Chapter 7
Black Affairs: The Position and Role of the African Corporate Middle Class in the Workplace

“Even though I deal with customers and all along I did things that were not black things in this company, I do get calls to discuss black affairs: your BEE, CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility], or whatever. But, then, I suppose that’s South Africa for you” (Chris, interview; November 2005).

7.1 Introduction

The process of class formation and social stratification is linked to both the workplace and society. As was shown in Chapter 6, state policies have a direct impact on these realms. However, sometimes state policies are contradictory in nature. Although the policies of apartheid state were aimed at suppressing the advancement of black people in terms of class, social status and power, this proved to be difficult since, for instance, the state itself needed people to run the affairs of black people (Crankshaw, 1994).

However, the main question is what is the implication of state policies, not only on the workplace but also on the direction of society and members of the previously disadvantaged communities? The aim of this chapter is to explore the position and role in the workplace of black managers interviewed in this research. The classification of the African corporate middle class using a model developed in Chapter 2 shows that although the majority of them can justifiably be classified as middle class, the same conclusion can be hardly reached when one looks at their social status and degree of influence in their workplaces. This is related not only to the remnants of the apartheid workplace regime, but also the effects of the market context and the policies meant to deracialise the workplace.


7.2 The social categorisation of the African corporate middle class

7.2.1 The African corporate middle class in the capitalist class structure

In his Master's thesis, Gibbons (2000) found that one can classify black managers in three categories – those who came through the ranks, former shop stewards, and those with formal qualifications. The sample in this study identifies two categories – those with a trade union background and those with formal qualifications. The latter group includes people with national diplomas and university degrees. Fourteen out of 21 of the interviewees hold either a university degree or technikon diploma. However, these may not be seen as static categories, as there are those with a trade union background who also have national diplomas or university degrees. These people are classified according to whether they acquired their qualifications prior to or after involvement in trade unions.

As is indicated in Table 7.1, the majority of the interviewees fell into the category of skilled managers.

Table 7.1 Classification of the sample by managerial category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of management</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top management (expert managers)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle/senior management (skilled managers)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior/supervisory management</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

This does not necessary correspond with qualifications held by individuals included in the sample. For instance, there were people in possession of BSc (Hons) degrees occupying junior management position. There were also those with national diploma in top management occupations.
It is important to note that all those classified as falling in the top management (shareholders, shareholder representatives, managing directors or those reporting directly to the CEO) had formal qualifications, while those who occupied the middle management level included those with formal qualifications and those with trade union backgrounds. Two of those in junior management were former shop stewards, while another one had a BSc (Hons).

### 7.2.2 Decision-making power of the corporate middle class

The position of the interviewees in the workplace (Table 7.1) seems to correspond with the decision-making power reflected by the answers given to the question about the kind of decisions the interviewees were able to influence in their companies. Although the majority of the interviewees were able to influence decisions concerning the projects or duties they were responsible for implementing or overseeing, there seemed to be differences depending on their educational background:

> I can influence decisions as far as my department is concerned. I can’t influence the company policy. It is usually a very top-down kind of approach. You are able to just influence your market; you’re able to influence your people. I can influence buying decisions, preferential procurement. I can decide whether to buy from a white or black supplier (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

The above interviewee had a national diploma in engineering and a diploma in management from one of the country’s business schools. Nonetheless, the majority of those who came to their positions through the trade union movement seemed to be concentrated in human relations positions and thus were only able to influence decisions to do with human resources and industrial relations:

> In most areas I take decisions about ordinary employees (Jacob; interview, September 2005).

However, those at the top management level seemed to be able to influence major decisions in the company:
I’m part of the company that has got shares in the company. So, I’m able to influence major decisions to do with how the company is running (Julius; interview, September, 2005).

This respondent had a degree in law and stated that he was head-hunted to represent the company that had a 20% stake in the company. Another interviewee puts it thus:

I take major decisions in financial management. I’m also a general manager and make decisions to do with shares and marketing and liaise with clients. Furthermore, as a director I’m responsible to ensure that the company complies with the legislation of the country (Makhaya, November 2005).

The interviewee had a BCom (Hons) degree, and he had shares in the company. This interviewee seemed to have major influence in his company. This, however, raises a question about whether this interviewee can be regarded as belonging to the middle class or not. Indeed, it touches on the impact of the changing nature of capitalism on the class structure of society.

Nonetheless, there are those who are not easily classified in the categories presented in the above discussion. For instance, there are people who are classified as occupying middle management positions, but think they have been given power to make major decisions involving the company’s direction. For instance, one interviewee classified himself as belonging to middle management, but was aware of the fact that he was doing everything the general manager was doing:

The CEO decides on the vision and the mission of the company and we have to put a little bit of meat into that. The kinds of decisions I influence are to do with customers. It is my job to define what this company has to do in order to make sure that the customers we have are treated well; we add value to their lives. The ultimate goal of my job is customer retention. My position is in the same level with some managers above me (Chris; interview, September 2005).

The above quote is a response of the interviewee who had an MBA and came to the company through the Graduate Recruitment Programme. However, this kind of ambiguous response is also found among those with trade union backgrounds:
I don’t influence any decision in this company. I do contribute my ideas when I feel like it is necessary. I’m not sure whether I’m a manager or supervisor (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

As shown by the above quote, the situation seems to be worse for someone with a trade union background and at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy.

Nonetheless, the sample comprises of individuals that may be regarded as occupying an expert class location. As defined above, these are managers in the consulting industry. Although this is an important category to explore, interviewees in this category are analysed in terms of their nominal employer since the concern of this report is with workplace transformation.

In the next section we look at how black managers interviewed for this research see transformation in the workplace. More specifically, the aim is to determine whether their middle class position is accompanied by social standing and power to influence decision making in their workplaces.

**7.3 The new workplace regime and the position of black managers**

In Chapter 3 it was indicated that this report explores three elements of the new workplace regime – the upward floating colour bar, the informal wage colour bar and the social standing of black managers in the workplace. It was shown that black people in managerial positions do not have sufficient power to influence decision making in the workplace and that their remunerations and benefits are still lower in some workplaces. This section discusses these elements in order to interrogate how black managers perceive their positions in the new workplace regime in South Africa.

### 7.3.1 Upward floating colour bar and informal wage colour bar

In Chapter 2 it was established that the occupation of a higher position in the workplace grants an employee the possibility of higher social standing and influence in the company. This is the position that is occupied by the corporate
middle class. In order to scrutinise the occupational mobility of black managers in the workplace, the first question asked is whether black people gets enough opportunities for promotion. The majority of the interviewees stated that there were ample opportunities for black people to get promotions. The reasons cited for this include the fact that there is affirmative action in place and that some employers are committed to transformation:

There is 100% backing from the MD level. For instance, my role is not marginalised in the company. I’m proud to say that I’m happy and comfortable in my company. Particularly, more white people are happy with my role because they are able to solve some of the problems they could not solve before (Jacob, interview, October 2005).

However, the major obstacle to grasping promotion opportunities seems to be the fact that many black people lack sufficient skills to get higher occupational positions. Furthermore, some interviewees asserted that there was a lack of awareness among black people to get opportunities presented by the new South Africa:

I believe that the opportunities are there. It is for our people to see that and take the opportunities… You can’t complain without doing anything. You complain and you probably expect things to come to you. Just like that, sitting at home and doing nothing and expect things to come! It can’t happen. Opportunities are not blocked. There are those who are willing to improve themselves but we’ve got that thing of underestimating our potential and our ability as black people (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

However, some interviewees argued that the difficulty to get promotion was related to elements that could be traced to the apartheid regime:

We still have the old guards … people who are in positions purely because of their skin [colour]. Also, the ladder of success is getting difficult and people who are up there (shareholders and top management), are mostly the product of the apartheid regime. And for them to change it will take a lot of time (Solly, interview, November 2005).

You can [get promotion], but there are lots of obstacles because of concretised attitudes of most white people in the junior and middle management (Solly, interview, November 2005).

In addition to the resistance attitudes of some white people in managerial positions, others argued that there were informal networks in the workplace that one needed to join so as to get promotion. In this regard, one interviewee said that one’s defiance to join the big brass ring resulted in stagnation:
Opportunities are there, dude. The only thing is that there are obstacles between a person and opportunities. The bigger obstacle is, more especially in white-owned company, a big brass ring. It mostly depends on who you know, because performance alone does not guarantee you promotion. Unfortunately, most black people do not have access to informal social networks in the workplace (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

Some of the interviewees argued that this happened despite the fact that there were policies and procedures meant to guide recruitment and appointment in the workplace:

For instance, there is a procedure required in terms of recruitment. But, proper channels are [hardly followed] when there is vacancy. You find that instead of the decision being taken by the recruitment committee, it is taken by an individual (Solly, interview, November 2005).

This phenomenon seems to be more conspicuous in top and senior management:

Most black people are in an island. Even if you can get business contacts, it’s a bit difficult for you because most white people prefer to talk to other white people (Julius; interview, September, 2005).

Some interviewees, however, disagreed that informal social networks were important in business:

It is hogwash to think that informal networks are functional in terms of performance in [the consulting industry]. I came in this field not knowing anyone, but I still get business (Thembi, interview, November 2005).

To establish whether one’s ability to grasp opportunities in the workplace is accompanied by all the benefits, the interviewees were asked whether there were differences in remuneration and benefits by race in their workplaces. The overwhelming majority of the interviewees believed that the differences were based on one’s level in the hierarchy and on qualifications. Some of those who saw differences based on race asserted that the gap was closing “because we are guided by the Bargaining Council and terms and conditions of the company” (Godfrey, interview, September 2005), and “because the government is scrutinising these kinds of things now” (Kobane, interview, November 2005).

Furthermore, there were those who were aware of the fact that some black people earned more than their white counterparts because they were head-hunted for BEE
purposes. This point links to the issue identified earlier, that lack of skills in the economy facilitates job-hopping in the labour market.

Despite this, other interviewees discussed how the criteria of hierarchy and qualifications were being manipulated to continue the legacy of apartheid in the workplace. The most prominent phenomenon identified by these interviewees is what is called the upward floating colour bar:

I can confirm that there is a disparity between blacks and whites in as far as benefits are concerned. This includes, among other things, car allowance. We are only two black people in the senior management in the company (myself and the HR manager). He does not have a car allowance and people who are employed by him have car allowances (Julius; interview, September 2005).

An interesting thing about this quote is that the interviewee was the shareholder representative and the person he was talking about came to the position through a trade union. However, Josias, who had a trade union background, identified this phenomenon in a different context:

I know of three cases. Let me give you an example. In F4 we have leasing vehicles and F3 does not have. And majority of black people find themselves in F3 level. There was a vacancy available; when this black lady applied; the position was reduced to F3 (Josias, interview, September 2005).

Although the latter quote confirms the upward floating colour bar, it is not clear what the cause of the downgrading of the position was. It may be influenced by the operational imperatives of the company or work restructuring for competitiveness of the company. Nonetheless, some interviewees argued that the upward floating colour bar is sometimes hidden under titles:

It’s still happening and sometimes it is hidden under titles. You find people doing more or less the same thing, but given different titles and, as a result, they won’t earn the same salary (Julius; interview, September 2005).

Others go further to argue that positions are being split into two:

We’ve had an instance in which one position that I can remember very well was split and occupied by two black people and they were called trainees (Chris, interview, September 2005).

In other words, one may argue that the upward floating colour bar happens in two ways. Firstly, it happens by downgrading the position to be occupied by a black
person or giving it a different title. Secondly, this phenomenon happens by splitting the job into two, to be occupied by black people who are called trainees.

Asked about the reasons given for this, one interviewee argued that:

Always … always … whenever they downgrade a position they use training as an excuse. They will always say, now we’ve found a person, but this person needs a little bit of training… They don’t say it’s downgrading, but that a person who is occupying this position needs experience… I don’t know if this reason is valid enough, because I’ve seen people moving into the same positions without the necessary experience, but not being given a training position, but full position (Chris, interview, September 2005).

This quote shows the awareness displayed by some black managers of the dynamics of their workplaces. Although the majority believe that a new workplace regime is emerging in their companies, that there are opportunities for black people in the workplace and that some black managers earn higher wages and benefits than their white colleagues, some are aware of the elements of the old workplace regime in place. More specifically, there is consolidation of the upward floating colour bar and “the big brass ring” or informal social networks serving to polarise black and white people in some workplaces. Nonetheless, the interviewees also revealed that lack of skills in the economy benefited a few individuals with relevant skills because of the companies’ need to meet their employment equity targets.

The next question to grapple with is the participation of black managers in the workplace. This will help us look into black managers’ power to influence decision making in the workplace.

7.3.2 Black managers’ participation in the workplace

In order to look into the issue of “reassertion of white managerial domination in the workplace”, the interviewees were asked whether black people had an equal voice to their white counterparts in meetings. The majority of the interviewees said that their voice was not heard in meetings. The reasons provided for this included the fact that most black people were concentrated in lower positions:

I have an experience where I raised an idea three years ago about employment equity. Would you believe it that the idea was only
implemented this year? This is partly because I was not in this position then (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

Others said that sometimes there was misunderstanding in communication between white and black people in meetings:

It depends on who is chairing a meeting. Sometimes, it is difficult for a white person to grasp in full a point raised by a black person. Since white people are the ones who, often than not, are chairing meetings, it becomes difficult for black people to participate meaningfully in meetings (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

Others argue that this could be attributed to lack of experience for most black people in the workplace:

The problem is that most black people do not have experience. A black person with experience will then have a voice (Makhaya, interview, November 2005).

The issue of experience is further linked to the fact that the core business of the company is to make profit:

I’ve got a friend sitting in [high level] meetings, there are lots and lots of frustrations… there is a lot of racism that I am aware of. You see that is how it has been structured… In our meetings, we are basically fulfilling contractual obligations as employees … not issues of succession planning, issues of what you want to become in future, because those issues are not part of the agenda, part of the culture of organisation. You are focusing on what is your job. In meetings, it seems you are in counselling… You point is noted … but, that idea is not taken seriously, it just disappears (Josias, interview, September 2005).

As a result of the profit-making objectives of the organisations, the goals of the company are the most important thing in organisations:

Although the profit-making objectives of the companies seem to be a valid reason for slow transformational processes, some interviewees seemed to be sceptical about this. As it was shown above, Mankwe (interview, November 2004) argued that this served to “redefine the goals of the organisation” so as to avoid transformation.

Nonetheless, some of the interviewees thought that their ideas were unduly scrutinised in meetings:
You see, what is happening is that you account to a white senior manager. And sometimes, because of the stereotypes, you come with an idea, it must be analysed more thoroughly to make sure that it is genuine. But, if the idea is coming from a person of a same colour, no matter how stupid, it is not actually scrutinised as your idea (Kobane, interview; November 2005).

In addition to the fact that this can be attributed to lack of experience of most black people in the workplace, this is also qualified in two ways. Firstly, there are interviewees who argued that the problem was that there seemed to be a lack of awareness among black people of the fact that BBBEE is meant to empower black people in the workplace:

We are not taking care of each other as black people. We end up killing confidence of our fellow black people because you don’t have that much independence to think for yourself (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

This becomes more conspicuous when one looks at the relationship between new university graduates and those who came through the ranks. For instance, one of the interviewees gave an example of a black person who studied in the USA and held himself aloof to the extent that he would not even speak to any of the black people in the workplace (Mankwe, interview, November 2004). Another interviewee gave an example of a university graduate who came and tried to do the work using “the text book” (Barney, interview, November 2004). Both these encounters ended in failure on the part of graduates, and they had to go back to the very same people they despised, to seek assistance.

While this may be said to be instigated by the environment, as, for instance, “they are told, look, you are the cleverest people around here” (Mankwe, interview, October 2004), one finds an element of adverse attitudes among black people in the workplace. For instance, some black people come to the workplace being too selective of the job they should do. Furthermore, it is argued that some black people come to the workplace thinking that because they are the only black people they will be treated unfairly. As a result, argues Kobane (interview, November 2005), one ends up not participating meaningfully in the workplace.
This is directly linked to some of the qualifications given by those who see their participation in meetings being taken seriously. Some of the interviewees who answered this question in the affirmative argued that sometimes it depended on the attitude of the individual. In other words, if you come to the workplace thinking that your participation is not going to be meaningful, it is unlikely that you will participate positively. Moreover, there are those who stated that although they were in minority, their proposals were always recognised:

> We cannot say that [our voice is heard] because we are in a minority. But whenever we make a proposal it is considered. But, there’re always informal meetings, where some decisions are being taken (Julius, interview, September 2005).

Other interviewees argued that although their participation was taken seriously, it only happened on so-called black affairs:

> But, I would want our influence to be on business, not on black affairs. Even though I deal with customers and all along I did things that were not black things in this company, I do get calls to discuss black affairs: your BEE, CSR, or whatever. But, then, I suppose that’s South Africa for you” (Chris, interview; November 2005).

It was shown at the beginning of this chapter that the apartheid government’s need to administer “black affairs” resulted in acceleration of the development of the black middle class during the apartheid era. The quote presented above indicates that one can identify a similar trend in some workplaces. Indeed, one sees a racial division of labour which has got little to do with one’s achieved status. It is difficult to argue that black people’s participation is taken seriously in the workplace. Although some interviewees argued that this depended on the seniority of one’s position, this is further consolidated by the fact that some argued that their participation was taken seriously only on so-called “black affairs”.

The interviewees who saw a lack of significant participation argued that this could be attributed to the fact that the roots of the colonial and apartheid social structure were still prevalent in the workplace. This is seen by the fact that some black managers argued that their ideas were being unduly criticised and that there were sometimes misunderstandings between black and white people in meetings. In
other words, although the hierarchy and work experience are critical in having an influence in the workplace, one can identify other non-related mechanisms in play in some workplaces. As it was indicated in Chapter 6, the main reason presented on the surface seems to be the fact that there is a need for competitiveness in the global context.

Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that the globalisation discourse, and more especially competitiveness, is being used as a new way to legitimate the elements of the apartheid workplace regime in the workplace (Von Holdt, 2003; Bezuidenhout, 2005). In other words, one may argue that the impact of globalisation serves to legitimate the apartheid workplace regime not only through retrenchment of many black workers, but also through little promotions and participation of black managers in the workplace. These can be seen when one is looking at the answers given to the question of whether there are differences in performance between black and white people.

As it would be expected, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees argued that performance knows neither colour nor gender. In qualifying this answer, the interviewees stated that it depends on the kind of a job one is performing. For instance, argues Thembi (interview, November 2005), it is unlikely that a person allocated to a job he/she does not like will perform satisfactorily. Also, this may be the case for the older generation, but not the younger generation:

I think we, as the young generation, are more exposed than our parents… we don’t see performance as being for whites only (Sharon, interview, November 2005).

Nonetheless, some interviewees were surprised that this mentality seemed to exist in some companies:

At some point I was the only black female in the company and there was a time when I felt like I could have done more and given more responsibility. The company could not give me that because I was junior. But there was another white girl who came around the same time with me and she was given more responsibility than I was (Thembi, interview, November 2005).
While Thembi’s experience shows that the issue of performance is linked to apartheid mentality, Thapelo refers to the upward floating colour bar as the source of the perception that black people perform differently from white people:

> It is just a silly perception... It sometimes derives from the fact that there is a tendency for companies to divide positions to be occupied by black people and people believe that black people cannot perform like white people. Performance is not influenced by colour, but your attitude to the job. Attitude means a person’s willingness to learn and do the job (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

While this consolidates the persistence of some elements of the apartheid workplace regime in the workplace, there was a suggestion among the interviewees that BBBEE-related policies seemed to legitimate adverse actions by some black people in the workplace. This affects both the performance of the companies and the objectives of the policies. One interviewee answered thus:

> Sometimes the environment is not conducive for black people to perform well. But, in my experience, generally speaking, all white people worked under me worked better than black people. Black people must stop throwing stones and counter the perception about black people; that black people cannot perform, are lazy, that at the slightest opportunity they will take a break (Chris, interview, September 2005).

Other interviewees attributed differences in performance to cultural differences between black and white people:

> There is a difference. And the reason is that the socialisation and the culturalisation are not the same. You know, we're coming from different backgrounds and for a long time we’ve got separate educational facilities. Therefore we were not taught in the same way, we were not brought up in a same way. The white person come to the workplace and creates businesses. They come from a working culture or a business culture and they bring it into the workplace. But most black people come from a culture that is not a working culture, not a business orientated culture. But now they move to a company or business and therefore their orientation in the business environment is not going to be the same. They’ve been slightly disadvantaged. Even if they go to the same school with whites, their background counts a lot in their disfavour (Kobane, interview; November 2005).

> It is culturally so, and some white managers capitalise on that and make us feel we are underachievers. As a black person I’ve been taught about ubuntu - the spirit of working together or togetherness. But, a white person had been taught about business. White people come with a perception that nothing is going to stop them from doing business, while black people are trying to be a capitalist with a soul, which cannot go away from us. But the question is how successful we are going to be in business (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).
These interviewees argued that it was sometimes difficult for black managers to draw a line between business and personal issues. As a result, argued Kobane (interview, November 2005), there was a tendency to want to be creative about company policies.

This discussion shows us that most black managers do not see differences between black and white people in the workplace. Those who see the difference attribute it to the legacy of apartheid and the fact that black people’s cultures do not sufficiently prepare them for the workplace. Nonetheless, there is also an indication that there is a lack of consciousness among black people about the objectives of BBBEE.

The above discussion also illustrates a contradictory class location of black managers in the workplace. Indeed, some managers sometimes become more conscious about the needs of other black people, to the extent that it may affect their performance in the workplace. This contradictory class location is more conspicuous to managers who directly link their superiors with shop floor workers. Most of these managers have a union background:

Black managers in the middle are in trouble, because you understand that most people in top management are still caught up in apartheid mentality. How can you help to allay fear they have for trade unions, while there is no one listening to you? And on the other extreme, you find workers mistrusting their own representatives, the shop stewards, because they are going too soft. And then, as a black manager you don’t know how to go to your own black people and say this is not the only way to attain our goals. And you find people who are up there going to these workers and telling them that management is like this today because of these black managers. As a black manager you find yourself being caught up in the middle (Solly, interview, November 2005).

Jeffrey takes this further to show that his position seems to forfeit the agreement he had with his union that he would advance the interests of the working class:

I find myself in the middle. It is difficult for me to advance the workers’ interests and also to perform as expected by the company, because of both the management and the trade union. On the management side you get isolated and labelled as you don’t enjoy the same trust as the others, and that determines the information you get from your colleagues, which, in return, determines your performance. On the other hand, the new leaders start questioning your motives. In other words, you don’t get support from
trade union, which you had an agreement with that you will help to advance the interests of the working class (Jeffrey, interview, October 2004).

The new workplace regime is characterised by diverse observations for black managers in their different workplaces. These range from a belief that the social structure of the apartheid workplace regime is still prevalent in the workplace, to a belief that this is rapidly disappearing. While a new workplace regime seems to be emerging, it is difficult to conclude that the old one is disappearing for black managers. The way in which the current workplace conjuncture is articulated by managers, however, is different from shop-floor workers’ views. For instance, their observation of the upward floating colour bar is slightly different from the observations of shop-floor workers in that they do not see any differences concerning their subordinates. The difference for these managers is with mobility and participation in meetings.

This may also signify that there are differences in the outlook in the workplace between managers and shop-floor workers. It may be argued, for instance, that managers are more concerned with upward mobility than with what is happening below them. Schlemmer (2005) indicates this when he argues that it seems the African middle class is more concerned with social mobility than social issues in general.

Furthermore, it is demonstrated that although the majority of the interviewees do not see differences in treatment, there are instances in which their position is influenced by their race. This represents structural developments of the workplace as seen by black managers. In order to look at the agency of black managers, the interviewees were asked about their responses to the workplace atmosphere and their relationship with their black subordinates in the workplace.
7.4 The role of the African corporate middle class in the workplace

In order to establish the role of black managers in workplace transformation, a question was asked about their reaction to the atmosphere or environment of their workplaces. Answers were characterised by mixed feelings. There were those who maintained that apartheid workplace regime had disappeared with the apartheid system. These interviewees argued that they were happy in their workplaces and did not see a need to do anything other than to improve their lives.

This becomes more complex when one considers those who say that workplace transformation is slow or does not happen altogether. Some of these interviewees appreciated the difficulties faced by companies that were trying to transform and were more co-operative to make sure that more black people occupy higher positions in the workplace.

Meanwhile, others said that there was nothing they could do but to talk about the situation among themselves. Those who fall in this category argued that there was a lack of, or they were not aware of, a strong organisation advancing transformational interests in the workplace. More specifically, these interviewees directed their concerns to labour movement and management associations such as the Black Management Forum (BMF):

\begin{quote}
The problem is that unions are involved from the junior level management (supervisors and shop stewards) downwards. However, I don’t think there is an impact of the labour movement after transition because (1) there is lack of skills and knowledge in the labour movement, and (2) it’s easy to co-opt the leadership … we give them five cars to do the so-called running around. They will be doing their own private things, rather than focusing on issues of the employees (Josias, interview, September 2005).

I used to highly appreciate unions at the time I was a shop steward. But, since freedom, I’ve seen many things that I don’t like. We’ve lots of problems here, but the union cannot do anything. I’ve heard uVavi and uMadisha24 talking about real issues, but they are not able to help the workers. I lost hope in the union. I’m still a member, but I don’t expect a lot from them (Thabang, interview, November 2005).
\end{quote}

\begin{footnote}
24 Willie Madisha and Zwelinzima Vavi - President and General Secretary of COSATU respectively.
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It is important to note that these are people with trade union backgrounds. Furthermore, the majority of these people seemed to know little about employee associations such as the BMF. However, some of those who knew about BMF put it this way:

I don’t think BMF can play a significant role in changing the situation, because the economy is in the hands of white people. For the problem to be sorted, we rely on whities… That means that they will change the situation to be better relative to their [own] situation being better… They are not going to say that we are allowing you to move from there to here and we will stand here and wait for you… No ways!!!… They want tangible … tangible benefits for themselves. For instance, BMF had a major influence on affirmative action, which was a philosophy and it brought to the workplace. But it’s difficult for BMF to follow these to the workplace (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

While Kabelo argued that its limitations are tied to its proper function, Josias saw change in focus on the part of the Black Management Forum:

We joined BMF because we thought it’s a forum where majority of black managers could come together and share our views, our frustrations and collectively, as an external body, come and influence internal organisational processes. I think for the past four years, the current leadership, including ourselves, has changed… One of the biggest achievements of BMF is with BEE and AA. Some of us took opportunity to be co-opted to senior positions other than implementing the latter to our organisations (Josias, interview, September 2005).

Perhaps, a better view of the reaction of black managers was captured by one interviewee. According to Kabelo (interview, September 2005), black persons in the workplace have three options:

The first option is you force yourself to settle for the status quo. You come here at 8:00 in the morning and leave at 16:30. You tell yourself that I’ll do what they want me to do [and tell yourself that] I’m gonna get promotion once in a while … maybe an increase of salary … [Or] they’ll keep you… The second option is you become a serious excuser. Even though you do work hard, you become a serious excuser. You go and play golf with these guys. You start watching rugby with these guys... And then they’ll say ‘Jaa, this guy is becoming better, he’s cool’, and whenever they are looking for a person to promote they’ll say, ‘Here is a right guy, take him’. The third option is to rebel. When you rebel you either get promotions very quickly because they move you to a next department in a higher position or you get sidelined. This can be very dangerous because you may lose your job (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).
Interviewees were also asked whether they felt a sense of obligation to treat black people differently in their workplaces. The majority of interviewees maintained that they did not do that:

No, whether you are black, white, Indian. I share my opinion (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

I do the best I could for everybody. I don’t look into colour (Solly, interview, November 2005).

Honestly speaking, there is no problem of race in my workplace (Thembi, interview, November 2005).

However, some of the interviewees took it to the next level and argued that they did not want to arouse people’s expectations:

I have plus-minus 20 people reporting to me and about 60% is white. I don’t treat someone because he/she is black. I don’t want people to have high expectations. And I think this works so well because everyone respects me accordingly (Godfrey, interview, September 2005).

More specifically, some people respected the vision of equality in the workplace. Indeed, some interviewees argued that other stakeholders should operate in this way, as well:

I don’t treat anyone differently because he/she is black or white. Yes, in terms of skills, I can treat an individual differently. But if you are not productive, it becomes another issue. In fact, I think trade unions must adopt his kind of view when dealing with industrial relations issues, since this will make them realise the difficulties we are faced with in the workplace. Also, this challenges black shop-floor workers to take initiatives by themselves to ensure their own development (Paul, interview, November 2004).

Others attribute this to the fact that there are business ethics to be followed. This touches on how some people emphasise the achieved status in play in the workplace:

Business ethics are very important in the workplace and colour is not an issue… I still have some principles coming from the unions, but you cannot create socialism in somebody’s business (Jacob, interview, October 2005).

However, among those who said they did not treat black people differently in the workplace, there were those who qualified their answers:

I treat them properly. If this is being perceived as treating black people differently, then, so be it. Properly means you treat them as human beings but, trying to undo the damage that had been done. You treat everyone
properly given their circumstances. But whenever I appoint, I appoint a black person (Chris, interview, September 2005).

This interviewee seemed to emphasise equality, while simultaneously he was very conscious of the needs of black people. This is similar to how the two interviewees quoted below saw it:

Although I’m trying by all means to put our people in the workplace, they should know that I will be treating them the same as others, according to their performance. I won’t leave my people behind, I will take them along. But I’m not gonna treat you because of colour. I don’t want to cry because of business loss (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

You wouldn’t do that because it creates inconsistencies. I think as a manager you must treat people the same. But you need to be conscious of the fact that the black ones need to be brought up to speed to be on the same level with their white colleagues. But that does not warrant them to be treated differently (Makhaya, November 2005).

There were a few who said that they always made sure that their black subordinates got preferential treatment in the workplace:

Yes, you always try to help people. Look, I will be a lot more talking to a black colleague than talking to a white colleague. Also, when dealing with a black supplier I’ll be more lenient in terms of due dates than a white person (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

While this interviewee saw the issue of social status as a major determinant, Kobane argued that his consciousness lay in the struggle against apartheid:

Sometimes it happens, because we’re coming from the same struggle. And you can’t separate us from that struggle; we need to nurture or nurse each other and I don’t think a white manager can do the same (Kobane (interview, November 2005).

This is consolidated by Julius, who argued that it was a personal obligation because of the apartheid regime:

I’m personally obliged to treat them differently, taking into consideration the fact that mostly are previously disadvantaged and we are trying to address [the apartheid social] imbalances. Whenever it is possible, I try as much as I can to expose [black workers] to further training and mentorship (Julius, interview, September 2005).

In addition, some of the interviewees argued that there were no specific things one could do to facilitate transformation, since the main issue in the workplace was performance. One of the interviewees said:
I don’t have an opportunity to go an extra mile… I don’t have special accommodation for anyone, because they all perform to the best of their abilities (Josias, interview, September 2005).

Perhaps the view about those who believe there is a need to facilitate black advancement is summed up by the following interviewee, who invoked the apartheid struggle in response to the new battles in the workplace:

During the apartheid era the community was involved, individuals … the groups were involved. Now, the manner in which the new struggle is structured, we need to empower black people with skills, because most of the skills are with white people. And then, you find that most black people do not understand the manner in which transformation should be carried out. For instance, if you can go to the shop floor and ask any ordinary employee what you understand about the skills committee, which is about transformation, you get answers such as ‘we don’t like that structure… they don’t understand’. Therefore, as employers, as workers, as groups, as trade unions, as civil society, we could all say to ourselves … [that] … empowerment is for us. And we must all try to help the government for the companies to comply (Solly, interview, November 2005).

The perceptions of the effects of the transformation agenda in the workplace lead us to draw several conclusions about the position and roles of black managers in the workplace. Firstly, the persistence of the elements of the apartheid workplace regime in some workplaces renders black managers in the workplace unequal compared to their white counterparts. Although there is a suggestion that this is linked to the skills, experience and hierarchy one occupies in the workplace, there is an indication that this results from the components of the apartheid workplace regime. This is consolidated by three phenomena identified during the interviews – fewer promotions in the workplace, less significant participation in the workplace, and participation in black affairs. Indeed, while they are satisfied with the influence they have over their subordinates, it becomes difficult when one looks at their participation in the workplace, and the remuneration and benefits they get.

Furthermore, the findings show that there are contradicting views about the African corporate middle class’s role in the workplace. Some of the interviewees maintained that there was no need for them to fight for transformation in the workplace, since the government was taking care of that. Others argued that there
was a need to ensure that the transformation agenda was advanced in the workplace.

This becomes more interesting when one looks at the interviewees’ answers on how they treated black people in the workplace. The majority of the interviewees asserted that there was no need for differential treatment. However, those who said they were treating black people differently gave moral and political reasons in line with the transformational agenda of government. This further demonstrates the contradictory class location of black managers. Indeed, some black managers were pitted between the need for performance and facilitation of black advancement in the workplace. These needs, they seem to argue, are not complementary. Accordingly, this is likely to create inconsistencies in the workplace.

Lastly, while the interviewees had mixed feelings about the impact of a negative workplace atmosphere on their agency, one can identify four options. Firstly, there are those who seem helpless about the situation. While they are aware of racism and the slow pace of transformation in the workplace, these individuals fulfil their contractual obligations. These are people who may be regarded as adopting a play-it-cool mode of adaptation. Different from what was established by Sitás (2004), these interviewees argue that there is a lack of strong organisations to advance the ideals of transformation in the workplace.

Secondly, one can identify those who settle for the status quo. These are people who are complacent about the workplace situation and are not worried about workplace politics. This phenomenon may be described as conversion, since these people believe in everything the organisation is doing. The majority (if not all) of these people are found in workplaces that are transforming. Although not exclusive to these companies, most of these workplaces are black-owned companies.
Thirdly, there are the “serious excusers”. These are people who see the importance of joining the “big brass ring” so as to get promotions. This may be classified as *colonisation*, since these people realise that there is a need to do everything the authorities want them to do to get a higher position. As Kabelo puts it, these are people who are doing everything, whether formal or informal, to get a place in the workplace.

And, fourthly, there are the “rebels”, who are consciously fighting for transformation in the workplace. These people adopt what Goffman would term an *intransigent line* as a mode of adaptation. They go all out to fight for transformation in the workplace.

In this chapter, it was shown that the difficulty to completely classify black managers in the category of the middle class is largely related to the workplace atmosphere. While there is an indication of a need for meaningful participation in their different workplaces, one can identify considerable levels of frustration emanating from the environment that seems to be based on ascribed status rather than achieved status. This leads to a contradictory class location accompanied by various responses from the African corporate middle class. As was discussed in Chapter 3, social stratification does not only involve how a person is classified in the workplace, but it also involves one’s standing in society.

In order to establish their position and role in a democratic South Africa, the next chapter discusses the social standing of the African corporate middle class and the contributions they make in uplifting the members of their extended families and the majority of the poor in black communities.