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## The human dimension

The heading above may be confusing because section 2 also includes information which may be regarded as part of the 'human dimension' of the company. The difference is that in section 2 the status quo is described, that is, who or which persons are involved in the company, while here the emphasis is on interpersonal phenomena and their relevance within the company. In this section therefore, group formation and the establishment of relationships and friendships among the employees are discussed with some indication of their relevance for functioning and operations in the company. In this regard it constitutes part of the tertiary dimensions of sociocultural diversity within the organisation.

### 3.1 Group formation

#### 3.1.1 Introductory comments

The following discussion is not a detailed account of all the possible groups that can be identified in the company since this would depend, among other matters, on the approach followed in the identification and classification of groups. Instead this section investigates group establishment, that is, specific categories or aggregates of people who are grouped together and thus identified on the basis of particular criteria or organising principles. It also deals with the manifestation of such groups within the company, and specific forms of behaviour associated with them. With one exception, all the research participants acknowledged the existence of different groups among the employees. They all agreed that in spite of the differentiation, the groups have the same goal, namely to ensure that the company meets its objectives. In some cases people felt strongly about the differentiation, while in others its extent was negated. One employee, for instance, said that there is no separation between groups, 'only a gap' which in any case, is not very big!

The criteria for group identification include, first, recognition of interaction between members on the basis of the performance of a particular task, which produces task teams; second, the idea that the people who interact in this way define themselves as a group; third, these people are also defined and identified by others as belonging to a group, although not necessarily consciously. Fourth, group identification is possible in accordance with specific criteria such as spatial differentiation, race and gender. Inevitably these criteria overlap, for example, as far as the drivers and managers are concerned, task specification, race and gender (male) overlap as criteria for group identification. The groups that are identified are not regarded as strictly localised functioning units, although localisation as a result of spatial differentiation is relevant. Collectively, the criteria also allow for a distinction between so-called formal and informal groups.

Groups are formal when they are defined by the organisational structure and organisationally prescribed work assignments. Interaction between them is regulated by official company matters, although this is not the only criterion. The activities in which the members are involved are determined by and directed towards achievement of organisational goals. The groups therefore constitute task groups, since members work directly together or interact regularly to complete a particular task. An exception to this concerns the drivers who, although a task group, only meet occasionally, to discuss matters of interest to themselves such as wage increases or issues arising from union membership.

Various informal groups can also be identified. These are natural groupings among people that arise mainly in response to the need for social contact. Informal groups therefore satisfy the social needs of employees within the corporate environment (Cilliers 1999:261), as illustrated by the inclination of people who share an office to group together at the year-end office function. These are the people whom employees know best; who share an office; 'click', that is, have something in common; or are of the same gender, which concerns women in particular. Informal groups also operate outside the company organisation, as is evident from the occasional social gathering at an employee's home of a group of selected persons who have established a friendship circle. Where the existence of such informal groups is acknowledged, it is clearly said that they do not include everyone and, once established, tend to be relatively permanent: members are inclined to keep together, for instance at office functions or they sit together at meetings. Membership, does cut across different categories of employees however. Within the office environment there is a group of men who, it was said, for unknown reasons do not mix with other people.

It was repeatedly stated that the drivers do not form formal or informal groups which constitute functioning units in any meaningful way. Thus with the exception of their own year-end function or at occasional meetings which con-

cern their employment, the drivers do not gather as a separate group, and mostly wait alone in their trucks and either eat a meal, sleep or read a newspaper. Only one white male insisted that whoever said that the drivers do not form groups was 'not telling the truth'. He moves amongst them and sees them group together around their trucks. In fact an issue which he tries to impress on them is that they should not group together, but observe the loading of their trucks. Observation revealed both situations. On occasion a driver was seen to wait in his truck, while small groups of drivers were also seen to congregate among the trucks in the grounds of the company. Informal groups do therefore develop among the drivers, primarily while they wait for their trucks to be loaded, but these appear to be little more than loose associations.

In another sense criteria for group differentiation constitute boundaries, a boundary being the point of interface between two sets of activities which marks the limits of intragroup interaction. Identification of aggregates of people in terms of boundaries is objective to the extent that the traits that mark them, that is, the boundaries, can be identified by an outsider. The identification is also subjective in that the markers constitute the boundaries for the persons concerned themselves, form part of their experience, and make it possible for them to distinguish between themselves as members and others as non-members. If boundaries are self-imposed, self-identification and typical forms of behaviour are particularly important. However, whether self-imposed or the result of organisation structure, boundaries produce a 'we'/'they' differentiation (cf Wallman 1979:2-7). In terms of this, the criteria of task and spatial differentiation, as well as race, can also be identified as 'boundaries'. Subjective identification on the basis of self-imposed boundaries is evident from comments, for instance from the drivers, to the effect that 'we come as drivers'.

Inevitably there is interaction between people across group boundaries, such as when office personnel chat with the traders in the afternoons, such interaction being largely informal. In contrast, interaction between the drivers and members of the other groups is predominantly formal and determined by official matters pertaining to the work situation. By implication regular interaction involving the drivers is limited to specific members of the office personnel, with other employees having no or only occasional contact with them.

The single informant who said that she could not agree with the idea of group establishment in the company explained her view by referring to the office functions when everyone, except those who have a definite reason for not attending, comes together. She appeared to perceive the office personnel as comprising a single and the only group in the company, since the drivers do not attend the functions. Her ideas contrasted with other views concerning the grouping together of people at office functions which reflects some of the primary groups in the company.

### 3.1.2 Task groups

Interaction between people is largely the product of task specification. Here task specification leads to the identification of three primary self-evident task groups in the company, namely the drivers, the traders and the office personnel, consisting of management and administrative staff (1.4 above). These labels are also used internally in the company as a means of 'informal classification', since officially the different categories are identified in terms of the postgrade held by employees. For example, all persons in postgrades T7 to T12 are categorised as '*laaikontroleurs*' or 'loading controllers', and all persons in postgrades T0 to T6 are '*drywers*', that is, drivers. With the exception of a single black male, the traders are all white males over the age of 50, and all perform the same task, namely making up orders and overseeing the loading of the trucks. The characteristics of the drivers (1.4 above) are, inter alia, that they are all black males, are qualified to drive large trucks either on the basis of a Code 10 or Code 14 driver's licence, and are responsible for delivering the company's orders. The office personnel include fifteen people, of whom four, all white males, hold management positions, and eleven are administrative and marketing staff, who besides four white males, include one black male and six females, one of whom is black (1.4 above). There is therefore less uniformity in the group of office personnel than in the other task groups.

### 3.1.3 Self-identification

The significance of the aforementioned categorisation of task groups is emphasised by the fact that members of the different groups identify themselves as belonging to one of these groups. For example, among the drivers comments that, 'we come as drivers', and similarly, 'we are separate this side, we come as drivers', imply the existence of a separate group which the members identify themselves, as well as a group based on task specification. The traders also identified themselves as a separate category in relation to the office personnel, but in their case it appears to be in reaction to the attitudes, comments, and identity imposed on them by other employees. To explain why he regards the traders as a separate group, one of them described how on a day when it was particularly cold the traders, who spend a considerable portion of their working hours in a cold environment, were told not to complain, that they, the 'men downstairs, should not throw tantrums'. The reference to 'the men downstairs' implied identification of a separate group of employees by certain office staff, who, in contrast with the traders, work in heated offices upstairs, thereby reinforcing the self-perception of constituting a separate group among the traders.

To reinforce the distinction, the trader concerned added that since his appointment, he has never had more than ten cups of coffee in the office environment. In addition, during the office function the 'traders', whom he called the 'low class', keep to themselves while the office personnel, '*die groot menere*' ('the big masters'), sit together. The traders are 'the rubbish' and are looked down on by the office personnel, who regard themselves as superior. For this reason, the informant said, he no longer attends the office functions. When asked whether the other traders shared his views and experience, he said that they did. Task groups are therefore significant sources of employees' self-identification, but membership may also contribute to their stress and frustrations (cf Cilliers 1999:259).

Self-identification is also evident in racial terms. The black employees refer to themselves as 'we blacks', who then supposedly behave in ways which distinguish them from whites. The drivers also distinguish among themselves on the basis of ethnic affinity. The drivers, all of whom provided their ethnic identity (cf 1.7 above), said that there are differences among the various groups but in the work context the differentiation is largely unimportant. One who did say that group identity is important in the work situation could not explain why. The following comment illustrates a driver's ideas on ethnic groups in the company: 'When you come to work, there is Xhosa here, there is Tswana here, there is Zulu here, there is Venda here, you see. These people are different. They – each and everyone he wants to talk his language first of all, and you may understand ... because you are working together ... Xhosas want to work and use his tradition; Zulu wants to talk his language and use his tradition, Tswana will want to work and use his tradition, but not when we are on the job. When we are one the job, we are doing one thing, look forward, not at the back.'

Ethnic identity of the self is reinforced by the inclination of people not to respond to people who communicate with them in a language other than their own. Here Zulu speakers are prominent in insisting on speaking and being spoken to in their own language (2.13.1 above), thereby emphasising their identity, but a driver, commenting on the conception that Zulu employees appear to insist that the other blacks speak their language, said: '*Ons gooi hulle tale uit ...*' ('We throw their languages out ...'), which also appears to emphasise that in the work context, ethnic identity and by implication groups based on ethnic affiliation are not regarded as significant.

### 3.1.4 Identification by others

As indicated above, employees also identify other people as members of one of the other two primary groups. More informally, employees refer to older people

versus younger people, indicating categories of people which cut across the primary groups. Older persons are regarded as being less amenable to change, and some members are said to be jealous of younger employees, whom they regard as more fortunate and in a position to improve their qualifications. The criterion of race is also significant. Some white employees identify the drivers as 'blacks' (*'swartes'*) and then generalise about them in terms of the 'black nation' (*'die swart nasie'*) who are perceived to behave in ways supposedly typical of blacks. Similarly, some of the drivers refer to the whites as 'whiteys' who resist change and represent the 'apartheid' of the 'old' South Africa.

A white male commented that one still finds 'Zulus, Tswanas, Mocambiquans'. They are all different, the Zulus being the leaders because 'they like leading other people'. Zulus are 'strange people': a single Zulu can castigate twenty other people, while twenty others 'cannot do anything to a single Zulu'. A Zulu still 'sees them right'. The informant added that if a new driver is appointed who is not a Zulu and a Zulu driver is instructed to teach him the routes, it has occurred that the Zulu driver refused to do so, the reason apparently being that a Zulu driver is only interested in taking his two pilots with him to see to the offloading so that he does not have to do it himself. Commenting on the establishment of groups on the basis of their identity, a driver said that *'ons mix hulle so, jy kan hom nie ken'* ('we mix them so you cannot know him') and with reference to Zulu-speaking employees, *'ons haal hulle uit by die Zulu Inkatha'* ('we take them out from the Zulu *Inkatha*'). He was asked why the drivers behave in this way and he said that they 'know them', ie the Zulus, and have to treat them in this way: *'... ons ken hulle, ons moet hulle so maak'*. It would seem, therefore, that to prevent grouping on the basis of ethnic identity, which specifically among the Zulu manifests on a political party basis, the drivers disallow the establishment of separate groups among themselves. White research participants also said that among the drivers one can notice a type of grouping which appears to be based on political differences, with members of the ANC grouping together in opposition to members of *Inkatha* who are mostly Zulu. In fact, an informant said that if a Zulu were asked whether 'he is *Inkatha*, he always says yes'. For these reasons, among others, the Zulu are perceived to be the dominant group in the company.

External identification, although perhaps not deliberate or conscious, is also apparent from various rules and tasks within the company. For example, the drivers start work earlier than most other employees. Meetings with them are held separately, although this applies to the traders and the office personnel as well. Because of varying working hours, it is difficult for management to arrange a meeting which can be attended by all the employees. Such meetings cannot, for instance, be held later during the day, since the drivers will not be

able to attend. Similarly, at certain times of the day or on specific days categories of office personnel such as those responsible for marketing and sales cannot be called away from their jobs if they are attending to orders. This also applies to the traders, who are unavailable in the mornings, their busiest time. These arrangements reinforce the perception among the employees of the existence of groups other than those to which they themselves belong.

### **3.1.5 Group formation and spatial arrangement**

The distinction based on work differentiation is emphasised by the spatial arrangement of the company: the drivers who operate downstairs, are also dispersed in that most of their time is spent away from the company, a natural consequence of their activities. They do not have a centralised point where they meet, other than the loading zone and parking bay for their trucks. This implies that for a group to be functionally effective its members do not have to constitute a localised entity. Because of the nature of their work, it was also said that the drivers cannot 'expect to sit upstairs in an office'. The traders operate primarily on the loading platforms, ie 'downstairs', although once the orders for the day have been loaded, they go 'upstairs' to an office which has been allocated to them and join members of the administrative staff. Administrative staff and management have offices upstairs, a location which has given rise to a distinction between 'us up here' and 'them downstairs', namely the traders and the drivers, or 'those upstairs' and 'us down here', although, as indicated, this does not imply that there is no contact between them.

### **3.1.6 Some implications of group formation**

In the previous section implications of group formation were alluded to. Here such implications are indicated more specifically.

One of the research participants was highly appreciative of the people downstairs. He identified them as an essential component of the focus of the company and as fulfilling a vital function since it is downstairs that the products, the lifeblood of the company, are loaded onto the trucks and then despatched.

The idea of jealousy emanating from members of one group towards those of another was heard on more than one occasion. The traders, having grown up in a different milieu, were said to be jealous of people in more senior positions, first, because they had never had an opportunity to improve their qualifications and thus never moved beyond the position of trader, and second, because of the larger salaries earned by people in senior positions, particularly management. The first perception was emphasised by the reaction of the traders to

management's selection of a new appointee to attend a particular course. The employee concerned interpreted the manager's decision as a motion of confidence in his abilities and of trust in himself, while the traders saw it as an attempt by the employee to 'curry favour' with management and made their feelings known in bad language. Another informant, who said that he perceived a definite differentiation between himself and members of the traders and the office personnel also ascribed it to jealousy, but he did not explain why.

The perception among some of the whites that the black employees constitute a separate aggregate of persons occasionally becomes apparent in the attitudes and behaviour of the traders towards black employees. For example, the white traders humiliated the recently appointed black male by insisting that he should be responsible for loading trucks for two remaining routes after loading the trucks for other routes had been completed. The correct procedure would have been for whoever is available to oversee the loading of the trucks for the remaining routes. The white traders, however, attempted to impose the responsibility upon their new colleague merely because he is black, but the matter came to the attention of their supervisor and was prevented. (See 4.2.3 below for details on this incident.)

Race as a criterion for group formation also plays a role in the social functions (2.17 above). Ostensibly held for the office staff, which includes two blacks and the traders, the drivers are excluded because they are out on deliveries when the functions are held. Therefore, it was said that 'it is impossible to get everyone together'. The drivers, however, are not invited to the year-end function, which is also intended for the office staff only, and a separate function is arranged for them at the end of the year. Describing the year-end function, one of the research participants said that the 'entire personnel' is present, knowing that the drivers are excluded and suggesting by his comment that they are not part of the entire personnel.

Interaction between members of different groups, particularly between office staff and the drivers, is primarily limited by organisational matters. Responding to a question about consulting members of management, a driver said that on an ordinary day he sees them when he delivers the invoices. These are checked, and if in order, he is told that 'he can go'.

The task orientation of the groups has implications for individual perceptions of particular groups. One of the drivers said that there are 'no spare drivers', which means that there is no one who can assist when an additional driver is needed in someone's absence, and it is consequently impossible for a driver who, for instance, is interested in studying to do so while he waits for his truck to be loaded in case his help is needed elsewhere. Similarly, concern was ex-

pressed by a senior white male about the generally advanced ages of the traders, who are approaching retirement. There is a need for new recruitments and therefore perpetuation of the group, in anticipation of a situation in the near future when a large percentage of the members of a task team will retire virtually at the same time.

## **3.2 Relationships between co-workers**

### **3.2.1 Introductory remarks**

An outflow of the establishment of groups and the acting out of the roles and positions entailed in the groups, is the development of relationships between employees which constitute the basis for person-to-person interaction in the company. The totality of relationships forms a patterned network within the formal structure of the company. Relationships imply that the people involved in them tend to behave in specific ways, while inherent within all relationships are expectations which the persons concerned have of one another. Relationships are abstractions from behaviour and are meaningless unless the people involved and their behaviour are also considered. By implication an investigation of relationships must be undertaken against the background of the context in which they occur (cf Robinson 1973:65, 85). Group establishment therefore not only has important consequences for the way in which the organisation operates, it also compels people into various relationships which are influenced by company regulations and operations. An investigation of interpersonal relationships means, among other matters, an evaluation of interaction between people on a person-to-person basis. 'Non-organisational' factors such as politico-historical factors, physical and intellectual differences, race, language differences, discrimination, stereotyping, attitudes and perceptions also shape relationships and produce alignments or associations which may or may not be in line with the official structure of the organisation (Britan & Cohen 1980:16, 22; Mead 1998:35). By the same token, factors such as these can constitute barriers to the establishment of meaningful relationships, which also indicates that the people involved in particular relationships may have different sociocultural backgrounds or value systems (Harris & Moran 1996:20), thereby emphasising the diversity inherent in the personnel composition of a company.

In terms of this it was important to investigate the relationships within the organisation. Inevitably some relationships are amiable, while others are not, although they are functional. In general, the research participants indicated that they do not have any problems with their co-workers and their relationships with others are good, described by a white male as 'above average' if one takes into account what happens at other firms where many problems are reported. A

female employee also said that relationships among employees are very good, although her exposure is predominantly to the office staff and not to the traders or the drivers, except in the afternoons when the former come upstairs and spend time with the office personnel to talk, and the latter when they consult her about business matters. The only English-speaking employee in the company, who was unperturbed about his unique 'status', holds a position which is not popular, since he has to control credit and at times must refuse requests for personal loans. Yet, even though he generally keeps to himself, his relationships with other people are good.

As in the discussion of groups, a distinction is made between different types of relationship on the basis of role positioning and interaction between people, specifically formal versus informal (or personal versus impersonal) relationships, and vertical versus horizontal relationships (incorporating power and authority relationships).

There is also an overlap between the different categories of relationships. For example, in view of the composition of the staff, relationships between the drivers and other categories of employees are both formal and vertical, and are further characterised by racial differentiation. Similarly, relationships between men and women are either vertical or horizontal, depending on the positions of the persons involved, and at the same time are primarily informal. The distinction, however, does provide some indication of the nature and relevance of relationships within the company, and the extent to which they influence operations. The significance of the evaluation of relationships also arises from the fact that from them it can be deduced who is subordinate to whom, who reports to whom, which persons work together (Mead 1998:170), who relates to whom, and in what way.

Various reasons were produced for the generally favourable relationships among all categories of employees. These ranged from the fact that many employees, particularly whites, have been working together for many years. Similarly, many of the drivers have had many years of service with the company, some as long as 17 or 18 years, and newly appointed drivers 'fall in' with the older ones. They realise that in the current economic climate it is shortsighted not to look after their jobs because it is unlikely that they will find employment elsewhere if they resign or are fired, hence it is in their interest to develop and maintain good relationships with co-workers. Service period is also an important factor in the establishment of relationships across colour lines. A trader referred to '*ons ou manne*', ('us old men') and said that '*ons kom 'n lang tyd saam met die mense*' ('we come a long time with the people'), meaning the drivers who have been with the company for many years, and with whom sound working relation-

ships have been established over time. In spite of change, which in any case, the informant said, has never bothered him, blacks and whites work together without any tensions or conflict, at least not at work, although he 'did not know what happened when they go home'. Other reasons provided for the good relationships were said to be that employees work closely together to achieve a specific task, are in regular contact with one another, even on a daily basis, or consult the same people regularly about matters pertaining to their position and functions, such as consulting the person responsible for processing paysheets if there are problems with a salary. In addition, because the company is small, people know each other well, which contributes to the establishment of favourable, almost personal, relationships among employees across language and colour lines. The amicable relationships were also ascribed to good management. As a trader pointed out, with effective management, matters at the company must proceed smoothly, including interaction between employees, and hence the establishment of good relationships between them.

### 3.2.2 Formal versus informal relationships

When relationships between employees, for example between manager and an assistant, are governed by the structure and organisation of the company, they are formal. Applebaum (1984a:7) refers to 'depersonalized human relations' resulting from the influence of industrialisation. This induces people to seek associations with others to compensate for the depersonalisation, hence they are also linked by interests other than organisational objectives, and relationships are established which are then informal and personalised (Mead 1998: 254-255). Relationships between workers on the same postgrade and thus horizontal, are primarily informal, while vertical relationships are more likely to be formal.

Informal relationships develop as a result of employees' needs for social interaction in the work environment. Among black employees there is a great deal of playfulness: one of them will playfully hit another with a belt as he passes by or they chase one another. The primarily informal relationship between males and females was also described as 'reasonably good' and the men were said to deal with the women as they 'want to be treated'.

Age plays a role in converting formal into informal relationships. Because he is older than the other drivers, a driver was asked how the younger drivers behave towards him. He said they speak 'properly' to him and most of them call him 'father' because he is 'big', meaning older than them. He has heard drivers being 'cheeky' to other people but no one has ever been cheeky to him: it is a matter of 'father', 'father', even among the Zulus who say '*madala, madala*'. At

times the older drivers also greet some of the younger white employees with 'hello, my child' because they regard them as 'their children'.

As regards her regular contact with the drivers, the black office female said that even though 'they are downstairs' and she is upstairs, they come upstairs regularly and 'they take me as their sister'. This is because she has known some of the drivers for a long time, but the relationship is also determined by race and is a carry-over from the past when employees worked together at the company's previous premises in the city. She added: 'I know them – even if they hire a new one ... [they] come and meet [me], and we take each other as friends.'

Sometimes a driver borrows money from a white employee with whom he has a special relationship. One of the white females said that although she knows that she should not lend money to the drivers, from time to time she does so to drivers who regularly repay their debt. It would seem that such behaviour only occurs because a special relationship of trust has developed between borrower and lender. The relevant formality of the relationship between employees is retained here and there is no question of exploitation of an informal relationship.

Informal relationships are not necessarily or only amicable. In a situation where four employees share an office, there are occasional conflicts, although these were said to be mainly about minor issues or 'ordinary problems' which develop between people from time to time. More seriously a female employee mentioned a driver who 'puts her off' because of his familiarity. She does not like his insistence that he wants to marry her. One of the white males apparently said that he would 'break his neck', but the driver was unconcerned, insisting that he intends to marry her, and that he has already collected enough money to pay the *lobola*. When asked how she deals with this matter, the informant said she should beat him on the head, but usually just tells him that she has enough money which her husband earns, but which she dislikes in any case, and that she cannot 'be bought' with money. While the driver concerned is unlikely to be serious and is imposing informality upon an otherwise formal relationship with an employee, the nature of his behaviour makes it impossible for the employee to respond informally, and because the relationship is work-based, she cannot withdraw from it either. The driver's familiarity produced negative feelings in the informant, thus adversely affecting the relationship between them, and making her attempt to keep it as formal as possible. This was not the only instance where unwarranted familiarity from a black employee was met with concern by a white employee, thereby imposing some strain on the relationship between them. A middle-aged white male, who was commenting on his relationships with the black employees, said that some of them call him 'Uncle', apparently because his hair is grey, to which he responds that he is 'not married to their aunt'.

### 3.2.3 Vertical versus horizontal relationships

Within the organisation people interact both vertically and horizontally and are therefore linked in vertical and horizontal relationships (cf 2.1 above). Together with performance, the success of the business is profoundly influenced by the way in which people handle these vertical and horizontal relationships (Applebaum 1984b:6).

Vertical relationships arise from the distance between individuals at different levels of a hierarchy, that is between people on different postgrades, such as relationships between manager and trader, manager and driver, or supervisor and driver. Vertical, often power relationships therefore constitute a structure of authority relationships that is one of the main areas of formal interaction in the company. Vertical relationships are primarily linked to acting out of roles and positions, and direct the flow of official communication through the organisation. They are also more likely to be formal than informal. Depending upon the way in which a relationship is maintained, the information indicates that more often than not vertical relationships are characterised by tension, which is contained by constraints arising within the work situation, such as recognition of authority and acknowledgement of job responsibilities. In addition, information provided by research participants concerning vertical relationships was predominantly about black-white relationships. Although this may be a consequence of the way in which research participants understood the notion of relationships, relationships between white employees and the drivers, which by virtue of the company structure are vertical, are also shaped by racial differences. Significantly, unlike the black employees, the whites do not regard race as an inhibiting factor in relationships, as, for instance, is demonstrated by the discontent among the former that whites call them by name while they call the whites 'Mr'.

On the establishment and nature of his relationships with black subordinates, a senior white male said that to ensure mutual trust it is necessary to listen to their views very carefully. If they realise that they are not being listened to, they lose faith in the person concerned. However, once a relationship of mutual trust is established with black employees it is possible to 'move mountains' with them. He also said that the black employees mostly consult him and a few other selected people with their personal problems rather than, for instance, the manager or white employees who have bombastic attitudes towards blacks. In this regard, he said that 'blacks are still blacks'. Problems for which they seek assistance or advice include a wife leaving, or a car breaking down. In the latter case the informant said he uses his cellular telephone to find out where spare parts are available, or he obtains the part for the driver concerned, who then pays him

the costs. Such assistance, he said, goes a long way towards establishing mutual relationships of trust. He added that as far as black people are concerned, 'please' and 'thank you' count a lot, and a black person should be greeted first, behaviour which is also conducive to establishing good relationships across colour boundaries. On occasion he has had reason to reprimand a black worker or to instruct one to redo a task, but has never experienced any problems. He said: '*Hulle is nie snaaks nie met my nie. Ek het nog nooit probleme gehad of konflik nie.*' ('They are not funny with me. I have never had problems or conflict.') In his comments the informant emphasised a crucial aspect of effective, particularly vertical, relationships, namely mutual trust (cf 4.5 below). Trust allows people to accept, but also to excuse, what others do or say, facilitating interaction between employees and strengthening relationships, and thus promoting company operations.

Interestingly, this research participant was not the only white male to say that his relationships with black employees are the best among the white employees. One of them not only said that among the white employees his relationships with the black employees are the best, but that the drivers also trust him more than anyone else because they consult him about personal problems. On one occasion he became aware that a driver had been drinking. He called him aside, referred to his wife and children, and explained how his drinking at work would affect them if he caused an accident. He told the driver that he was not concerned about him, but he was concerned about his family. Concern about his family coming from a white person apparently made a deep impression on the driver and he has never been caught drinking again. At the same time the incident strengthened the (vertical) relationship between the two men.

Vertical relationships may be promoted or even developed to facilitate company operations. Each trader has a team of workers, or pilots, at times the same people who work with him, although this is not a fixed rule. Both the traders and the teams would prefer to work together more permanently because they would then get to know and understand what is expected of one another, ensuring good relationships and the establishment of a team spirit, which is conducive to productive working.

Also with regard to relationships between blacks and whites, a white male said that such relationships have improved considerably over the past few years, mainly as a result of the greater consideration shown towards the black employees (2.12.2 above). There is greater openness in the relationships and also much better communication between blacks and whites than there were a few years ago, although he also said that there are indications that matters are not as favourable as desired. He added that employees with racist attitudes are the types of person who 'are never totally satisfied'. At present management has a fairly good relationship with the shop stewards who represent the drivers.

Another white male mentioned that when he first joined the company, he called 'all' the blacks together, presumably those with whom he works, to establish cordial working relationships from the start. At the time he commented on the colour differences between himself and them and, apparently sensitive to various political and emotional issues, insisted that in work time no one should talk about religion or politics. When he opens his hand, he told them, it is white, and when they open their hands, they are black, but the colour of their blood is the same, and in a hospital everyone receives the same blood, depending upon blood type. There is only one 'Old Master' ('*Oubaas*') in heaven for everyone; there are no different gods for whites, blacks or coloureds. People should not insist that 'Mandela does this or this' as a means of persuasion to get their own way. This has nothing to do with the business and if anyone had objections about the way in which he conducts his responsibilities, they should inform him. He said the black employees to whom he spoke accepted his ideas, and accordingly he has established and maintained sound relationships with those with whom he works.

In spite of the general perception among employees that vertical relationships in the company are good or reasonable, views provided from time to time seemed to indicate otherwise, that is, not that they are dysfunctional, but that inherent in them are elements of tension. In fact it is probable that in many instances 'good relationships' means an absence of overt conflict, and relationships are therefore precise to comply with the requirements of convention within the business environment. Thus 'good relationships' actually implies 'good working relationships'. This could explain certain ideas provided by whites, such as the comment of a male that although interpersonal relationships at the company are very good, and he has a great deal of contact with the black employees, he does not discuss his viewpoints with them, or they theirs with him. His relationships with them are therefore defined by business matters. In a similar vein, a white male said that although his relationships with black employees are good and he has a special relationship with a black female worker whom he occasionally asks to help him with additional tasks, he does not take her for granted and expect her to work without additional remuneration. Good relationships with black people in the work context are important, but he would not associate with them informally or socially.

The authority inherent in a vertical relationship sometimes becomes apparent in a display of arrogance. A trader related an incident which had occurred a few months previously when someone 'upstairs' contacted him telephonically and spoke to him as if he were 'merely a labourer'. He said he told the person that he was coming upstairs, where he was confronted and asked by one of the managers what was wrong, to which he replied that he had come to 'put some-

one in his place'. Other employees stopped him carrying out his threat. He said he disliked the person's attitude and behaviour, which he felt would not solve the problem. This type of behaviour causes resentment and it is unlikely that the disruption in the relationship between the two men will be breached without a determined effort on the part of the senior employee to restore it.

The only black female office employee, who also insisted that she gets on well with other employees who treat her 'okay', stated that sometimes tension 'was building high' and that some white employees maintain that she can do 'nothing right', instead of telling her what she has done wrong as she would expect from them: 'Somebody must tell you, no, this is wrong, even if it hurts ...'

But a driver who also insisted that he has good relationships with his white superiors said: '*Dit is net hulle is clown – hulle speel met my altyd.*' ('It is just that they clown – they always play with me'), with the assumption that underlying the clowning are negative feelings, and an exploitation of the vertical relationship between the driver and the white employees. The possibility that joking suppresses darker meanings and attitudes was also heard from a white female, who said that many of the white employees joke with the blacks seemingly to maintain informal relations with them, but their behaviour could have other less positive meanings. However, she added that she was not sure whether this is correct because she does not work directly with the people involved.

In spite of saying that his 'connection' with the whites is good, a driver believes that the relationship between blacks and whites at the company 'can be better'. He based his view on the perception that the whites exert excessive control over the blacks, and are unaware of the nature of the drivers' work, further suggesting that the whites should accompany the blacks on their delivery routes to see what their work entails. In the same vein, another driver, who said that there is 'still a lot of apartheid' at the company, believes black-white relationships are strained and still a problem in the company. He did not know whether the other drivers also felt this way, therefore he could not talk about 'the other guys' (the drivers) who are possibly afraid to talk about such matters. He said he also avoids talking to the whites, or 'whiteys', because it is impossible to know what they say behind people's backs. (This informant did not trust the interview session since he did not know what would be reported.) When a driver makes a mistake, he said, it is not unknown for a white person to say that if he does not want to do what he is told, 'the gate is open', which he interpreted as a threat. When things go wrong, he becomes stressed because one should enjoy what one does: this is 'healthy'. Some days everything proceeds smoothly; from early in the morning until evening. Then matters become 'scratchy'. The only way in which this problem can be solved is for 'the white people here, they must know the black people. The black people must know the white people. The

problem can be solved.' He referred to the 'atmosphere' at the company, which he described in terms of the 'white people who work here don't trust the black man. OK, they help you, but they do not stretch out.' This, he said, applies to all the white employees. For reasons such as these, as a group, the drivers 'just work'.

One of the drivers said that as far as black-white relationships are concerned nothing has changed since the demise of apartheid. The whites still think there is a 'difference between people', which is apparent from their behaviour and because they do not try to hide their attitudes. Although they (the whites) are trying to 'adjust normally', they find it difficult, so 'separation' is still present in the company. He was asked whether people treated him with respect, to which he replied that although people do, including those who supposedly 'dislike him', once his back is turned it is impossible to know what happens. He said: 'So otherwise I take it they are respecting me, like me.' He said that sometimes the drivers discuss their relationships with the whites amongst themselves. They, the drivers, know that whites behave in particular ways, but the latter believe that the blacks are 'too much on witchcraft'.

In contrast with the ideas of the drivers, a white female described the relationships between blacks and whites as 'different', implying that they are different from relationships between whites only. This has always been the case, and whites do not mix with blacks as they mix with other whites. In addition, the differences in postgrades between whites and the majority of the blacks in the company also contribute to keeping people apart. This implies that the differences inhibit the establishment of meaningful relationships between blacks and whites. From what she is able to discern around her, the relationships between blacks and whites are therefore reasonable but not 'fantastic'.

Also on the topic of the relationships between blacks and whites, a white male maintained that relationships between blacks and whites in the company are very good and to prove his point said that the former are at liberty to enter an office to talk to office employees whenever they wish. However, when he was told that some drivers indicated that they do not feel comfortable talking to whites because they are rebuffed or are told that they 'are complaining again', he said that there are drivers who complain unnecessarily. They have been told not to complain since the company has various ways of coping with problems such as shortages on orders. Problem customers are identified, that is, as people who regularly argue about shortages, and the company deals with them by charging slightly higher prices. Thus it is the company's problem and not the drivers', and they have no reason to complain or to waste time by complaining. This informant's comments reflected on a matter other than the relationships between black and white which were being discussed, and as a result of his views, one has cause to

question the possibility that he was not cognisant of or sensitive to matters which concern the drivers, and that, subconsciously perhaps, he ascribed disruptions in relationships between blacks and whites to the behaviour and attitudes of the blacks.

Horizontal relationships constitute alliances between people on the same postgrade, for example between trader and trader, and driver and driver. Although horizontal relationships are also shaped by the work context, they are largely informal and lack the authority and power distance of vertical relationships. This does not mean though that they are necessarily personal, amiable or without conflict. With the exception of relationships on postgrades T0 to T6 and T7 to T12, each of which includes a black employee and four and five white employees, they are racially homogenous. In accounts of relationships which may be regarded as horizontal, it was possible to discern respondents' ideas about such relationships in general, that is, without consideration of themselves, in contrast with views which included reference to the informant him/herself. The nature of such relationships could also be inferred from employees' accounts of interaction with co-workers.

The apparent absence of strained relationships on the horizontal level paralleled what was discerned as regards the vertical level, that is, that research participants in general maintained that such relationships are good, primarily because employees get on well with one other. In various contexts it was repeated that although the drivers do not form a homogenous group and have few opportunities for interaction amongst themselves, relationships between them are amiable and free from conflict or tension. A white male described the relationships between them as 'fantastic', given that they do not participate in strike actions, and if problems do arise, the drivers meet and consult the manager collectively to solve the matter. A trader, who also discussed the relationships between members of ethnic groups, said that in the past such relationships had been strained because of frequent friction between members of different groups, but over the past few years this has changed. Partly, this was because drivers work largely in isolation and have few opportunities for gathering or talking. If a driver is not out making deliveries, he remains close to his truck. Concerning mutual cooperation between drivers with different ethnic identities, a driver said that they 'are mixed' and he did not know of any specific problems between them, implying that relationships between them are good. However, he could not be explicit about whether they actually work well together: in some instances it is clear that they do cooperate meaningfully, but he added that even if he said that the drivers work together well, management would not think so.

In spite of the generally acknowledged idea among white employees that good relationships exist between the drivers, this appears to be on an overt level

and universally good relationships between the drivers are not the rule. The young driver who was recently transferred from another branch of the company expressed a great deal of concern about his relationships with his co-workers. He described how the other drivers seldom talk to him and when they do, they 'confuse' him. He regards himself as an 'outsider', and does not know the area where the company operates as well as those who were 'born' there. He sometimes has difficulty finding his way, yet he does not receive a great deal of assistance from the other drivers. He said: '*Hulle dink hulle gaan my gedagte opdonder, maar dit is net om te sê dat die rondte wat hulle aflewer, dis nie so maklik nie, dit is nie so maklik om so af te lewer nie, want ek kom van Pietersburg [Polokwane] af, ek ken nie die plek nie – die plek wat hulle hier aflewer, dis die plek van die mense wat hier gebore is, weet die plek, ken die plek, want hulle het gedoen van hulle geboorte.*' Speculating about the reason for their behaviour, he said that it was in line with the usual manner of behaving by black people who are strangers to one another, but nevertheless it was disturbing. Although he greets the other drivers, he said that '*my praatjies met hulle is nie te goed nie*' (my talks with them are not too good). He explained that when black people meet a stranger they do not readily trust him/her because of 'the stupid manners in our head' ('*dom maniere in ons kop*'), by which he was apparently referring to a way among blacks of gossiping behind other people's backs ('*'n skinder manier*'). He was aware that they questioned why only he had been transferred from the other branch of the company when it closed down since there he had several co-workers, and believed that he had been favoured above the others ('*Hoe kan hy alleen spasie hier kry, miskien dit is 'n ander manier wat nie reg is vir die ander mense?*' How could he alone have got a space here, maybe this is another method which is not right for the other people.') He told his critics that the other employees had also been given 'a space' somewhere else, although he did not know where. All the employees at the other branch had been notified about the vacancy in Johannesburg and anyone who was interested would be considered for the position. None of the other employees were interested. The informant said that he has a wife and five children, as well as a house which costs a lot of money, and as a result told his previous employer that he wanted the job because he did not want to be unemployed. He was asked what he could do about the gossiping, to which he said that complaining about the drivers' attitudes would worsen matters: '*Daar waar ek gekla het, dit gaan mos 'n woord wees.*' ('There where I complained, there will be a word.') He meant that whoever he spoke to would want to know whom he was complaining about, and would call these people and ask them why they were saying such bad things ('*lelike dinge*'). The matter would drag on and spill over to the township where he stays. The people involved would say that he had run to the manager and got them into trouble. The matter would escalate and when they saw him outside the work

situation or over a weekend, they would confront him and ask him why he had spoken to the manager. He added: *'Jy weet hoe die swart mense is.'* ('You know what the black people are like.') He also indicated that there are some drivers who are not 'so funny', whose manners are good and with whom he can work, that is, people who wanted him to know what was being said and told him about the gossiping. Thus, although the drivers' attitudes prevented him from establishing good relationships with his co-workers and made life difficult, the situation was bearable. He commented on the uncertainty of the future, but added that eventually everything, including the gossiping, would end.

Like this account of problematic relationships between drivers, strained relationships occur among whites at the same postgrade. A white male referred to an incident when an older person on the same postgrade swore at him. He responded by telling him that as an adult, he should talk like one, and then asked him what 'the problem' was. To this the latter responded that the informant was 'not his boss'. The informant replied that he was aware of this and in fact had never been his boss, but was pointing out that he was not doing his work. The exact details of the incident are unknown, but presumably the informant commented that the other person was neglecting his work. Within a work situation, the informant believes, it is best to ignore matters such as these and walk away, because becoming aggressive in the workplace is very easy. This exacerbates the situation and further disrupts the relationships between people who are obliged to work together.

As regards relationships between women and men, a female informant said that their nature largely depends upon the strength of women's personalities. If a woman feels that her work equals that of a man, she should not be afraid to say so or to be assertive. Often she, the informant, has been told by male co-workers that her 'mouth is actually too big', which to her implies that the men do not like assertive women, and feel threatened. They are accustomed to women 'standing back' but, she said, this is not how matters should be. She would not allow such a situation to develop, and if she believes that a matter 'is right, then it is right', regardless of the circumstances. Nevertheless, she also said that matters often became a little too much for her to deal with, and that sometimes she wishes she were a man because of the remarks that men make. (*'Baie kere ... persoonlik is dit 'n bietjie vir my te erg. Partykeer wens ek ek kan 'n man gewees het omrede die aanmerkings ...'*) ('Many times ... personally it is a little too much for me. Sometimes I wish I could have been a man because of the remarks ...') Such remarks were about her appearance but, although seemingly intended as compliments, they are too personal and make her feel uncomfortable. She does not always take them seriously and also jokes with the men, but there are times when she gets annoyed and the men are aware of this. Matters that recur every day are a

problem. If someone compliments her one day, he should not do the same the following day. There are a number of men who behave this way and whose comments possibly contain more than just a compliment. She believes they also watch for her reaction, and as soon as she reacts, they insist that they had not meant what she said, thus creating an uncomfortable situation. She added that the longer she knows the men, the easier it becomes to deal with them, but there are times when she finds their behaviour irritating. She has even told them so and they get angry and refuse to talk to her, but then the matter passes until the next incident arises. She has often 'put them in their place' and they know 'where they stand with her', but it is difficult to 'keep them there' because in time they start behaving as before.

### 3.3 The establishment of friendships

When people are in close proximity to one other, are of similar ages, and share interests or a sociocultural heritage, friendships often develop between them. Friendship therefore implies recognition of a mutuality between persons, that is, people with whom one is prepared to spend pleasurable time voluntarily. Establishment of friendships clearly has implications for interpersonal relationships, particularly informal group formation, and to a certain extent friendship relations overlap with informal relationships, except that they are optional, the result of personal choice and are characterised by unstated supportive behaviour which is usually reciprocal (Seymour-Smith 1986: sv friendship). Against this background some brief ideas on the establishment of friendships in the company are presented. Two patterns emerged: first, the establishment of some friendships between the white employees, and second, the lack of it among the drivers.

Although more evident among white employees, the development of friendships among them is not universal in that it does not apply to everyone. This means that not all white employees are involved in friendships established in the work environment which overflow into their private lives. Two of the female research participants who share tasks and an office said they go shopping together, but this would seem to be a matter of convenience rather than an indication of true friendship. The shopping trips occur in the afternoons after 15:00 when people leave the office. The only true manifestation of friendship was found among a group of office staff who meet at one person's home from time to time.

An idea which emerged repeatedly among the drivers was that they do not establish friendships with others at work, nor do they spend leisure time together outside the work context. The significance of this situation arises from

the general principle that in the absence of relatives, friendships are more likely to be established with people with whom they are in regular contact. A number of drivers live away from their families, whom they only see once a month. Yet there was no indication of the establishment of friendships among them. As one of them pointed out, he is 'always in his truck' before he makes his deliveries. By implication, the work context prohibits the establishment of friendships. Even though he lives far from his relatives, he has no friends at work, unless people who approach him with problems can be considered 'friends'. The only friends he has are members of the ZCC (Zion Christian Church) to which he belongs. From this one can deduce that he does not associate with the other drivers on a friendly basis at all. Another driver who was recently employed by the company said that he had not made friends. Although he greets the other drivers, he does not chat to them, because people do not readily trust newcomers.

No other explicit reasons were discerned for the absence of friendships among the drivers. This absence appears to be because the drivers generally do not establish groups other than a task group, and may also be because, as has been repeatedly mentioned, they do not discuss various issues among themselves, which may either be a cause of the absence of friendships among them or a result of it.