Sanibonani, greetings. It has been an adrenaline-driven four weeks since we last engaged in July. A packed programme, coupled with increasing pressures of finalisation of year-end results, set the tempo for what can easily be described as a highly energised atmosphere. The stamina required for the activities conducted was simply overwhelming, but the rewards received made it worth the effort. Our stakeholders appreciated the time and dialogue and provided invaluable information that helped read the temperature on the ground.

Key among the engagements the General Managers and I undertook was a series of site visits that took us across the length and breadth of Umgeni Water’s operational area. We went to 12 sites and returned convinced that all of them are aligned to the strategy and business focus of Umgeni Water. In the bigger picture, this translates into an organisation that is operating at optimum and is also delivering on its mandate. The beneficiaries of a well-oiled and high performing organisation like Umgeni Water are the end users of its products and services. At a time when our country is still experiencing turmoil unleashed by service delivery protests, the provision of uninterrupted, efficient and affordable water services by Umgeni Water comes as a breath of fresh air.

Site Visits: All the major issues that were brought to the fore

Staff who attended and presented on each site’s performance substantiated this analysis by providing tangible examples and evidence of good performance. While they illustrated achievements made, they also identified shortcomings. It did not end there. They offered solutions to challenges and, in some instances, even said how they would implement these solutions. I was impressed with the quality and content of presentations and, importantly, with suggestions on how to deal with problem areas. The provision of solutions is a clear illustration that staff know and understand the magnitude of the issues they are dealing with and how they will overcome hurdles they face.

In many industries and businesses, there appears to be a tendency to make problem solving the responsibility of somebody else, specifically that of...
management. In an environment of this kind, staff remain disengaged, disempowered and apathetic. The impact of this phenomenon is seen in the mediocrity of the companies for which they work.

Mediocrity is not what we have or encourage at Umgeni Water. On the contrary, robust dialogue is welcomed and will continue to occupy an important place in organisational culture while Umgeni Water is under my stewardship. There were many robust moments during visits to sites which reflected the passion and professionalism with which roles and responsibilities are taken. I am pleased that key issues impacting on staff and sites were brought to the fore and that the response from General Managers and Managers was handled in a professional and polite way.

I am concerned about two problems that were raised by staff: vandalism of infrastructure and unauthorised encroachment onto Umgeni Water’s servitude. Many sites are experiencing these problems and appear to have had little or no success in managing them. The consequences of widespread vandalism and uncontrolled servitude encroachment are extremely serious, to the point they could affect the organisation’s ability to provide uninterrupted water services and maintain its infrastructure. Staff must not hesitate to report acts of vandalism to the police and servitude encroachment to the relevant municipality so that firm action can be taken against perpetrators. It is hoped the inclusion of tough amendments in the Criminal Matters Amendment Act, Criminal Law Amendment Act, and Prevention of Organised Crime Act will serve as an effective deterrent against deliberate damage to essential infrastructure. In line with these legislative amendments, a new offence relating to theft of or damage to essential infrastructure will be created and bail and imposition of discretionary minimum sentence regulated.

Site visits: It’s your platform – use it effectively

It is important to get a sense of some of the other problem areas that were identified by sites in order to enhance understanding of the business and the issues that could impact on operations. They were:

• Some access roads to infrastructure are in poor condition and become impassable, especially when it rains
Some customers do not adequately monitor potable water quality which, in turn, results in missed opportunities for Umgeni Water to obtain Blue Drop certification at some sites. Customer contribution to obtaining Blue Drop certification is 40% while that of Umgeni Water is 60%.

Some members of the Project Steering Committee of Lower Thukela BWSS are resisting the appointment of Umgeni Water staff to this scheme, on the basis that they want locals (residents of Mandini) to be provided work there.

Sand mining at Umvoti River is affecting raw water quality, flow into Umvoti Water Treatment Works and invariably potable water production.

Former municipal staff (uMgungundlovu District Municipality) are now working at small wastewater treatment works that are being operated and managed by Umgeni Water. These staff have to be fully integrated into Umgeni Water and begin adopting the culture and values of the organisation.

In some instances driving of Umgeni Water’s vehicles has deteriorated to the extent where measures have had to be introduced to try to improve driver behaviour. These measures include the display of a telephone number on vehicles that will allow members of the public to report reckless driving.

Site visits have become an effective platform for staff to illustrate their achievements and to also take a proactive position in resolving problems where they exist. It is also an opportunity for the General Managers, Managers and I to engage directly with staff by providing direction, responding to questions raised and comments made. I want to thank staff for their presence and input, both of which are highly valued.

**Feedback on status of Lower Thukela Bulk Water Supply Scheme**

Key customers were brought together for a high-level briefing on Lower Thukela Bulk Water Supply Scheme. This session was held to provide feedback on the status of the scheme, parts of which have been delayed causing deferred commissioning. The scheme was constructed at a cost of R1.4 billion with funding from the Department of Water and Sanitation and it is based in Mandini, iLembe. It will supply
potable water to iLembe District Municipality as far south as Ballito. Provision of water to Ballito will make additional water available in Hazelmere Dam for supply to eThekwini Metro, thereby reducing the impact of the drought.

The briefing session in Umhlali was called in response to concerns over delays in completion of the project which, it was felt, would delay provision of water through this scheme. Present at the briefing session were officials of the Department of Water and Sanitation, iLembe District Municipality, Sembcorp Siza Water and Umgeni Water.

A comprehensive presentation was done which provided details about the project and progress to date with the six components of the scheme. All six components – barring one – are on schedule for completion. The part that has been affected by delays is mechanical and electrical installations as a result of quality-related issues. This has caused delay in commissioning of the works. In the next month or two, after some issues have been resolved, we will be in a position to commission two-thirds of the plant, making it possible for some water to be delivered to the customer. The design capacity of 55ML/d will, however, not be reached at this stage. Stakeholders present were pleased with the feedback provided and accepted that the delay was beyond the control of Umgeni Water. The engagement ended on a positive note, in that phase two of the scheme can now be considered for implementation. It has always been my view that transparency is an important ingredient for fostering good customer and stakeholder relations.

Saluting the Women of South Africa

I was delighted to see active participation by Umgeni Water staff in Women’s Month activities. The initiatives you planned and hosted are warmly embraced and welcomed. In hosting these events you did not only pay tribute to the South African women who risked their lives to reject the apartheid government’s abhorrent pass laws, but you also contributed to fostering social cohesion and unity within our organisation. Your programme of celebration and remembrance was a fitting tribute to the 20 000 women of all cultures and races who braved the brutal force of a repressive regime and marched to Union
Buildings on 9th August 1956. It was an act of passive resistance that sent a message: *wathint abafazi, wathint imbokodo*. This protest was a turning point in the history of South Africa as it gave impetus to the struggle for liberation and gender equality and shattered all the imaginable stereotypes about women.

Sixty years on, South Africa and the world have changed. Women today exert influence and authority in many leadership positions in all spheres of the economy, corporate world and politics. In Europe Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, is said to be the most powerful person on that continent, and if Hillary Clinton is elected President of the United States, she will become one of the most powerful people on earth, according to Forbes. Other women who have also defeated the odds to take their rightful place in public life are: Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf; South Korean President Park Geun-hye; Nepal’s President Bindhya Devi Bhandari and the First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgen.

South Africa also has its own female leaders and celebrities. They include women empowerment trailblazer and Chairperson of the African Union Commission Nkosazana Zuma-Dlamini; author and entrepreneur Wendy Luhabe; former Chief Executive Officer of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange Nicky Newton-King and mining entrepreneur Bridgette Radebe. Representation in Government has also improved. Indeed, a great deal has been done to correct the decades-old gender imbalance, but a lot more still has to be done. Both the private sector and Government
must accept this as a challenge they will have to overcome. The bottom line is that female representation is lagging and has to be fixed, lest the struggle by women may have been in vain.

**Age has no barriers, ask Jelley**

Wayde van Niekerk, South Africa’s 400m Olympic gold medallist, has deservedly been feted for his achievement. The bullet from Bloemfontein certainly also enjoyed every moment of it as he proudly displayed his prize. It is little known, though, he owes his success in many respects to his sprightly coach – a 74-year-old woman, Ans Botha. The septuagenarian has been coaching and mentoring him for several years on the art of being a winning athlete. She became indispensable to his strategy to take gold in Rio. As an elderly coach, Ans is not alone in her endeavours to churn out top-notch achievers. In New Zealand she has an opposite number, albeit 20 years older, who also prepared an athlete for the Rio Games. He is 94-year-old World War II veteran and super coach Arch Jelley.

Arch is believed to be the world’s oldest Olympics coach – and a fine one at that. He coached 1 500m runner Hamish Carson for the 2016 Games, and intends remaining with him for the 2020 Games. That’s, of course, assuming Arch is still in good health.

Asked in a candid interview whether he was not somewhat too elderly to be involved in sport, he quipped: “Age is irrelevant; it is just a number. If you’ve got the knowledge and keep up to date with new techniques, it doesn’t matter how old you are.” On our doorstep, across the Limpopo, Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe has also made his intentions know. At the age of 94 he will be contesting the 2018 Presidential elections. If he wins and remains in office, he will be 99 years old at the end of the five-year Presidential term.

Mind boggling, but it shows that some people simply do not succumb to the vagaries of age. It seems nobody – not even a nonagenarian – can douse the internal flames of ambition.

The winter chill’s now over; happy spring

*Cyril Vuyani Gamede*
*Chief Executive*