

A transformational public sector leader

Issued by [SAICA](#)

17 Nov 2022

Mabatho Sedikela is one of those people who work in the public sector as an act of patriotism. She grew up in a large family in Limpopo and as the older sister, she was tasked with setting an example for her siblings. One of her responsibilities was to help her parents manage the family business. That was how she first discovered her natural talent for numbers.



A CA(SA), Mabatho also has a master's in South African and International Taxation from the University of Johannesburg and more than ten years' executive experience in the public sector. In 2021, she was appointed Head of Provincial Audit at the office of the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), where she provides strategic leadership, direction and oversight of the audit portfolio of the nine provincial business units.

When Mabatho began her articles, she was astounded at how few women were entering the profession. But when it came to black women, the stats were even more startling. 'I had to find ways to show up as a woman, without being seen as too bossy or aggressive, but still be assertive,' she recalls. 'It was not easy at first, and I am grateful that I was able to have access to and be empowered by great mentors on how to contribute – first as a woman, and then as a woman of colour. Those were major challenges then, and they are still relevant today. That was why I joined the Association for the Advancement of Black Accountants of Southern Africa (ABASA).'

Mabatho started her career at Deloitte and had limited knowledge and exposure to the public sector. But at some point, she began to question what contribution she was making to the country.

'My dad used to say, "People fought and sacrificed their lives so you could have an education and better prospects. What are you going to give back?". That was when I started to reflect and question whether my career in the private sector was making a meaningful contribution. Through my involvement at various ABASA forums, I started interacting and being exposed to more people in the public sector mainly from the AGSA; the organisation always scooped the awards for the biggest intake of people of colour. I was constantly being encouraged by AGSA executives to consider joining the organisation and my interest started to grow.'

Mabatho discussed a possible move with Kimi Makwethu who led the AGSA from 2013 to 2020 until his untimely passing, and who had been a partner at Deloitte before that. As one of her mentors and a leader whose opinions she respected, he was supportive of the idea. 'He sold me a dream and I trusted him because he knew where I was coming from,' she says. 'He also told me that I would work harder than I could imagine but that did not scare me. All I knew was that I would be able to sit across the table and proudly tell my parents what I was doing to contribute to our democracy.'

From the start, it was apparent that working with politicians and others in government was right for her. 'I spoke the same language as these people, I looked like them, and I could explain complex, technical matters without making the leaders feel uncomfortable because there was a sense of ease and familiarity. As an executive, I also realised that I could help to

address the issue of insufficient representation of people of colour and women in this role. I have never looked back.'

She had planned to do a five-year stint at the AGSA and then return to the private sector and leverage the knowledge and experience she had gained, but her heart and mind were captured. Today, her passion for the profession is driving her to find ways to encourage universities to educate finance students about the many opportunities in the public sector.

'There is an enormous amount of value to the work we do at the AGSA; we need to do more to build a foundational understanding of that value and encourage young people to consider a career with us. CAs(SA) are needed in the public sector more than anywhere else at present.'

As a leader, Mabatho has always accepted that she has a responsibility to others. In her early years at the AGSA, she helped to transform the Gauteng business unit into an institution that operates in line with private sector work ethics and objectives, and to grow and develop the young CAs(SA) who were training with the AGSA. To contribute meaningfully to the transformation of the profession, early on in her career, Mabatho served on various boards, including the board of SAICA, as well as the Independent Regulatory Board for Auditors (IRBA). More recently, at the AGSA she served on the Accounting Standards Board to influence the development of public sector standards to enhance transparency and accountability.

'I am immensely proud to have witnessed the growth of so many people who have worked with me – from my PA who has become a manager, to accounting professionals who have gone on to become leaders in other public sector organisations. I encouraged many of them to study further and it has been rewarding to touch the lives of young people in this way.'

Mabatho leads by example and with conviction. She is a motivated, resilient, results-oriented executive. Her leadership style is one of support and guidance and she has developed a track record of uncompromising excellence. She has also spent a significant part of her career capacitating the AGSA, drawing on her knowledge and experience.

Because she finds it impossible to separate her own growth from her work, she measures her success by the impact she is able to make. Self-awareness, self-regulation and servant leadership, she says, are what keep her accountable.

Mabatho is all too aware of the systemic issues facing the country, and she is determined to make the next five years at the AGSA count. In June 2022, when the AGSA launched its report on the state of local government, she commented that the fundamental principles around credible financial reporting and transparency on how public funds were spent and managed, were found wanting. This meant that citizens were at risk of not enjoying the basic services that municipalities are responsible for delivering.

'As head of audit for the nine provinces, I have my work cut out for me,' she says. 'Local government is at the coal face of service delivery, and we have all had enough of potholes, load shedding and water shedding. My aim is to meaningfully contribute to resolving these systemic issues and ensuring that the AGSA remains a strategic, value-adding partner that can influence and encourage a culture shift for the benefit of our citizens. I will make sure that the AGSA's #cultureshift2030 strategy is implemented, monitored and delivered across all provinces to contribute to the transformation of local government.'

As for the future, she remains dedicated to people development and to finding a successor who is even better equipped than she is to take over her role. She aims to continue to be in a leadership role in one form or another and is keen to pursue some form of involvement in academia, where she hopes to spread the word about the magic that can be made at the AGSA and in the public sector at large.

'We have a huge responsibility to turn around the current state of affairs at provincial level and enhance public sector accountability for the benefits of all citizens who rely on municipalities for service delivery,' Mabatho says. 'We need energetic, innovative young graduates who are the future leaders to help us get it right.'

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