

CHAPTER 4

PEOPLE

To return to that question asked by journalists back in 1999 at the launch of the Scorpions: but who are the Scorpions? Obviously, the composition of the DSO has changed since the launch of the organisation, but some characteristics have remained the same.

The first unchanged characteristic is that of youth. Much was made of the recruitment of university graduates straight out of university in late 1999 into the Scorpions, and their dispatch for highly specialised training, some at the FBI's Quantico, some at Scotland Yard, and, later, some in the DSO's own programme in Mpumulanga. The idea was that the "cream of the crop", brimming with youthful enthusiasm and energy, would be armed with the tools of the trade with which to combat crime, and would do so without fear or favour, and with proper regard for human rights.

But youth is a double-edged sword. While on the one hand, the young people recruited into the DSO were meant to have been trained "properly" on how to conduct an investigation and would not therefore hold onto bad habits that some may have developed in the old SAP, their relative initial lack of experience – not necessarily as investigators, but of experience of life, and of any kind of work at all – potentially places a burden on those more experienced constantly to check and guide the work of those less experienced.

How young are members of the DSO? At the time of writing in late 2003, just more than a quarter of DSO members were under the age of 30.³² Only 3% were older than 50 years of age. More than a quarter of the DSO's entire staff complement had no prior work experience before being employed by the DSO, although most were university graduates. Most were employed as investigators, so that for every experienced investigator, there is another who had no work experience prior to being taken on by the DSO.

The idea behind this recruitment of youth was that the new and inexperienced would be well trained, and, with the passage of time, become experienced. This problem of lack of experience would therefore be short-lived and

was the inevitable short-term cost of creating a new kind of organisation. Indeed, some of the new recruits from the first batch employed have already been promoted from “special investigator” to “senior special investigator”.

Furthermore, many of the experienced investigators taken on were indeed extremely experienced and brought with them a wealth of skills, which are more likely to be quickly passed on to new investigators in the DSO than elsewhere, as investigators in the DSO work in teams rather than alone (see *Operation*).

However, some say that the “passage of time” on its own is not enough to make investigators experienced, even in the DSO’s team environment, as young investigators need the freedom to “learn from their mistakes” – the room to apply in real life what has been learnt in training. The DSO policy of only taking on large important matters (see *Mandate*) means there are few smaller cases which the less experienced can lead on their own, and indeed, no room to allow mistakes. Young investigators have to be content with small roles in larger team investigations.

Furthermore, the overseas training that the first new recruits received also created some problems. A decision was taken at the time that no experienced investigators would be sent to the US and the UK for the basic training, although some experienced members were sent for senior training on specific topics. The UK government provided training on South African request to 100 members of the DSO; 50 new recruits followed a tailored seven-week training programme; 50 others undertook Senior Investigation Officers (SIO) training.³³ Training was carried out at the Police Training College at Hendon.³⁴ Both UK training programmes included a significant human rights element. On the US side, about 80 members of the DSO were trained at Quantico, Virginia, at the FBI Academy³⁵.

This decision to send only the new recruits on foreign basic training was ostensibly taken for reasons of cost. Those investigators who were sent abroad for neither the basic nor the senior training, many of them ex-SAPS members, felt at the time that the underlying reason for the decision was that they were being sidelined, and would be retained in the DSO only until the new recruits were ready to take over from them.

Whatever the true motivation, the decision had consequences. The first was that those new recruits were trained in a vacuum, without any knowledge of how things are done in South Africa and of the South African law enforce-

ment environment, with which to challenge the overseas trainers. The second was that many of the older investigators were not trained in the new methods taught. In sum, the decision to send the new but not the old on the overseas training may have exacerbated any inevitable tensions existing between the “old guard” and the “new guard”, and may also have resulted in some of the training not being taken on board. Again, this is a problem that is likely to dissipate with time, especially since recent DSO training has been locally-based.

One of the advantages of youth, is related to the second characteristic of the DSO: it is one of the most representative organisations in South Africa; a new organisation of younger people, created post-1994, supposedly without any of the “historical baggage” sometimes bedeviling state organisations.

As far as the employment equity figures go, the DSO has indeed managed to be a representative organisation. At the time of writing, African, Asian or Coloured members made up 70% of DSO members.³⁶ Just over half of all members are African, the majority of whom are special investigators (64%). On the gender front, just less than 30% of the staff consists of women, a not insignificant proportion given that law enforcement is not often a career of choice for women. However, most of the women (55%) are prosecutors or occupy administrative positions. By comparison, 68% of male DSO members are senior special or special investigators.

Overall, the representative nature of the DSO, making it in some senses a microcosm of broader South African society, means that while all sections of the public can feel a sense of ownership of the DSO, some of the challenges of South African society are also reflected within the organisation. For example, one of the inevitable consequences of the gender-occupation split alluded to above is that women are often the group-head prosecutors directing an investigation by a team of mostly male investigators (see *Operation*), and there is sometimes noted a tendency to want to “go over their heads” to a male authority figure.

Apart from youth and diversity, the DSO is also composed of persons of a higher than average educational standard: almost all, including the investigators, are university graduates. Indeed, it was apparent from the interviews conducted that the DSO consists of many talented individuals keen to make a difference and not afraid to speak their minds; any complaints of those interviewed had tended to revolve around frustration at not being able to do more in their positions in the DSO.

The future success of the DSO will depend on retaining and capitalising on the investment in these individuals. This can only be achieved by limiting DSO employees' frustrations, since such talented individuals are far more likely to move if frustrated, and far more marketable in the private sector, than the less talented.

In sum, therefore, the DSO is a young, diverse organisation of talented individuals, and these qualities have implications for how the DSO should be managed.