

SABPP's Annual Ethics and HR Governance Conference: A Milestone Event



On March 19, the South African Board for People Practice (SABPP) hosted its annual Ethics and HR Governance conference, marking a significant milestone for the organization. This year, the conference took place at the newly opened SABPP House in Ruimsig, establishing a fresh standard for collaboration and innovation. With over 100 enthusiastic delegates in attendance, the event became a vibrant hub for knowledge-sharing and professional development.

I was absolutely thrilled to serve as the MC! Engaging with brilliant minds from both industry and academia and sharing my thoughts was an incredible honour. The discussions served as a lively reminder of how crucial ethical practices and governance are in our HR profession. This conference addressed private and public issues head-on, offering HR professionals a fantastic opportunity to reflect on their vital roles in building ethical, fair, and resilient organisations.

With dynamic and thought-provoking sessions, delegates didn't just learn—they were inspired and motivated! I'm confident that everyone left the conference with a rejuvenated sense of their responsibilities in crafting ethical work environments. It was a fun and enriching experience for all involved!

The speaker lineup was impressive, featuring industry experts who explored pressing topics such as whistleblowing, leading with integrity, and combating fraud within HR. Ms. Irisha Luhanga, MD of Redefine Human Capital led invigorating discussions on designing inclusive learning systems that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. She reminded us that AI and other innovative technologies are transforming the learning landscape in ways our current models must adapt. It's time to think differently and inclusively to support those impacted by technological advances!

Additional sessions focused on embracing disruptions in the digital age and navigating the technological advancements reshaping the HR landscape. Topics such as public administration ethics and technical

disciplinary assistance were discussed, highlighting the importance of governance and accountability. The conference's success showcased the HR community's commitment and collaborative spirit. SABPP reaffirmed its mission to empower HR professionals to cultivate ethical and sustainable organisational cultures, inspiring them to lead with purpose and integrity in a constantly evolving world. We were fortunate to have a live case study! Prof Vee, Dr Sibongile Vilakazi, author of "PUT HER IN HER PLACE", shared her experience of confronting an unethical process within a well-respected organisation. Her narrative offers lessons in governance and insights into South Africa's labour laws, employer-employee relations, and the legal system.

HR: The Backbone of Ethics Management

A key theme emerged: recognising HR as the backbone of ethics management. Organisational culture is central to decision-making, service delivery, and profitability, particularly in the public sector. HR professionals possess the unique ability to shape and sustain ethical practices, making their roles essential in today's complex environment.

It was a sobering moment during Advocate Mathilda Shaku's session when delegates were reminded of HR's essential part in establishing ethical frameworks, policies, and processes that have far-reaching societal impacts. Advocate Shaku is a Director of the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). HR is directly responsible for how public servants and private sector employees are held accountable for their portfolios. However, challenges remain, stemming from employee behaviours that include:

Unethical Conduct: Conflicts of interest (COI), unauthorised side jobs, and improper acceptance of gifts.

Poor Work Ethic: Habitual tardiness, early departures, and substandard performance.

Lack of Accountability: A culture of ignoring or failing to report unethical actions due to fear or ignorance.

These challenges include reputational damage, low morale, increased fraud, and normalisation of unethical practices. On top of that, public sector-specific hurdles complicate the situation:

Weak Management: Turning a blind eye to unethical behaviour or fostering intimidation.

Lack of Protection: Fear of retaliation discourages whistleblowing, while inaction on reported issues erodes trust.

Recruitment Challenges: Questionable hiring practices and weak leadership accountability.

Weak Consequence Management: Lack of accountability perpetuates unethical behaviour and poor governance.

Driving Ethical Integrity and Leadership in Tomorrow's Workplace

Yael Dall Head of Group Ethics Operations at Discovery, reminded us that the organisational landscape is evolving, driven by:

Digital Transformation: Incorporating AI and data protection into ethical HR practices.

Psychological Safety & Wellbeing: Balancing employee care with business needs.

Shifting from Compliance to Culture: Emphasizing core values rather than just regulatory box-ticking.

Strengthened Governance: Meeting rising compliance standards.

She emphasised that HR's role in the future of work is to capacitate the organisation so that ethical leadership and integrity increase while ethical failures decrease. She mentioned that HR increases

ethical leadership by ensuring a baseline encompassing three pillars of ethical integrity is in place:

Values: Upholding consistent moral principles, even in tough times.

Leadership: Emphasizing accountability, fairness, and transparency.

Culture: Fostering ethical behaviour throughout the organisation.

Beyond Whistleblowing: Building Psychological Safety and Ethical Courage

Mrs. Elizabeth Dlamani Khumalo, TDCI's chairperson and a powerhouse in HR and a legendary leader, stressed the importance of moving beyond whistleblowing as a reactive strategy to create proactive cultures of psychological safety and ethical courage. While whistleblowing often highlights systemic failures, psychological safety can help mitigate ethical risks long before they escalate.

Mrs. Dlamini Khumalo emphasised that psychological safety must be intentionally woven into organisational systems rather than left to chance. Core values such as trust, integrity, respect, inclusion, and support for mental health are vital for creating psychologically safe environments for employees. She reminded us that effective governance measures—such as leadership accountability and robust reporting mechanisms—are essential to maintaining inclusivity and transparency.

Retired Vice Admiral (Dr) Asiel Kubu of the SA Navy challenged us in HR to recognise that embracing AI and other technological advancements is an ethical obligation. We cannot afford to overlook the waves of disruption, as they are inevitable, and HR must acknowledge the structural changes these disruptions impose on organisations. He asserts that HR should embrace and lead these changes rather than merely being consumers of technological progress. HR's leadership opportunities include adopting a forward-looking mindset, investing in our learning and education, and becoming strategic business partners so we can be well-informed organisational partners in digitisation and digitalisation.

The risk of failing to do so could open the gates to negative influences and allow poor results to dominate. This caution from Dr. Kubu echoes Ms. Dall's earlier warning that HR's role is to mitigate ethical failures. Dr. Kubu elaborated, reminding us that while embracing innovation is essential for sustaining a competitive advantage, we remain under-regulated in South Africa concerning AI. This makes our stewardship even more vital, as we must proactively manage cyber threats, ensuring that data collected by AI is ethically recorded, used, and stored, and advocating for our organisations to strengthen their cyber resilience actively.

Mr. Katleho Seqapotsa, the Membership Officer at the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners South Africa Chapter, re-emphasised that preventing ethical fraud starts with us as HR professionals being ethical. Ethical failures can tarnish reputations, harm engagement, and lead to financial or legal troubles. He tackled these challenges head-on, motivating HR professionals to lead sustainable and ethical transformations.

A panel of industry and academic experts, led by Prof. Karel Stanz of the University of Pretoria (UP), emphasised the importance of keeping the "human" at the core of modern technological advancements, including AI and digital transformation, as they reshape the HR landscape. Other panel members

included Dr. Martha Harunavamwe, a Senior Lecturer at UP; Dr. Marius Pretorius, MD of TDCI; and Mr. Frank de Beer, a Director of The Arbinger Institute S.A.; and Mr. Patrick Mugumo, a Director at IRG Group.

By addressing these pressing issues, the conference highlighted the crucial role of HR in promoting positive change and fostering a culture of accountability and integrity. As organisations adapt to an ever-changing world, HR's mission to cultivate trust, values, and integrity remains essential!

Egbe Oyegun-Adeoye

Director, Navigate Consulting Africa (Pty) Ltd











