the 26th of March 2020, my world and my head were abuzz, and I felt like a panic engulfing my being. I was anxious about SAHPRA's ability to work remotely when so many processes were manual. I worried about SAHPRA's ability to be agile and flexible to be responsive to what the COVID-19 pandemic would present. In the early days of the pandemic and lockdown, not knowing how long the world would be in the pandemic, my anxiety levels were manageable. However, with time, as there was a need for COVID-19 tests, ventilators, and vaccines, to name a few areas, SAHPRA found itself at the heart of the COVID-19 response. One can write a book about this, but I would like to focus this piece on what got me through this tumultuous time as a new CEO. This entity was now at the heart of the national pandemic response, interfacing with the global community and with limited capacity and experience as an independent health products regulator.

My reflections will be structured along with leading self, leading others, and leading business under uncertainty and remote working.

Leading Self

Remaining calm amid a storm is one of the most difficult things that a type A personality can endure. I usually thrive on having all information available to me when required and making evidence-based decisions. With the rate of new information available during the pandemic, one had to be comfortable with making decisions based on the facts at the time, knowing full well that in a day or a week's time those facts would change. I found that being resilient, a trait that of late has been refined as I've been participating in triathlons has stood me in good stead. Even when the going was tough, I had to keep going. I had to be resolute on decisions we had taken when SAHPRA faced attacks and threats from political parties, legal challenges from civil society, personal attacks, and being called all manner of unscrupulous names imaginable. I had to bite the bullet and soldier on.

Leading others

In the midst of a storm, as captain of the ship, it was of critical importance that I provide clear direction to the team as we had to navigate the uncertainties. I had to be agile and consultative to ensure that procedures applied by SAHPRA were responsive to the current context, yet not compromising the health products' safety, quality, and efficiency. Pulling everyone along and seeking their support as many of our staff had to work lengthy hours, demonstrated the need for leaders to be able to positively influence their team and gain their support. Team SAHPRA did a stellar job during this period.

Leading business

Having worked at a management consultancy firm before and being a scientist, I am very comfortable with consulting with others and seeking support and counsel from those considered experts. This quality enabled me to emerge as a credible leader, who can identify what they know and what they don't know. For what they don't know, be comfortable enough to identify those who can assist in making the best decision collectively. But more so, this assisted SAHPRA to make what I consider to be the best decisions at the time.

Furthermore, SAHPRA was very open to sharing its know-how and expertise with other regulators. In addition, other regulators were very helpful and supportive during this time. One of the positives from this period was the accelerated pace at which I established a good network in the regulatory space both on the continent and outside. The collaborative relationships were critical for our success.

I always get the question: "Would I have taken the job knowing what I know now?" My response is always, that someone needed to get it done, so if it had to be me, I would still take up the challenge.

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