



2 August 2022

Reflecting on the Zondo Commission of Inquiry: Lessons for the Private Sector from Mandela Month

The Private Sector has a central role in combatting corruption

“Those who conduct themselves with morality, integrity and consistency need not fear the forces of inhumanity and cruelty.” ~Nelson Mandela

The much-anticipated final report of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector, better known as the Zondo Commission, was published in June 2022. Whilst the report sought to investigate the public sector’s involvement in state capture, it highlighted that corruption was not limited to the public sector, but occurs across the private sector as well. This discovery challenged the existing notion that the private sector is more ethical, and is less susceptible to corrupt practices, than the public sector.

Annually, the 18th of July is **Mandela Day**, with the month of July recognised as Mandela Month by the **South Africa Government**. Reflecting on July, we celebrated not only a great man, but an exceptional leader, which presented an important opportunity to ponder what guidance our “Father of the Nation” might have shared regarding ethical leadership. Especially, regarding the current state of corruption, which is now endemic across South Africa. Nelson Mandela was a global icon of democracy and social justice and while we may not have his presence, we certainly have his legacy to guide us.

The impacts of unethical and corrupt activities have far-reaching socio-economic implications, considering corruption does not only affect democratic institutions but also undermines the State's ability to govern, deliver services and address our most challenging issues as a society.

On the 29th of June 2022, the **National Business Initiative (NBI)** hosted a Thought Leadership Series, under our Ethical leadership and Anti-Corruption pathway, presenting reflections and insights on the Zondo Commission of Inquiry, from an array of senior experts and leaders in both the public and private sectors.

Lessons for the private sector

Panellists stressed that corruption poses a significant challenge to stability, growth and social cohesion as it disproportionately affects marginalised groups, preventing social inclusion, exacerbating inequality, and inhibiting prosperity.

The losses associated with high-level financial fraud undermine social security and destabilise economic systems. Furthermore, corruption undermines fair competition and discourages investment and trade. It is through intentional, collaborative efforts that businesses can learn and improve on their structures.

Further key insights and reflections include:

- **Transparent, accountable, and integrity-driven practices help to restore trust.**
- **Adopting a zero-tolerance mindset and standard of practice amongst people strengthens businesses.**
- **It is imperative that businesses research and vet who they build relationships and partnerships with as businesses are not corrupt, but rather influential people within those structures.**

Protecting Whistle-blowers

The dialogue emphasised the need for policies and procedures around whistle-blowers to be implemented, concentrating on the need for protection for those that come out and tell their story. Investing and improving structures that support and protect whistle-blowers encourages people to be honest, which can ultimately change the culture of corruption.

The Role of Leadership

Strong and courageous ethical leadership is necessary in combatting corruption. Ethical and courageous leadership sets the tone for people within the organisation to subscribe to ethical and moral codes, thus leading to a force that is united against corruption. It is vital that businesses reassess their role in promoting fairness and equity within greater society.

Adapting and changing for the future is not only imperative, but also necessary if our society and economy in South Africa is to recover and thrive. The private sector has a central role to play in this regard. Changes need to be meaningful, cooperative and actionable. Changing the culture around corruption in South Africa is a long-term

journey, however, it is instrumental for all of society to work together and combat corruption and the best time to start is now.

For more information on NBI's Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption work in the Private Sector, please contact Thuthula Ndunge (Project Manager: Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption): ThuthulaN@nbi.org.za



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