CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure successful achievement of set objectives, any organisation has to combine and utilise all its available resources in the most effective and efficient manner. In most organisations, the work force constitutes a substantial part of these resources. Despite technological progress, including automation, the worker still occupies a central place in the production process and the human factor still serves as the basis for profitability and level of service. Although all resources are essential for success, people, according to Hall and Goodale (1986: 3), are generally regarded as the employer’s core resource. Effectiveness, ie the level of success achieved by the organisation, is therefore closely related to the optimum functioning of the people employed by the organisation.

As a result of the pressure on organisations for change and transformation, management of the human resource component is becoming more and more important. A thorough knowledge of the people employed by an organisation is becoming essential. The human being is complex and dynamic, as every individual behaves in a unique way, influenced by factors such as habits, needs, motives, objectives, ambitions, cultural background, values and norms. These aspects, in turn, are influenced by various factors within and outside the organisation. Therefore, it is natural that every individual will be affected in a unique way by change within his/her organisation.

It is commonly accepted that, in the past, organisations assumed large portions of the work force to be similar and that anyone different simply had to adapt to the majority group (De Beer, 1997). In today’s organisation this approach has changed to one where employees are regarded as many different individuals, each of whom have to be acknowledged as adding value to the organisation in a unique way. The importance of valuing and respecting individual differences in the quest of companies to outperform their competitors, receives more and more support (Jamieson & O'Mara, 1991; Peters & Waterman, 1982).

The above mentioned applies to all types of organisations and enterprises (Schein, 1992), none more so than those in South Africa battling to get to grip with the transformational changes brought about by new political and social priorities. De Beer (1997) emphasises that for South Africa, having a strong history of stereotyping people in all spheres of society, this transition will by no means be an easy one. The crippling effect of Apartheid as a socio-economic
system on the economy and all social structures in South Africa, and the
dramatic turnaround in the early nineties, are not new to anyone familiar with
the recent history of and political developments in the country during the past
decade. The system of Apartheid, characterised by members of various racial
and ethnic cultures being regarded as too different to develop together,
resulted in a deeply entrenched social paradigm preventing people in general
(and specifically the minority white community) to see the need for a deep and
thorough understanding of these differences. This resulted in the highly
biased and discriminating approach of separate development where "non-
white" citizens were increasingly disadvantaged and deprived of
developmental opportunities and social rights. Although the country has
always had a population of huge variety, this diversity was not reflected in the
composition of companies' employee numbers. However, the 1994
democratic elections brought about significant changes in organisational
policies in respect of selection and appointment of members from all
population groups. The process of change is ongoing towards a future of
balanced representation (Hirschowitz, 2000). No one has remained
unaffected, and old paradigms and assumptions regarding people's abilities
and potential are continuously being challenged. The challenge for workers
and employers to work together more effectively and productively in the same
work place will thus become increasingly demanding. In addition to this South
Africa is also expected to become a competitive role player in the global
market and as such an example for the rest of Africa. This will not be
achieved over night. Despite an increasing number of the world's multi-
national corporations already returning to South Africa, Hodgetts & Luthans
(1997) foresee difficult times for the years ahead.

In this regard Theron (1992: 1) sees the survival of South Africa as a modern
industrial complex in the era of increased integration as dependent "to a large
extent on the ability of its people who think differently and have different
values and beliefs to…. strive towards the attainment of common goals". The
ongoing process of integrating all ethnical groups with different cultural
backgrounds and values into one united socio-economic community in South
Africa calls for an effective analysis of these value differences. It forms a
natural prerequisite for people to work together in teams for the attainment of
individual and organisational goals. The challenge is to enable people, with
different cultural backgrounds, preferences, perceptions and needs, to work
together as effectively as possible. In the RSA, the merging of diverse
cultures in the workplace culminates in management having to pay more and
more attention to these differences when dealing with personnel and
personnel-related problems.

When analysing the nature of leadership behaviours and the factors
influencing these behaviours in an African context, one has to keep track of
the fact that "African" is not just different to "Western", but that the term
"African" in South Africa represents a huge variety of ethnic, cultural and sub-

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cultural groups. These include nine major ethnic groups, each with its own cultural identity and language. There seems to be consensus that there is a fundamental conflict of cultures between blacks and whites and that organisational behaviour varies across cultures (Becker, 1974; Hammond-Took, 1986; Hofstede, 1980). However, Erwee (1988) points out that the question as to what proportion of this variability in organisational behaviour is caused by cultural determinants, became a contentious issue resulting in conflicting viewpoints. Although Human & Hofmeyer (1985) acknowledge a cultural gap between whites and blacks, they stress the fact that culture’s influence on the behaviour of blacks should not be overemphasised, as most black managers deliberately “westernise” their behaviour as much as they can in the white organisation. To them a black person’s conformity to tribal cultural values is situational as he may only display traditional behaviour when expected by his family. In contrast with this Hammond-Tooke (1986) rejects the fact that a black is urbanised and westernised once he has changed his geographical location. To him urbanisation is a result of fundamental structural and cultural changes which will, amongst others, involve the adoption of …..“new, or alternate perceptions, concepts and symbolic structures”.

Despite the many disagreements, findings of researchers (Moerdyk & Coldwell, 1990; Erwee, 1988; Biesheuvel, 1987) generally indicate that the eurocentric approach of explaining the behaviour of all cultural groups in terms of Western knowledge and paradigms (which are not relevant to these groups) will not suffice in a heterogeneous cultural composition in South Africa. Instead of the old ethnocentric approach (Van der Walt, 1997), the country should continuously seek to move towards a society characterised by ethnorelativism, where the potential and value in terms of organisational performance of all groups and cultures are regarded as inherently equal. The ethnocentric approach in the “old South Africa” resulted in major imbalances in the SA business world. In 1999 Smit and Cronje reported that less than 2% of top and middle management was black and that only a handful of blacks have managed to establish themselves as top executives. They further indicated that if middle and top management were singled out and compared, there were 541 top-and middle-level managers per 10 000 members of the white workforce, with only two of these managers per 10 000 blacks, a ratio of 270:1. The same figure for Coloureds was 10 and 95 for Indians. These figures should further be put into perspective against a ratio of more than three blacks for each white member of the overall South African population.

It is clear that whites still dominate the professional, managerial and other skilled positions. As early as 1988, Erwee investigated the reasons for this type of occupational structure by focussing on a theoretical framework that indicates the structuring of relevant variables, and then reports on a number of variables

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1 The belief that one's own group, culture or subculture is inherently superior to other cultures and groups.
(most of which are still valid today) responsible for the slow advancement of black leaders in South Africa. The most important of these are:

- The role of the physical environment (including aspects like poor education, lack of geographic mobility and sociological factors).
- Organisational policies (such as selection and blocking of promotion).
- The impact of culture (through different values, attitudes and behaviour).
- Individual perceptions or personality factors.

Despite a significant amount of South African research on variables influencing cross-cultural employee behaviour and specifically career advancement of blacks, this area of research still seems to be fragmented owing to the lack of a holistic integrated theoretical model. Various research questions posed by Erwee (1988:16) have not yet been properly researched, which indicate how much basic research still needs to be done. Examples are the following:

- To which extent do the cultural paradigms between black and white employees differ with regard to their perception of time and individualism versus collectivism, etc.?
- How does the organisational behaviour of black and white employees vary?
- How can cultural diversity be used as an organisational resource?
- Do black leaders have an external locus of control?

Research based on the above-mentioned questions should be done with the specific aim of explaining how diversity can be utilised as a valuable organisational resource for leaders at all levels. An understanding of, and more importantly, the acceptance of ethnical and cultural differences became a prerequisite for fast economic and social development in post-apartheid South Africa.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Since 1992 the enormous changes South Africa has experienced – changes driven mainly by the extreme diverse composition of the South African population - have been discussed, philosophised and written about at length. The radical change, from a society of “apartheid” in the past to a multi-racial society of equal opportunity for the future, has far-reaching implications for most organisations.
In this way the South African public service, directed by the principles of reconciliation, restructuring and development, also finds itself within a process of transformation. Seen against the background of the fundamental political change after the 1994 election and the resulting integration of military personnel in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), the Department of Defence (DOD) is currently undergoing a process of transformation according to which the SANDF will also adopt a new organisational paradigm (see chapter 2). The SA Air Force, one of the arms of service, is committed to these changes implemented by the DOD and is the organisation on which this study will focus. In reaction to the change imperatives the SA Air Force has already been restructured according to the image of the newly transformed DOD organisation.

This new organisation regards the following objectives as important:

- Establishment of a professional work ethic.
- Improvement of morale and productivity.
- Improvement of services rendered.
- Establishment of new, and more participative, organisational structures.
- Development of a new organisational culture.
- Increased focus on human resource development.
- Establishment of a learning organisation.
- Thorough management of change and diversity.

The process of transformation in the DOD is thus not limited to mere modifications to the previous dispensation, but implies radical change. It is an all-embracing programme and involves change to organisational structures, labour practices, management philosophies, leadership principles as well as change in human behaviour, through the establishment of a new value-driven culture. Transformation of the SA Air Force organisation (as part of the DOD) will therefore have far-reaching implications for managing and leading the human component of its resources.

### 1.3 SUMMARY

The study of cultural and value-related differences and the development of a workable and effective leadership culture for business in South Africa takes place against the backdrop of a unique socio-political history. In the process of rebuilding a multi-racial society, also in the world of work, the diversity of the SA population calls for a proper understanding of all human factors influencing leaders’ ability to lead their organisations and their people towards higher levels of productivity and competitiveness. This also applies to the public sector in general and the Department of Defence (DOD) in particular. In the next chapter the research setting will be discussed in more detail, where after the research objectives will be presented.