

Can we learn from Lonmin?

By: Lesanne Brooke – Dialogue Communications Training

What happened at Lonmin's mine in Marikana is shocking and unresolved. The factors are complex and multi-faceted. Defined as a watershed fired by economics and politics, what happened at Marikana is also about people communicating inappropriately.

Can we prevent a repeat of what happened? The truth is, without deep change, perhaps we can't. These protests stem from long-term lack of mutual empathy. But this pivotal event reminds us of the essential role communication and emotion play in successful management. People can make or break the bottom line. Dissatisfied people can influence, sabotage and destroy.

Measure the emotional climate

For managers who don't work with feelings because "business is business", Marikana should be a flashing red light, warning you to reconsider your assumptions.

Successful management of human resources has the potential to divert or avoid crisis. One of the critical insights to be gained here is that when a crisis happens, it is already too late. We cannot suddenly start communicating, establish trust and resolve conflict. The cornerstones have to be established before crisis brews.

However, now is certainly the time to pay extra attention to the feelings of the workforce – to reassure, ask, discuss.

Communication is key

Announcing information and using negotiation skills when required is not really communicating with a workforce. Communication is a dynamic, continuous factor that is part of culture, requiring conviction, commitment and respect.

People have a need to be acknowledged, feel safe, trust and be heard.

Everyone wants these needs met. Unsatisfied by tokenism, institutionalised thinking or even a pay rise, these needs are fundamental to attitude and behaviour. And their lack fuels anger.



President Jacob Zuma visits injured Marikana miners in hospital.

This is not to say that physical conditions are not a factor, but potent frustration needs respect, collaboration and attention. Had Lonmin management acknowledged the level of disenchantment when NUM began to lose its foothold, a timely response might have provided opportunity for mutual problem solving. Maybe if miners felt involved and trusted, this would have been a better story.

A necessary new dance

A workforce needs maintenance, time and money in the same way as essential equipment and machinery. Decisively ordering an open-communicative approach throughout the ranks won't do it. Effective interaction must be woven into every aspect and function. What's more, "change agents" must learn skills to be successful.

Engaging a workforce takes time, but is essential. It builds trust and mutual respect, strengthening resistance to disruptive influences.

Unfortunately, the economics are so established and the dynamics of the relevant parties so entrenched that it is like a dance with unavoidable steps. It takes courage and effort to practice alternate ones.

Talk and talk until the talk starts

Here's a common approach to improving management/worker relations: An

approach is decided, documented and sent down the structures. Perhaps some posters, emails and training sessions are conducted; maybe there's a slogan and launch; some money is spent. It is now assumed the new approach is implemented. This is an erroneous assumption.

Strategic people must be skilled to interact, build critical relationships and manage the trust of large groups. These skills require learning, practice, mentoring and support. Remember, people are people, not automated drones.

And even this is only a beginning. Long-term health can take two to five years, but genuine practice will change lives, shift attitudes, build safety, create understanding and encourage a willingness to contribute.


Create change

- Plan for improving communication.
- Train key people throughout the ranks to communicate change.
- Provide on-going communication and management skills development.
- Consult informally and formally.
- Engage people at all levels.
- Manage relationships authentically (a motivational speech means nothing unless it is part of a network of interventions, ground-level discussions and actions that reinforce the message).



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If we learn nothing else from Marikana, we know it is time for change. Talk has powerful, surprising results. The biggest surprise is it is so effective, takes less time than imagined, affects the bottom line and makes a real difference.

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