

COMMENT

EDITOR'S CHOICE:

RECOMMENDED READS:

Multi-user offshore hubs for Africa? This was one of the proposals presented at the African Ports Evolution conference - read more on page 28.

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I have long had a fascination with the concept of perception versus reality. It's not a simple topic and it would be rudimentary to presuppose that perception and reality are opposed. A person's perception of the world is also their reality and they are likely to defend their views vehemently when something challenges this reality. While perceptions are formed overwhelmingly by our place in society, they are also shaped by our interactions with people, how we gather information and the media.

So what has this got to do with the maritime industry where facts are facts and science, engineering and strategy govern its development as well as progress? Not so. Wherever we encounter a hiccup, or worse a blockage, towards what we believe to be progress - you can be sure that opposing perceptions are trying to shape reality in the maritime industry.

And while perception is often equated with PR as most companies seek to formulate the best possible perceptions for their brands - perception becomes a far more challenging animal to tame when it relates to getting things done; promulgating policy or even creating new opportunities.

My few encounters with parliamentary proceedings have reinforced my fascination with perception and reality. Most recently I sat through submissions to the Fisheries Portfolio Committee aimed at addressing the proposed amendments to the Marine Living Resource Act. I expected a rather dry interrogation of each amendment, but received far more. Let's start with some facts:

- Everyone on the portfolio committee is aligned to one of the political parties.
- None of those on the portfolio committee have any commercial or financial interest in the fishing industry.
- The session attracted submissions from a variety of sources.
- The session attracted the interest and attendance of many representing mostly the small scale fishers, subsistence fishers or communities.
- These groups are living in poverty and do not see a means to improving the lot of their children.
- The amendment of the Act will have an impact on these people.

Those are facts that I am inclined to believe that everyone in attendance would be willing to agree on. Given these facts one would be inclined to hope that the session could have been chaired to a successful outcome. Unfortunately it's simply not that easy.

For example when certain people are perceived to be proponents of Apartheid while others are perceived to be champions of the

people - it becomes very difficult for those in the people's trenches to look beyond the persona and hear the message of the previously privileged. Similarly the previously privileged's (and those in denial of previous privilege) perception is that the only message of the previously oppressed is a political one.

And so when Shaheen Moolla submits that he feels the amendments are flawed; across the floor they hear that he is against amending the Act and does not want to recognise subsistence fishers. One portfolio committee member even stated that she was "offended" by his submission.

In my perception her understanding of his submission was filtered through her perception of him as a previous legal adviser to DAFF and one of the architects of the current Act. For the record he believes that the Act is in "dire need" of amendment, but warns of some of the perhaps unforeseen implications of the current proposed amendments.

The fishing industry continues to be a polarised one. Perception is reality and drives the discourse on a path that seems doomed to fork off in the direction of the us and them; win or lose dichotomy. Or is this just my perception?

But perception does not only rule in the fishing industry. It's at work within and about the maritime industry as a whole. It's time we challenged some of our own thought processes to ensure that we are not offering a port of refuge to inappropriate perceptions.

What are our perceptions around transformation in the industry? Should we be challenging the perception that a bolstered ships' registry will benefit the industry (or vice versa)? What are our perceptions of short sea shipping, cabotage and coastal shipping? Have we done enough to shift public and government perception of the maritime industry? What of perceptions around port concessioning and privatisation?

Let's be open to shifting perceptions and creating a win-win reality for the maritime industry.

Editor - Colleen Jacka