

Manager-Employee Relationships during Turbulent Times at a Gold Mine in South Africa

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Abstract: This article aims to provide new conceptual insights into the responsibilities of an engineer who acts as a plant manager and who has to deal with employee relations during a turbulent time at a gold mining plant in South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used to gather the data in this study. Trustworthiness of the research was ensured by applying various reasoning strategies, such as content analysis, inductive reasoning, blending, bracketing and understanding in order to interpret the data. The first group interview comprised managers as well as engineers who were appointed as managers, the second, administrative employees from the service departments, and the third, artisans and foremen employed at the mine. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the transcripts. The recurring themes from the group interviews were 'employee empowerment', 'trust building', 'employee voice' and 'development of skills'. A conceptual framework for manager-employee relations during troubled times was developed from the findings. The essential responsibilities of a gold mining plant manager during periods of turbulence were described.

Keywords: *Manager-employee relationships, employee empowerment, trust building, employee voice, development of skills.*

1. Introduction

The year 2016 marked another challenging year for the South African mining industry in the wake of subdued commodity prices, an increase in short-term volatility, increased pressure on operating models and regulatory uncertainty (PWC, 2016). Mining production in South Africa fell by 0.2 percent year-on-year in August of 2016, following a 5.4 per cent slump in July. This was the twelfth straight month of contraction, although at the slowest pace, as output dropped for gold (-8.2 percent) (Trading Economics, 2016). KPMG (2016, p. 2) explains: "uncertain regulatory framework, weaker commodity prices, increased working costs, constrained infrastructure, high labor costs coupled with poor levels of productivity and strained labor-management relations; these are some of the challenges that have placed South Africa's mining industry in dire straits". Productivity of mining depends on the labour working in the mines (Ranjan & Das, 2015). South African workplaces are culturally diverse (Nel, Kirsten, Swanepoel, Erasmus & Jordaan, 2016) and relationships in the mining industry are complex and dynamic (Josep & Taka, 2012). Deloitte (2016, p. 6) states, "to support the constant push for productivity miners may have to tread into controversial waters: labor reform". A good manager-employee relationship is therefore necessary. This relationship will optimise performance, and employees will feel engaged (Tanzel & Gazioglu, 2014). Emmott (2015) is of the opinion that for many employers, employee engagement has become the focus of their efforts to manage the employment relationship. Such a relationship, however, can be distorted by the diversity of cultural interpretations (Jenkins, 2004). It is therefore essential that managers display procedural and distributive fairness in the organization (Gill, 2008).

Ranjan and Das (2015) mention that efficiency in productivity employee satisfaction and motivations are important issues in the mining industry. Zheng, Di Milia, Rolfe and Bretherton (2007) assert that managing strategic flexibility is essential in the mining industry in order to achieve organizational objectives. Deloitte (2016) suggests that South African mining managers should not only focus on profits, but also provide decent jobs, play a positive role in mining communities and be sensitive to the environment. In order to accomplish the above it is essential that managers establish and sustain a healthy relationship with the employees. The objectives of this study were threefold. First, to investigate the manager-employee relationships at a mine; second, to profile the essential responsibilities of a gold mining plant manager during turbulent times; and third, to develop a conceptual framework of manager-employee relations during a turbulent time from the findings in this study the importance of this study relates to the identification of the main themes that form part of the four pillars that are crucial in manager-employee relationships during a turbulent time at a gold mine. Another important contribution is the profile of essential responsibilities of a gold mine plant manager that can be used to transform an engineer into a gold mine manager. Employee morale and employee motivation are important in the mining industry (Ranjan & Das, 2015). Staff, needs to be motivated, and talented employees need to be retained (Dickie & Dwyer, 2009).

Manager–Employee Relationships: Herington, Scott and Johnson (2005, p. 256) mention, “Employees view relationships as being very important in the work environment”. Holtzhausen and Fourie (2009, p. 337) state: “when managing the employer-employee relationships, three aspects need to be monitored: the employee’s general perspective of the character of his relationship with management, the type of relationship, and the employee’s perception of the quality of the different dimensions of the relationship”. Dickie and Dwyer (2009) posit that the effective management of employees will provide a competitive advantage. Improving manager-employee relationships will increase employee satisfaction and labour productivity, reduce turnover and motivate employees (Tanzel & Gazioglu, 2014). Boudrias, Gaudreau, Savouie and Morin (2009) state that employee empowerment is the set of managerial practices that increase employees’ autonomy and responsibilities as well as an individual proactive work orientation. cited by Faizal, Mathey and James, 2015) remark that employees must have autonomy in their working environment. Supervision style and job design are important empowering conditions (Boudrias et al., 2009). Bass (1998) identifies four leadership behaviors that represent basic components of transformational leadership: idealised influence (charisma), individualised consideration or attention, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation. Antonakis, Fenley and Liechti (2011, p. 76) define charisma (idealised influence) as “symbolic leader influence rooted in emotional and ideological foundations”. Bass (1985) argues that individualised consideration or attention includes the provision of support, encouragement, coaching, delegation, advice and feedback for use in followers’ personal development. Bass (1985) opines that intellectual stimulation increases awareness of problems and influences followers to view problems from a new point of view.

Values and objectives affect the employer-employee relationship (Holtzhausen & Fourie, 2009). Whenever employees feel the organization expresses their values, it creates a sense of commitment to the relationship between the organization and its employees. Trust in the employer-employee relationship is essential to achieve organizational objectives (Holtzhausen & Fourie, 2009). The core of cultural change is the maturing mentality that increases trust, participation and cooperation between managers and employees (Savolainen, 2000). Schiavi (2013, p. 254) mentions that trust-building characteristics include “transparency, integrity, delivering on commitments and being forth-right in communications”. Trusting workplace relationships have a positive influence on the dedication to an organization (Gill, 2008). Working conditions in the mining industry could be dangerous and workers therefore have a right to health and safety (Josep & Taka, 2012). Any managerial strategy to improve health and safety as well as the productivity of underground miners must include the miners’ work culture (Ranjan & Das, 2015). Phakhathi (2013, p. 143) confirms and elaborates: “any strategy designed to improve the health, safety and productivity of underground gold miners must recognise, elaborate and systematically articulate the workplace culture of planisa as an existing and alternative work practice in the daily running of the production process”. Planisa is a Fanakalo (mining language) term for gold miners’ informal work practice of making a plan at the point of production deep down the mine (Phakhathi, 2013). The mining workforce must be transformed, productive, receive fair wages and work in a non-discriminatory, safe and healthy environment (Baxter, 2015). The well-being of managers and employees is therefore of utmost importance (Higgs, 2007).

Managers have to communicate with their subordinates, deal with grievances, apply discipline and deal with conflict and disputes (Tustin & Geldenhuys, 2000). Emmott (2015, p. 664) states, “employers are clearly in charge, but the concept of employee voice undermines traditional assumptions about managerial sovereignty and hierarchy and challenges managers to find better ways of delivering high performance”. ‘Informal voice’ refers to the direct communication between front-line managers (group of managers closest to the employees) and employees (Townsend & Loudoun, 2015). Townsend and Loudoun (2015) add that informal voice has only been recognised recently as an important and on-going process to lead employee and organizational outcomes. According to Townsend and Loudoun (2015), there are three broad means of employee voice activities: silence, formal channels and informal channels. Townsend and Loudoun (2015) found that employees tend to prefer the informal voice channel, which refers to communicating with front-line managers. Kilroy and Dundon (2015) suggest that front-line managers should act as organizational leaders and employee coaches who display the behaviors of a transformational leader. Transformational leaders provide opportunities for employees to develop capabilities (as cited by Marques, 2008). Hall and Sandelands (2009) emphasise skills development. Dickie and Dwyer (2009) are of the opinion that employee development is important in the mining industry. Phakhathi (2013) proposes that the South African gold mining industry should adopt innovative forms of work that focus on participative schemes. Gill and Meyer (2013) believe that managers and employees should be flexible and self-motivated.

Problem Statement and Aim of Research: According to Branine, Fekkar, Fekkar and Mellahi (2008), the single most important factor determining unions' ability to manoeuvre is the continuing support they receive from government and its institutions. Fashyoin (2008) suggests that strategic initiatives can strengthen employment relationships. Mutually accepted obligations in the employment relationship are also of the essence (Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). A gold mining plant in South Africa was subject to change and turbulence. During this period there was no clarity on the nature of the manager-employee relationships. The main aim of the study was therefore to investigate the manager-employee relationships at the mine at the time in order to gain an understanding of these relationships.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach tries to identify how people perceive and interpret their experiences in their natural setting and to provide answers to the research questions (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2002). The research was conducted within the constructivist research paradigm where individuals develop subjective meanings of their own personal experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Group interviews allowed the researchers to clarify some aspects of the questions put to the interviewees (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2010). Group interviewing is a quick and effective method of collecting qualitative data, as inputs can be obtained from several people at the same time. During discussions, the synergistic group effort produces a large number of ideas, which stimulate the generation of new ideas. "A qualitative interview is essentially a conversation [...] ideally the respondent does most of the talking" (Babbie, 2008, p. 336).

Sampling: A purposive sampling technique was used to identify forty-two participants for this study. Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen and Kyngäs (2014) argue that purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies where the researcher is interested in informants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic. Separate group interviews were conducted. The first group interview comprised managers as well as engineers who were appointed as managers, the second administrative employees from the service departments, and the third artisans and foremen employed by the mine. A vast amount of information about their experiences of their relationships with management was collected, and the researchers kept field notes.

Trustworthiness: The trustworthiness of this part of the study was increased by maintaining high credibility and objectivity. Member checking was used to improve the accuracy and credibility of what was recorded during the group interviews (Barbour, 2001; Byrne, 2001). The researchers also attempted to maintain the trustworthiness of the research by applying various reasoning strategies, such as content analysis, inductive reasoning, blending, bracketing and understanding in order to interpret the data (see in this regard Kvale, 1996). Bracketing is the cognitive process of putting aside one's own beliefs, not making judgements about what one has observed or heard, and remaining open to data collection and analysis (Arjun, 2011; Van Manen, 1997). May (2010) adds that the researcher endeavours to describe with words the experiences of the participants relating to the investigation of the phenomenon by bracketing out any possible prejudiced ideas about the phenomenon under discussion.

Data Collection: The researchers used field notes and group interviews to collect data from the personal experiences and perceptions of the interviewees. The following questions were asked during each group interview: Tell us more about the relationships between managers and employees at this plant. Is there anything that you would like to add to our discussion?

3. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used because it is a comprehensive and methodical examination of the contents of a particular body of material of human communication for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or prejudices (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Data was collected through group interviews. The researchers used hand-coding, and recurring themes were identified (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Deductive coding based on the literature review was used to analyse the data. All group interviews were recorded and transcribed (Creswell, 2009). The data was hand-coded and categorised according to Tesch's (1990) method: Get a sense of the whole by reading all the data carefully. What is the underlying meaning? Write thoughts and themes in the margin. Do this for several informants – cluster together similar topics and arrange topics into major topics and unique topics. Revisit data with topics, abbreviate the topics as codes, re-analyse and identify whether new codes emerge. Turn topics into categories.

Reduce the number of themes by grouping similar themes. Diagrammatise the basics of the previous two bullets. Finalise abbreviations and alphabetise codes. Perform preliminary analysis of material belonging to each category. Where necessary, recode existing data.

4. Findings

The recurring themes from the group interviews were 'employee empowerment', 'trust building', 'employee voice' and 'development of skills'. These themes are presented in Table 1. All quotes are provided verbatim and without being edited.

Table 1: Themes, Categories and Quotes

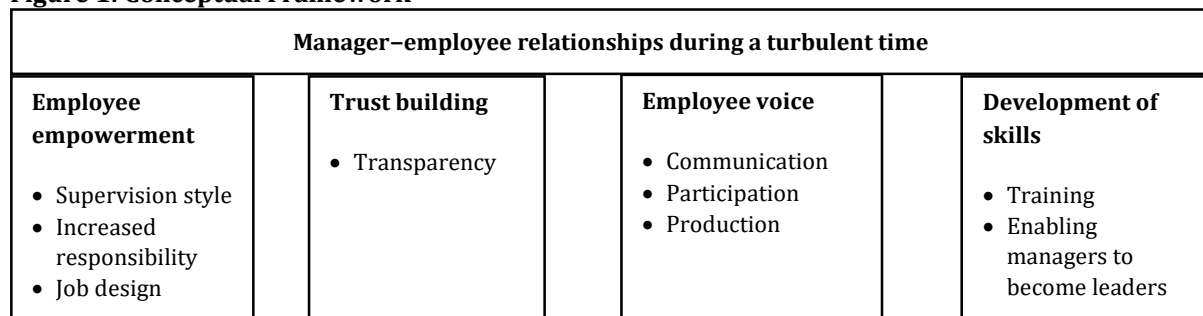
Theme	Category	Quote
Employee empowerment	Supervision style	"Mr. X leads by example. He will take the hosepipe and he will clean. He will show the people how. He inspires people." "Treat the plant as a family. Feel at home at the plant".
	Increased responsibilities	"If the behavior is good, then production will go up. We are one team that can compete globally ...". "You know I have been a foreman as well. They took a lot of their responsibility away. They cannot make a decision now. Call a fitter or boilermaker they cannot make that call anymore. A standby official must be called and make a decision."
	Job design	"There are job descriptions but a lot of them are very vague. A plant attendant has a very broad scope. It can mean everything or absolutely nothing. No job descriptions from B level and down. Only C level has job descriptions."
Trust building	Transparency	"I just want to see more transparency. The future of the plant, production statistics. From my side transparency from management." "Every foreman up to management is allowed to take cell phones. But a lower grade is not allowed to bring it in. If we have a query like that, the answer would be it is a management decision you cannot bring in your cell phone. They do not understand. If you want to be transparent you have to know the reasons."
Employee voice	Communication	"From my opinion, the most important thing is communication [...] Meetings, access to information, pamphlets, and gatherings. Open communication is the most important thing." "It is not a one-way communication that comes from the top down anymore. My input is important."
	Participation	"People want a platform to participate. They want to be involved."
	Production	"People know they are important. They feel that they are part of this plant". "It is not for management to say that production is produced [...] Everyone must be involved. Each and everyone must be involved." "To be truly involved in the discussions and the change what you need to do as an individual and as a team, I think very few of us are fully engaged."
Development of skills	Training	"Individuals were going to be sent on training. Promises were made but not kept." "They [management] said that people will be sent for training. That was never followed up on, never discussed. People need to follow up. A lot of people have development areas, never communicated to them."
	Enabling managers	"It is very, very difficult to teach engineers to become leaders [...] send managers on training courses, use mentorship and coaching." "The new engineer at this plant is from Iscor/Sasol environment. Total different environment. He does not understand the gold mining industry. Managers must first learn the plant in order to lead. Learn the plant through the people."

Discussion: Employee empowering conditions that were identified from the group interviews were supervision style, increasing responsibilities and job design. Savolainen (2000) posits that skilful leadership is essential for the spirit of cooperative ethic to be implanted and sustained. Leaders must create and empower an environment where trust and openness prevail. Boudrias et al. (2009) found that the supervisor plays an important role in the development of employees with regard to meaning, competence, self-determination and influence. Employees want ownership by participating in decision-making. Sahi and Mahajan (2014, p. 637) found that "enhanced employees' participation, involvement and responsibility determine effective outcomes in the form of increased job satisfaction and commitment to the organization". Managers are therefore responsible for empowering their employees in order to improve manager-employee relationships during turbulent times. However, the first take of managers during troubled times usually to disempower employees because they want to take control to make sure the workplace survives. Leadership therefore seems to be an important theme in manager-

employee relationships. Leaders need to be committed to the engagement processes and dedicated to the values of the mining company.

During the interviews, the groups indicated that charismatic leadership is an essential leadership style for this plant. Managers should articulate a clear vision for the future of the plant. It appeared that transparency, as part of trust building, was perceived as important for the manager-employee relationship. De Ridder (2004) found that employees would trust managers who are trustworthy and have integrity. Transparency was important at the mine under study, and employees indicated that management should provide reasons for making decisions and be open about production and safety statistics. At the plant under study, employees wanted their voice to be heard. It was clear that they saw communication as the freedom to express opinions and ideas and to participate. Findings by Magness (2015) confirm that communication in the mining industry is crucial. Tjosvold, Hui and Law (1998) found that when problems were discussed fully through good communication, both manager and employees worked towards a common goal. Therefore, good relationships and good communication engender good future relationships. Emmott (2015) found that employee voice could be seen as the ingredient building on and reinforcing leadership, integrity and line management. A conceptual framework of manager-employee relations during a turbulent time was developed from the findings in this study, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



As seen in Figure 1, the four main themes, namely ‘employee empowerment’, ‘trust building’, ‘employee voice’ and ‘development of skills’, as well as the respective categories of each theme, can be seen as four pillars that are crucial in manager-employee relationships during a turbulent time. Without these pillars, there is a strong possibility that the manager-employee relationships may not be effective during periods of tribulation. The findings in this study can be used to profile the responsibilities of an engineer who acts as a gold mining plant manager in South Africa when this mine faces challenging conditions. These responsibilities are summarised and described in Table 2.

Table 2: Profiling the Essential Responsibilities of a Gold Mine Plant Manager during Turbulent Times

Responsibilities	Description
Leadership	Adopt a charismatic and transformational leadership style
Empower employees	Give responsibilities and ownership to employees
Human resource management	Oversee that there are job descriptions for each employee
Build trust	Be transparent in making decisions
Employee voice	Ensure that employees have communication platforms
Employee engagement	Allow employees to make suggestions
Development of employees	Ensure that all the employees are properly trained

Recommendations and Practical Implications: It is recommended that managers should engage employees on a regular basis to encourage informal lines of communication. Savolainen (2000, p. 325) states, “under challenging external circumstances functioning labor management-relations may form a mental ‘buffer’ for the organization”. It is also proposed that a balanced scorecard be used to assist managers to measure performance to optimise manager-employee relations (as cited by Shurbagi & Zahari, 2013). It is essential to ensure that employees experience increased responsibility and that their job designs are updated and relevant. Trust can be built through transparency. It is recommended that during turbulent times managers deal with employees as unique individuals; consider their individual needs, abilities and aspirations; listen attentively; further employees’ development; and coach employees.

This can be done through open and constructive discussions between management and employees. In order to establish and maintain a high-trust workplace, the challenge for human resource practitioners is to develop a thorough understanding of employee engagement and conflict management in order to improve manager-employee relationships. This would instil a practice of transformational leadership and a culture of 'employee voice'. In order to achieve the latter, it is recommended that employees have communication platforms, offering them the opportunity to participate in relevant discussions.

All the employees must feel that they are involved in order to enhance production. It is recommended that skills development training be made available to all staff members, and that career path be discussed and developed. Managers must be empowered to become leaders. Mentoring and coaching should be introduced to assist with this process. For future research, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted at other gold mining plants in South Africa and internationally. It is also recommended that the mediating and moderating factors in the manager-employee relationships in the gold mining industry be determined. Deloitte (2016) argues that labour relationships in the mining industry must be reformed, and this could be investigated in the gold mining industry. The current study also offers several practical implications. Collaborative efforts between mining companies, government and labour are necessary to address fundamental challenges in order for mining companies to start thinking more strategically and to focus on what it really means to be "Fit for Future" (Deloitte, 2016, p. 11). By building trust and generating enthusiastic support from their employees, leaders are able to improve individual and team performance. Borowski (1998), states that an ethical relationship between managers and employees is the result of respect that should govern all human relationships, and this is still relevant in 2018.

5. Conclusion

The first objective of this study was addressed by identifying four main themes as part of the investigation into the manager-employee relationships at a mine. The essential responsibilities of a gold mining plant manager during troubled times was profiled as part of the second objective and the third objective was achieved by the development of a conceptual framework of manager-employee relations during a turbulent period. The objective of the current study was to provide new conceptual insights into the manager-employee relationships at a gold mining plant in South Africa. These relationships in the complex gold mining industry were probed during group interviews. The recurring themes, which emerged from the group interviews, were 'employee empowerment', 'trust building', 'employee voice' and 'development of skills'. A conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the main pillars for upholding effective manager-employee relationships during turbulent times. Promoting a positive, empowering and transparent organizational culture to facilitate the effective management of labour relations will add value to the plant under study. Leadership should evince trust, integrity, respect and personal credibility.

Managing change demands inspiring and effective leadership and transparency. Nurturing employee voice is important for both leadership and a healthy organizational culture. Labour practitioners at the mine under study should therefore facilitate and promote the culture of openness and employee voice amongst both managers and employees. The issues raised above speak of the challenges of life on a South African mine. For those subjected to these conditions, it is very important to be heard and empowered. Unfortunately, the management style at the mine under study was bureaucratic, giving rise to labour unions that were actively trying to protect their members. It therefore seems that poor management styles promote unionisation. The study found that the new charismatic and transformational leadership style of the plant manager gave employees a voice. While there is yet room for improvement, the plant management was proactive in creating communication platforms during the period of turbulence. Transparency grows trust amongst employees, but requires a leap of faith from the side of management. Beyond that, the development of employees to the same extent as management is generally neglected. This study managed to highlight the value of people-while production and profit are important in the mining industry, the people side also demands attention. Manager-employee relationships will then thrive, especially during troublesome times.

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