

Conflict: A Reality on Gold Mines

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Introduction

Conflict is an extremely complex phenomenon arising from an intricate matrix of interrelated causes. Handling conflict in an enterprise, especially on a gold mine, is not an easy task. To manage conflict effectively, it is necessary to diagnose its real causes and to decide on a management plan of action.

Conflict is commonly regarded as a function of human behaviour, which leads to the perception of conflict as negative, destructive and undesirable.

A different approach is to view conflict as potentially healthy and even beneficial. According to this view, conflict is a prerequisite for development; without conflict, change and growth within an enterprise would not be possible. It is important to realise that conflict must be managed to be of any value, and that unresolved conflict could be disastrous to any organisation (Nel & Van Rooyen, 1989).

In this paper, the perception of shift bosses on certain issues related to conflict on a specific gold mine is investigated. Some

theoretical aspects as well as a description of general working conditions on a gold mine will be briefly outlined. In conclusion, the findings of the investigation will be discussed.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict is classified according to its source and, according to Rahim (1986:15-16) the following can be identified:

- **Affective conflict** - two parties become aware that their feelings and emotions are incompatible, for example a black man's feelings towards the commemoration of 16 June as opposed to those of a white man.
- **Conflict of interest** - two parties competing for a scarce resource, for example two persons applying for the same job.
- **Conflict of values** - two parties have different value systems and ideologies; for example, a migrant worker who grew up in a remote village in the Transkei will have a different value system to that of a university graduate who grew up in a big city.

- **Cognitive conflict** - two parties have different perceptions of the same situation; for example, two people witnessing an accident will report different versions of why the accident took place.
- **Goal conflict** - two parties differ on the outcome of a particular issue; for example, the trade union wants a 20 percent salary increase and management is prepared to grant a 10 percent increase.
- **Substantive conflict** - members of a group disagree on issues relating to their tasks or jobs.

Rahim (1986:16) further classifies organisational conflict on the basis of the levels at which it occurs. These levels are:

- **Intrapersonal conflict** - conflict within the individual due to tasks, roles and interests which do not match this expertise.
- **Interpersonal conflict** - conflict between two individuals, for example between two workers.
- **Intragroup conflict** - refers to conflict among members of the same group.
- **Intergroup conflict** - refers to conflict between two groups, for example a dispute between the trade union and management.

Managing Conflict

The effective management of a conflict episode is not only important to the employees concerned, but also to the organisation as a whole. Conflict management not only entails the handling of manifested conflict, it is in essence the management of the total conflict process or cycle. In this process, valuable individual energy is channelled away from potential waste towards finding creative solutions to problems which will benefit the individuals concerned as well as possible future developments. Threats can thus be transformed into opportunities if conflict is well managed.

Conflict pre-care

The first phase of conflict management is focused on avoiding or minimising conflict within an organisation. The supervisor ought to be sensitive to causes and situations or structures which could be potential sources of conflict before they escalate to unmanageable proportions.

Armed with this knowledge of the potential sources of conflict, active steps to reduce conflict potential can be taken. For example, management could:

- ensure a proper method of selection and placement of employees;
- ensure a proper induction programme for new employees to inform them of the:

- goals of the company;
 - employee assistance programmes;
 - structure of the company and where they fit in;
 - grievance procedures; and
 - disciplinary procedures;
- make sure that all employees have a copy of their job description and understand it;
 - ensure proper training and development;
 - make sure that employees have a sound knowledge of the different cultures represented in the organisation;
 - ensure proper formal communication, for example a briefing system or consultative council meetings;
 - maintain a sound IR system, for example a grievance procedure.

By implementing the above, the conflict potential will not be totally eliminated, but an endeavour to ensure a better understanding of circumstances applicable to the organisation will at least be made and conflict proneness hopefully be reduced.

Conflict identification

Identification is the second phase in the

conflict cycle. The conflict potential is turned into latent or felt conflict. It, becomes therefore, necessary to institute a continuous conflict monitoring system to identify conflict indicators. Records must be kept of indicators such as:

- assaults;
- grievances;
- disciplinary cases;
- labour turnover;
- absenteeism;
- timekeeping;
- downturn in production;
- work stoppages; and
- labour unrest.

The '*grapevine*' is also a very important informal communication system that can provide an indication of existing conflict. Conflict can also be identified merely by being alert, and furthermore employees tend to send out signals when they have grievances and it is therefore important to observe employees' behaviour and listen to what they communicate.

Dealing with conflict

This phase deals with the manifestation of conflict. It is important to diagnose the problem and implement a proper plan of action.

From the literature it appears that all conflict management techniques have, at their best, one of the following outcome, namely a win-lose, lose-lose or win-win.

Rahim (1986:17-18) identifies five ways of dealing with conflict as indicated in Figure 1.

This model for dealing with conflict contains five basic approaches:

- The **integrating approach** implies a high concern for the self and others with a potential win-win outcome.
- The **obliging approach** implies a low concern for the self and high concern for others within a potential lose-win outcome.
- The **dominating approach** implies a high concern for the self and low concern for others with a potential win-lose outcome.
- The **avoiding approach** implies low concern for the self and others and a potential lose-lose outcome.
- The **compromising approach** implies an intermediate concern for the self and others with a no win-no lose outcome.

To ensure a win-win solution, managers must focus on aims and goals by stating superordinate goals and encouraging problem-solving attitudes among employees. The process of participative management could be of great assistance in creating a win-win climate. Labovitz (1980:62) is of the opinion that managers should:

- identify and acknowledge the existence and usefulness of conflict;
- encourage opposition;
- consider the management of conflict as every supervisor's responsibility; and
- approach conflict in a manner which will both stimulate and resolve it.

Filey (Labovitz 1980:64) suggests the following guidelines for effective conflict management:

- Conduct a problem analysis to determine the basic issues.
- State the problem as a goal or as an obstacle rather than as a solution.
- Identify the obstacles to attain the goal.
- Depersonalise the problem.
- Separate the process of defining the problem from the search for solutions and from the evaluation of alternatives.

Conflict aftercare

Conflict aftercare can also be seen as a preventative measure. The whole process of a particular incident must be evaluated, from the conflict potential to its manifestation. Strategies must now be devised to eliminate the causes, which leads back to conflict pre-care, thus completing

CONCERN FOR SELF

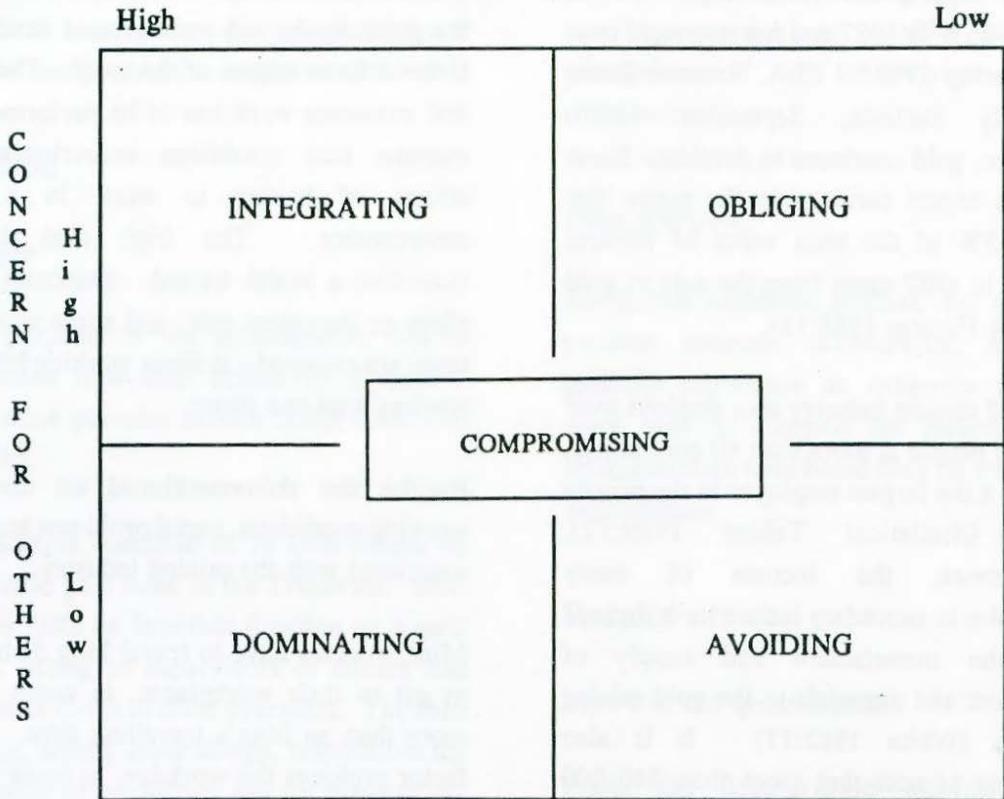


Figure 1: A model for dealing with conflict

the circle.

It is very important that complex organisations should aim at a more rational and open policy of handling conflict. This applies especially to the gold mining industry where costs resulting from conflict situations have a negative influence on the already diminishing profits of gold mines.

The Importance of the Gold Mining Industry to the Economy

The importance of the gold mining industry to the economy of South Africa cannot be overemphasised. A high gold price leads to an upswing in economic activities while a low gold price may result in a decline of the South African economy towards a recession. South Africa's dependence on the strength of the gold price can be explained as follows.

The contribution of the gold mining industry to total exports has varied from 42% in 1983 to 35% in 1987 and has averaged over 30% during 1988/89 (S.A. Reserve Bank, Quarterly Bulletin, September 1990). However, gold continues to dominate South Africa's export earnings to the extent that some 65% of the total value of mineral exports in 1987 came from the sale of gold (Facts & Figures 1988:18).

The gold mining industry also employs over 400 000 people at more than 40 gold mines, making it the largest employer in the private sector (Statistical Tables 1989:32). Furthermore, the income of many companies in secondary industries is derived from the manufacture and supply of equipment and materials to the gold mining industry (White 1982:11). It is also important to note that more than 340 000 employees (80%) of the mining industry work underground (Statistical Tables 1989:32).

Working Conditions on Gold Mines

Of primary importance to conditions in the mining environment are the deep levels that men are required to work on South African gold mines, making the South African mining industry unique. There are many workers working more than three kilometres underground. Despite the stringent safety measures to reduce fatality rates, deaths caused by rockbursts and rock falls presently account for 50 per cent of gold mine

fatalities (Chamber of Mines Newsletter, 1987:4). Another problem associated with the great depths and underground workings is the arduous nature of the work. The fact that strenuous work has to be performed in extreme heat conditions exacerbates the effects of having to work in a hot environment. The high dust levels constitute a health hazard. Darkness also plays an important role, and some working areas are cramped - at times working heights are less than one meter.

Besides the abovementioned on the job working conditions, social problems are also associated with the mining industry.

Mine workers have to travel long distances to get to their workplaces, in some cases more than an hour's travelling time. This factor prolongs the workday, in some cases by up to 25%, which in turn increases stress. To add to the stress, some of these workers barely see their families whilst working on contract and, as most of them are illiterate, they receive messages only by word of mouth.

The language barrier is another problem among the workers in the mining industry. Mine workers are drawn from various countries and regions. They speak different languages and most of them can speak neither Afrikaans nor English. Fanakalo is a language developed by the mining industry and is used mainly for instructional purposes between black and white employees. This lack of understanding and of the ability to

communicate creates more stress among the workforce. It is under these circumstances that shift bosses must manage conflict and ensure that production targets are achieved.

Method

Sample

The purpose of the investigation was to determine how shift bosses on a specific gold mine perceive certain issues related to conflict.

The sample consisted of 70 shift bosses on a specific gold mine in the Transvaal. Shift bosses fulfil an interface function on a gold mine, acting as supervisors of miners and are subordinate to mine overseers. The shift boss is, among other things, responsible for the safety of his section and for maintaining discipline and production targets. He is also a key figure in the success of any mining operation.

Data was collected in the form of mailback questionnaires. Of the seventy questionnaires posted 54 were returned, resulting in a response of 77%.

Instruments

The questionnaire items were in English. The demographic information (Part I of the questionnaire) was collected by using appropriate questions pertaining to the respondent's age, years of experience on the

job and language preferred. Part II contained questions relating to sources of conflict, reaction to conflict and the perception of the supervisor (mine overseer).

Data Analysis

No formal statistical method, for example product moment correlations, stepwise multiple regression or subgroup analysis were used to interpret the results. The interpretations were based only on frequency distributions.

Results

Part I of the questionnaire

From the demographic information it became clear that the majority of the respondents were Afrikaanse speaking and in the age group 30-39 years. Most had served for more than five years in the post of shift boss.

Part II of the questionnaire

Sources of conflict

As far as the frequency of conflict is concerned, it became apparent that the majority of shift bosses (37%) experienced conflict only a few times a week or a few times a month (37%) and not as most people would believe, on a daily basis. It also became clear that the individuals responsible for conflict varied from mine overseers

METHOD	RESPONSE (%)
● Try to solve it to suit yourself	18%
● Satisfy the other party's needs	13%
● Turn your back and walk away	11%
● Attempt to satisfy both parties' needs	24%
● Take a middle ground position	10%
● Solve the problem by using your authority	24%

Figure 2: Methods used by shift bosses to resolve conflict

(13% to colleagues (17%), employees from other departments (15%) and miners (54%) appeared to be the main source of conflict. It could be argued that the main reason for this was that the majority of shift bosses are white and the majority of miners are black. Cultural differences and the language medium used are the most probable reasons for the communication problems experienced. The conflict between shift bosses and miners may be ascribed chiefly to differences in perception, lack of communication, mistrust and unfairness in the workplace. Interestingly enough, the same reasons are also valid for conflict between shift bosses and supervisors (mine overseers). From the findings it is clear that the main causes of conflict may be categorised as *interpersonal*, and this is also confirmed by the fact that shift bosses describe the conflict they experience as

essentially attitudinal and interpersonal.

Reaction to conflict

There seems to be a wide variety of methods used by shift bosses to resolve conflict. The methods used are shown in Figure 2.

From Figure 2 it is clear that the emphasis is placed on the idea that both parties' problems should be solved at the same time. It is also evident that some shift bosses believe that by using their positions (authority), they can solve all problems. It is, however, disturbing to note that some shift bosses do not attempt to solve problems at all (11%). Regarding the aspect of how shift bosses feel after a conflict situation, the majority (79%) indicated that they felt better after dealing with a conflict situation. This, however, does not mean that the conflict has been resolved. Shift

bosses might be under the impression that the conflict has been resolved, but the grievances may actually still remain.

Concerning the treatment of subordinates, 58% of the shift bosses thought that they treated their employees fairly. However, 42% thought that they were sometimes unfair.

Perception of Supervisors

All shift bosses (100%) were of the opinion that their supervisors (mine overseers) needed formal training to be able to manage conflict to the advantage of the company. They also felt that the supervisors (mine overseers) were not sufficiently equipped to manage interpersonal problems (71%), do not have required knowledge of industrial relations (66%) and most importantly lack communication skills (42%) as well as counselling skills (50%).

Conclusion

Although the last word on conflict in the mining industry has not yet been spoken, this investigation revealed certain important issues relating to conflict manifestation among shift bosses. Training supervisors in conflict management is long overdue and the diversity and complexity of people meeting face to face within the gold mining industry cannot be overemphasised. Strategies to equip shift bosses and mine overseers with the required knowledge and skills must be developed in order to ensure better

understanding among individuals of different races, and also to ensure organisational effectiveness.

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