Article

Workplace change and frontline supervision in deep-level gold mining: managerial rhetoric or practice?

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Introduction

In the colonial and apartheid years of gold mining, production supervisors were racist, bullies, autocratic and abusive. In many instances, underground workers were assaulted. The day-to-day running of the production process was often characterised by callous management practices and worker resistance. Moodie (2005) writes that violent workplace supervision underground in South African mines was common and taken for granted at least until the 1970s. As Moodie (2005:36) points out, 'in the mines, the "rhythm of work" had long since been maintained by violence alone...People learned by being beaten and once skilled or promoted, avoided the worst of it'. The white supervisors were assisted by black 'boss boys' (team leaders) in entrenching despotic forms of workplace supervision (Crush et al 1991, Moodie 1994).

The current competitive business environment calls for particular forms of frontline supervision that improve organisational performance. This is particularly true in the South African gold mining industry where the racial workplace hampered effective development and implementation of supervisory training programmes. In the apartheid years of gold mining, the day-to-day running of the production process routinely involved the abuse of power by supervisors to the detriment of the employment relationship. The post-apartheid gold mining regime and pressure to improve efficiency and productivity have necessitated different forms of supervisory and management practices in the South African gold mining industry.

The sociology of work and management literature is dominated by studies conducted in advanced industrial countries, especially in British and American firms (Child and Partridge 1982, Hodson 2002). Not much is known about the shop-floor behaviour of management in productivity-enhancing programmes in the contemporary South African gold mining workplace. A lot of emphasis has been on the worker at the point of production. This is despite the history of racial forms of supervision and management that have characterised many South African gold mining firms.

This article examines the changing nature of frontline supervision in the light of the supervisory training course which was instituted to improve operational efficiency and productivity at AngloGold Ashanti's Great Noligwa mine. It assesses the extent to which the supervisory training was implemented in the underground gold mining workplace. Was the course really about empowering the frontline supervisor to improve workplace productivity or a mere information-sharing session between top managers and supervisors? This is the key question this article seeks to answer.

The article is divided into four sections:

- the first section provides a brief discussion of the research method that was used to collect data;
- the second is the review of literature on frontline supervision and workplace change processes;
- the third section discusses the mine's three-day supervisory training course;
- the fourth and final section assesses the implementation of the supervisory training in the underground mining workplace from the point of view of production supervisors (shift-bosses) and their superiors (mine captains).

Research methodology

This article is based on a six month participant observational research project conducted at Great Noligwa mine between April and September 2007. Having been granted permission by mine management and the representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), I attended the supervisory training course as one of the mine employees holding a supervisory position.[2] Open-ended interviews were conducted with shift-bosses and mine captains who attended the supervisory training course.

Furthermore, I lived in the mine hostel and went underground with underground gold miners to investigate the day-to-day running of the production process at the rock-face. This supplemented data collected from observing and participating in the mine's supervisory training course. I wrote detailed notes of my observations and conversations with the informants in my fieldwork diary.

Frontline supervision and workplace change processes

To understand the role of the frontline supervisor in workplace change processes, it is important to understand the manner in which the supervisory role on the shop-floor has evolved over time. A number of writers have presented different accounts of the changing nature of frontline supervision in industrial organisations. As noted earlier, many of these accounts are based on shop-floor studies conducted in British and American firms. These workplace studies have provided the framework through which to understand the position and problems of the foreman in contemporary industrial organisation. Gardner and Whyte (1945) as well as Child and Partridge (1982) provide an interesting account of the position and problems of the supervisor in the workplace. These authors argue that supervisors are in a challenging position in the organisational ladder. Management sees supervisors as part of management. Similarly, workers consider supervisors as part of management or agents of management.

Supervisors do not seem to have a clear cut perspective of their location in the organisational ladder. In their study of the human elements of supervision, Gardner and Whyte (1945) found that the supervisors viewed themselves as the 'bumping post' between management and workers – that is to say the 'men in the middle' (Roethlisberger 1945) 'caught between the opposing forces of management and shop-floor, torn by competing demands and loyalties' (Child and Partridge 1982:8). This view still holds today in spite of the classification of supervisors as members of the white-collar rather than blue-collar sector (Goldthorpe 1980, Child and Partridge 1982, Seppala 2004).

In the light of the puzzling location of supervisors in the management structure, Child and Partridge (1982:8) ponder the following: 'to what degree of authority and discretion actually remains to supervisors, and whether their job retains any managerial attributes?' It is this empirical question that Child and Partridge (1982) address so well in their book. Their argument shows the manner in which top management initiatives have over the years of industrialisation weakened the position of the frontline supervisor.

In the early stages of industrialisation, frontline supervisors enjoyed a considerable degree of authority and power not only in overseeing the production process but also in the selection and dismissal of workers.

However this was not uniform but varied from industry to industry (Smith 1878 cited by Child and Partridge 1982, Melling 1980). In the context of the South African gold mining industry, the racial organisation of work enabled production supervisors to abuse their supervisory authority and power to the detriment of the employment relationship (Johnstone 1976, Crush et al 1991, Moodie 1994 and 2005, Von Holdt 2003).

In the late nineteenth century, with the advent of new production methods, supervisors began to lose authority and power in their managerial functions, as firms sought innovative techniques to withstand increasing international competition and resistance from organised labour. The supervisor's authority and power was greatly reduced with the advent of the scientific management movement or Taylorism pioneered by FW Taylor (Taylor 1911). Of significance here was Taylor's concept of 'functional foremanship' which prescribed that activities such as selection, planning of work, costing, procurement of materials and quality control be done according to scientific methods by relevant qualified staff personnel (Child and Partridge 1982).

By the 1940s, the decline of supervisors' authority and power was apparent in British and American firms. During this period, Child and Partridge (1982:7) argue:

> By and large, the days were now gone when workers depended upon the supervisor for holding on to their job, and when the workers' loyalties would attach primarily to him. His ability to enforce authority on the shop-floor was now uncertain, while his very position of leadership was increasingly being challenged by their own-chosen and union-accredited representatives, the shop stewards.

As a result, a considerable number of supervisors experienced alienation and job dissatisfaction as the supervisor's role became:

> Stressful and his capacity to achieve what management expected of him progressively more limited. The continued development of centralised functional departments, laying down a framework of procedures which governed many shop-floor parameters, and encouragement they gave for shop stewards to bypass the supervisor, led other commentators to conclude that he no longer occupied a position of special importance in the management system. He was more a transmitter of management decisions than an active participant in them. (Child and Partridge 1982:8)

In the 1940s, frontline supervisors were described as 'the marginal men in industry' (Gardner and Whyte 1945, Wray 1949). It would be wrong to suggest that the supervisors are passive reactors to workplace change processes. By the 1940s, there was increasing unionisation of supervisors in British and American industries. This even caused supervisory strikes in key industries. Management, especially in America, recognised that changes in supervisory roles had created what they called ‘a supervisory problem’ (Gardner and Whyte 1945, Roethlisberger 1945, Child and Partridge 1982).

From the 1970s onwards, continued reorganisation of work through computer-based information systems led some writers to suggest the redundancy of frontline supervision (Edwards 1979). In recent years, the organisation of work around autonomous or flexible work teams (Manz and Sims 1987) has ‘raised the questions of whether the function of supervision should be abolished and embodied with self-regulatory workgroups or whether it should be elevated with the supervisor taking on more of a team leader or facilitator role’ (Dawson 1991:37). The contemporary firms have designed and introduced different forms of new working practices in order to remain buoyant in the competitive global marketplace. Regardless of how top management introduces new working practices – be it teamwork or supervisory training – the frontline supervisor remains the implementer or a change catalyst in the workplace (Weir and Mills 1973).

Manz and Sims (1993) illustrate how the marginalisation of frontline supervisors by top management derailed a workplace change initiative in a particular firm. The authors, working as consultants for the firm, rescued top management’s initiative by bringing frontline supervisors on board. As a result, the supervisors’ resistance against top management’s initiative was overcome. They accepted and freely drove the initiative at the point of production. This case study shows the power of the frontline supervisor at the point of production in that they can render a new management policy efficient or inefficient. It is for this reason that Dawson (1991) argues that the authority and power of the foreman is not only located within the formal hierarchical command structure of the organisation but also within the informal work relations between supervisors and shop-floor workers. This suggests the significance of subjecting working experience of the frontline supervisor in workplace change programmes (Gardner and Whyte 1945, Etzioni 1958).

The frontline supervisor as a change agent in the workplace

The managerial and sociological literature indicates that there has been a renewed interest in production supervisors as a subject of research in the contemporary workplace. A number of writers have commented about the role of frontline supervisors and middle managers in the implementation of workplace change and productivity-enhancing initiatives. It is argued that, depending on the manner in which senior management involve and empower the frontline supervisor in workplace change initiatives, the frontline supervisor can resist or facilitate change in the workplace (Lowe 1992 and 1993, Manz and Sims 1993, Mason 2000, Fenton-O'Creevy 1996 and 2001, Seppala 2004).

Furthermore, research reveals that where production supervisors have been found or are alleged to be resistant to change, it is because of the lack of support from their superiors – that is top management (Chelte et al 1989, Hales 2005, Fenton-O'Creevy 1996 and 2001). In such instances, top management would institute a new management policy having not properly consulted and equipped frontline supervisors to facilitate the implementation of a new management policy. While a few organisations have succeeded in empowering their production supervisors to implement workplace change initiatives, many have failed.

A review of the literature indicates that the following three factors have contributed to the failure of many managerial development programmes to bear fruit:

Firstly, the tendency of top management to overlook human relations and organisational issues in the process of transforming the workplace. Feeling the pressure of improving company profits, once the trainees had completed attending the training programme, top management tend to focus more on meeting financial targets than addressing attitudinal, behavioural organisational issues affecting change in the workplace (Pym 1968, Pollock 1998, Cassar 1999, Voros 2000, Blair and Kochan 2002). These may include inefficient human resource practices and production bottlenecks such as material shortages. While it is important to focus on the financial element of workplace reorganisation, it is equally important not to overlook the human and organisational aspects since workplace change initiatives are enacted by human beings themselves – top management, middle managers, frontline supervisors and shop-floor workers.

Secondly, supervisory or management training programmes have a tendency to undervalue informal learning and social organisation of work. They tend to focus more on the formal or administrative knowledge than on the informal or tacit knowledge of overseeing production and supervising people (Lindblom 1959, Watson 1980, Leger 1992, Webster and Leger 1992, Enos et al 2003).

Thirdly, another factor that renders management training programmes ineffective is top management's failure to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme in meeting the organisational goals. It is argued that senior management tend not to make follow-ups of the training programmes upon implementation (Collins and Holton 2004, Hamlin 2004). According to Pym (1968), the most common excuse for top management and trainers to reject evaluation of training is that they tend to see evaluation as an academic exercise. The lack of resources or the time and the blame culture for poor performance are part of the many excuses management tend to raise to dismiss the evaluation of productivity-enhancing training programmes.

The next section shifts focus to the substance of this article – Great Noligwa's supervisory training course as it unfolded over three days.

Great Noligwa supervisory training programme

The top management of the mine studied deemed it important to improve workplace supervision. Mine management instituted a three-day supervisory training course as one of the means by which to increase the productivity of the mine.

Day One

Day one activities revolved around the vision and goals of the mine. The vision of the mine was to be a successful producer of gold by achieving its production, safety and financial targets. The mine had the following three goals for 2007: first, to achieve zero fatalities and/or less than nine loss-time-injuries (LTIs); second, to produce 1,555 kilograms (Kg) of gold per month; and finally, to maintain production costs at or less than R2,225 a square metre or per stope worker. For a variety of reasons, the reality is that the mine battled to meet its production, safety and financial targets. As Robert McHughes,[3] the Mine Manager, remarked to the course participants:

> We need to keep our costs down for the gold we produce. Since 2001, gold production has gone down. In January to March 2007, we made a loss … The more gold we mine, the more money we get. We sell gold. That is our business.

Health and safety in the workplace was discussed. The course participants were urged to adhere to work standards and safe work practices. Freddy, the Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) Manager, had this to say to the supervisors:

> Nobody comes to the mine to get injured. The reality is that we do injure our people. Why? Behaviour … Make sure we work according to the correct [work] standards. It is up to us to change the safety performance at Great Noligwa mine. We need to get our mindsets correct.

The reality is that, as Freddy admitted, at times the shift-bosses encouraged their subordinates to take shortcuts in response to production constraints such as material shortages. Material shortages (resulting from logistical problems such as delays in the delivery of material and budgetary constraints) prevented stope workers from completing their production tasks within the official eight-hour shift. In response to such production blockages the shift-bosses and their charges improvised production through the informal work practice of making a plan (planisa). Planisa is a Fanakalo (mining *lingua franca*) injunction, entreating miners to deploy their skills and ingenuity to tackle the day-to-day problems posed by the endemic uncertainties and organisational dysfunctions of mining. Planisa involves creative, self-organised improvisation and initiative on an individual and collective basis, often circumventing standard work rules. Planisa is an innovative yet risky informal work practice underground workers adopt to tackle production bottlenecks. A detailed discussion of the gold miners' underground practice of planisa is beyond the scope of this article (see Phakathi 2002 and 2009).

The stope workers often searched for the material in unsafe areas in order to meet their production targets and increase their bonus earnings. In the event of injury, mine management blamed the workers. In fact, by not providing workers with sufficient material, management compelled workers not to adhere to official work standards but to adopt unofficial work practices such as planisa. The mine captains had a tendency to put pressure on the shift-bosses to meet their production targets. As a result, the shift-bosses tended to put pressure on their charges to produce even in unsafe working conditions. The shift-bosses also made a plan when they ran short of budget by loaning each other money to buy the material. Stringent allocation of budget to supervisors and obsession with cost-savings affected the daily running of the production process. Therefore, in certain instances, work practices down the mine were contrary to official work standards (see Lindblom 1959, Watson 1980).

The SHE Manager pointed out the significance of management style:

> How do your subordinates see you? Your boss is not with you when you deal with your people [subordinates]. Most of the people are

> leaving their companies because of their bosses. Not money, money is secondary. Lead the people as people. They are not mere tools. When you treat people with respect, your safety and production will be good. It is easy to care for people. I know very well. Caring comes from a good relationship. Caring can be the most powerful supervisory tool. Care for the people and make Great Noligwa great.

Moreover, team-building exercises were conducted inside and outside the training room. The following extract from my field notes describes one of the blindfolded team-building exercises that formed part of the course activities for the day.

The blindfolded team-building exercise

Outside the training room, the course participants were divided into two groups. The groups competed on this team-building exercise with their eyes blindfolded. The teams were tasked with forming a dome tent over a period of ten minutes. Both teams were provided with the necessary material to carry out the exercise.

Our group (Pete, Elizabeth and Alwyn) successfully completed the exercise in nine minutes and ten seconds. Lodi, the Training Officer, told us that this was a new record. The previous record was nine minutes and thirty two seconds. We felt good. We realised what teamwork, effective communication, listening, effective leadership and planning could do for a work group.

After lunch, a role-play exercise was conducted inside the training room. The essence of this exercise was to make participants aware that business restructuring can be a challenging task for all company stakeholders. The extract below expresses the point.

Role-play exercise on business restructuring strategy

The two groups participated in a 45 minute role-play exercise on the introduction and implementation of a turnaround business strategy. Each of the participants was given a role to play in the execution of this business restructuring strategy. The participants played roles of shareholders, board of directors and management. I played the role of management.

As a member of the management team, the brief we got from the board of directors was to inform the employees about this workplace change initiative and the reasons behind it. We then had to report back to the board of directors. This was quite an interesting but a challenging business and workplace change related exercise. It made us realise how difficult it can be to win the support of all company stakeholders on a particular workplace change initiative.

Day Two

The previous day's activities were reviewed. Discussion and group exercises on human resources management dominated the bulk of day two's activities. The following elements of supervision were discussed: coaching, leadership and communications. The Training Officer urged the supervisors to value their subordinates: 'There is a tendency to look down upon frontline mineworkers. We tend to rate people by their status or profession. People who create your wealth are people in overalls. Recognise another person's power at every level'. This remark is in line with Lawler's (2003:3) assertion that:

> In this new era, people need to be respected and treated as precious human capital, more essential to the organisation's effectiveness than its financial capital. People can now be the primary source of a company's competitive advantage in most businesses. To put it bluntly, how people are treated increasingly determines whether a company will prosper and can survive.

This signals a paradigm shift in the manner in which employees ought to be treated. As Lawler (2003:3) points out further:

> In the past, arguments about the importance of how people are treated have largely fallen on deaf ears in the executive offices and boardrooms of most organisations. Yes, there are many companies that claim that their people are their most important asset and they even put pictures of them (always smiling) in their annual reports. But most of these companies do not behave like their people are their number one priority. All too often, they treat them as replaceable parts that add little value. But today, a number of powerful and compelling factors are coalescing into a new reality: to be effective, organisations must excel in organising and managing their people. In the twenty-first century, treating people right is not an option; it is a necessity.

Moreover, supervisors were urged to create a working environment conducive to high performance. Adequate provision of labour and production material was emphasised. The course participants were asked to make a list of factors the mine needed to address to increase operational efficiency and productivity. The list revealed a variety of organisational, technological, geological, management and labour factors which crippled business performance in the mine. The production constraints identified were discussed. The Training Officer promised to pass the list of production constraints to the executive committee (EXCO) for intervention purposes.

Team-building exercises also featured in day two's proceedings. The extracts below illustrate the point:

Exercise on team competition

The Training Officer asked each group to choose a name in the list provided. Our group's (Pete, Elizabeth, Alwyn and I) name was Golden Eagles. The other group was called Carpe Diem. The exercise was about providing a correct answer to a puzzling question. Figuring out the correct answer entailed some form of creativity and active listening.

Our group did not do well. Carpe Diem narrowly beat us as they got more correct answers than us. Golden Eagles achieved a score of 17 points whereas Carpe Diem got 18 points. Carpe Diem's team members were each rewarded with lollipops. The Training Officer did not however spell it out before we began the exercise that the winner would get a prize. It was a surprise. Our team was a bit disappointed for not having been able to win the competition.

A video illustrating the importance of communication and behaviour in the workplace was screened. This activity was followed by another teamwork exercise. This time, the Training Officer told us from the beginning that the winner would be rewarded with a soccer ball.

The teamwork exercise

The activity took place outside the training room. With our eyes blindfolded, we had to form a square with a rope on the ground in ten minutes. The Training Officer explained the task in advance and gave us a few minutes to organise ourselves and plan for the task. We appointed the team leader and spelled out our individual roles in the exercise. We could not get it right. The shape of the rope was not in a square but something like a triangle. We failed to get the exercise right despite the fact that the Training Officer gave us a second chance to get it right. Why did we fail the exercise? The feedback we got from the Training Officer was that we individually thought for ourselves rather than for the team. We set our minds more on the prize [the soccer ball] rather than on the task. According to the Training Officer, the main cause of our failure was that we did not plan and communicate properly amongst ourselves. This teamwork exercise reminded us of the importance of planning, communication, leadership and teamwork in the day-to-day running of the production process underground.

Day Three

The previous day's lessons were summarised. Saving costs was the day's buzzword, explicitly expressed through a breakdown of monthly expenditure presented by Betty, a white South African woman and the Financial Manager in the mine. Betty informed the supervisors how the mine was doing financially: 'The cost-pressure is extremely high at this point in time'. The financial pressure that the mine was faced with should be understood in the context of the rising production costs associated with deep-level gold mining, the quality of the grade of ore, and the fluctuating character of the gold price. In other gold-producing countries, such as Australia and Canada, gold mining takes place at shallow levels, is capital-intensive and is said to be relatively safer and less expensive. Conversely, in South Africa, gold mining is expensive because the ore-deposit is located at ultra-deep levels. As a result, it is difficult and costly to insert appropriate technology to extract the gold-bearing rock. It is for this reason, among others, that South African gold mining is labour-intensive.

Betty revealed to us that the mine was spending a lot more on labour costs than other AngloGold Ashanti South African operations: 'We are the lowest in the industry. We are the worst. We have more people in this mine than other mines producing the same quality of gold'. A breakdown of the total monthly expenditure indicated that the labour bill was around R46 million. According to Betty, the labour bill was more than half of the total monthly working costs.

Betty attributed the mine's exorbitant monthly labour bill to over-employment and overtime work. Betty informed the course participants that a weekend overtime bill was R1.2 million. It was interesting to hear from Betty that retrenchment was not the panacea for the high labour bill but the improvement of labour efficiency: 'We need to do more with the same. We need to do more square metres [stope faces] per man. We need to improve labour efficiency. That is how we can resolve the labour bill'. I would agree with Betty that the mine needed to improve labour efficiency. However, the improvement of labour efficiency would require the improvement of organisational and management efficiencies. For this reason, I tend to differ with Betty's view that the expensive monthly working bill was, to a large extent, caused by over-employment and overtime work. As was revealed by my participant observational research in the underground mining workplace, my point of contention is that the mine's expensive labour bill was not necessarily caused by over-employment of underground workers but rather by poor organisation of work: poor mine planning, labour shortages, absenteeism, and material shortages.

At the time of fieldwork, occupational illnesses affected the strength of underground labour on a daily basis. This made it difficult for underground work teams to meet their productions targets. I discovered that poor mine planning prevented the stope workers from removing the broken rock to the ore-bins on weekdays. For instance, in one shift-boss' panels, there was a pile of broken rock in the gully because the ore-bins were located far away from the stope and were not sufficient to allow the crew to remove the broken rock on a day-to-day basis. As a result, the production crews had to come to work on public holidays, Saturdays and Sundays to remove the broken rock to the ore-bins. A Sunday or public holiday shift paid twice the normal shift.

It can be argued that attributing the mine's exorbitant monthly labour bill to over-employment and overtime without taking into account the above-mentioned organisational dysfunctions and management inefficiencies signalled a narrow and skewed view of the factors that contributed to the expensive working costs in the mine.

Furthermore, the course participants were informed that the mine's consumer bill was R16 million a month. This included expenditure on stores, production material and equipment. Betty highlighted that the mine spent a lot of money on rock-support material, especially rock props: 'One rock prop costs R600 – R900. We [Great Noligwa mine] are spending about R500 million per month on rock props', Betty said. The Financial Manager went on to say: 'There is plenty of material lying underground. Please help me by telling me where to reclaim rock props'. One shift-boss, Pete, concurred with Betty that he had seen unused rock props lying in a particular underground worksite. He vowed to help the Financial Manager and the mine in reclaiming unused rock props underground. To reduce the working costs, Betty informed us that the mine went as far as hiring a contractor to look for and reclaim unused rock props in various underground work sites. This shows the pressure the mine was under in order to save production costs.

Moreover, Betty informed the course participants that the mine was doing well on electricity, water, energy and maintenance bills compared to other AngloGold Ashanti South African gold mines. The remainder of the monthly expenditure was on the administration work. In summing up her presentation, Betty reiterated the importance of saving costs by not wasting material: 'This can turn around our costs', she said. She mentioned that the mine was spending R10 million over its monthly budget.

After the tea break, Lodi, the Training Officer, summarised and identified key points from Betty's presentation. He emphasised the importance of meeting production targets. This is the message top management kept on stressing to the course participants. Lodi told us that in 2006 the mine failed to achieve its monthly production calls of 1,555 kilograms of gold by 1,500 kilograms (total underproduction for the year). From Lodi's point of view, if 1,500 kilograms of gold were multiplied by the average gold price of R1,500 per ounce (in 2006), the mine made a loss of about R2.2 million in 2006. Mathematically, this was a financial loss equivalent to a three-month production of gold. Drawing from the production results of January 2007, Lodi pointed out that the mine failed to meet the monthly target of 1,555 kilograms of gold by 355 kilograms. Put differently, it achieved 1,200 kilograms of gold for the month of January 2007.

The supervisors were also made aware of the global market forces that were influencing the productivity of the gold industry. For instance, the fluctuating character of the gold price and its impact on operational efficiency and productivity was discussed: 'We can't control the price of gold, but can control production and costs', Lodi, the Training Officer, commented. January 1980 was highlighted as the year in which the gold price reached, for the first time, a peak of $800 per ounce. The impact of the 1990s gold slump on the gold mining industry was discussed. The supervisors were also reminded why it was necessary to restructure the South African gold mining industry towards efficiency and productivity.

Lodi summarised the three days of the course as follows:

> 2006 was not a good year for Great Noligwa mine. How can we improve this mine? What can we do to increase production and reduce costs? Tell us of anything that can be replaced. Tell us exactly where [production] material is lying underground... winches, locos, props standing around. The future of this company lies in our hands.

These remarks indicate the cultivation of a new employer-employee relationship in a post-apartheid gold mine. The employer is bringing employees on board as a significant party in the business strategy of improving organisational performance (see Cotton 1993, Lawler 2003).

We wrote a test on what we had learned over the three days. The test was on the following: goals of the mine, barriers to effective communication and steps in improving communication in the workplace, problem-solving, assertiveness, differences between what supervisors do and what leaders do, steps in improving leadership skills, steps in developing employees, characteristics of an effective coach and rules of coaching, creativity, managing diversity and managing performance in the workplace.

Unlike the previous two days, day three activities were completed around lunch time. We did not have lunch though as we had on the previous two days. Instead a barbeque party had been organised to take place immediately after the graduation ceremony. At the graduation ceremony, the course participants were tasked with making two short presentations to members of the executive committee (EXCO) on the business theme they had found most interesting in the course. The two groups had to nominate a spokesperson.

Our group (Pete, Elizabeth, Alwyn and I) nominated me as their spokesperson. Our presentation was on living the values of the company. Tom spoke on behalf of his group. Their presentation was on managing diversity in the workplace. Having discussed and prepared our presentation, I presented the theme we had found most interesting in the course to EXCO members. The audience seemed pleased. Our group also seemed happy with the manner in which I presented what we had discussed together.[4]

Furthermore, I was not sure how the EXCO members would respond to my presentation as I was not a permanent member of Great Noligwa mine. I imagined that top management would have liked to hear from one of the mine employees rather than from an outsider who was only visiting the mine for an extended period of time. This is the dilemma I was faced with when our group nominated me as its spokesperson. It was quite a dicey situation to be in. I was however thrilled by the fact that I calmly handled the situation.

The group presentations were followed by a brief comment from Robbie, the Production Manager at the mine. Robbie praised the course participants for their excellent presentations. He reiterated that the course was the brainchild of senior managers – the initiative mine management had taken to improve the productivity of the mine. Therefore, they fully supported it. The extent to which top management supported the course beyond the classroom will be examined in the section that follows. Lodi, the Training Officer, stood up and gave a vote of thanks to mine management and administrative staff. Subsequently, Gert, the Human Resources Manager, and Gerrard, the Senior Training Officer, handed the certificates of attendance to the course participants. A white woman in her late twenties and Public Relations Officer (PRO) in the mine took photographs as we collected our certificates of attendance from Gert and Gerrard. This was followed by a group photo including course participants and EXCO members.

The atmosphere was great as the course participants mingled and joked with senior managers in English, Afrikaans and Fanakalo. It was good to witness supervisors and senior managers in a relaxed mood. There was specially packed meat (beef, lamb and sausages). Drinks and beer were flowing in the bar located within an entertainment area called a *lapa*. At the time of fieldwork, barbeque parties were frequently held in the mine particularly during team-building programmes and in celebration of outstanding production results.

The section that follows assesses the design and implementation of the supervisory training course in the workplace down the mine.

Assessment of the mine's supervisory training course

A review of the literature reveals that evaluation is one of the most neglected aspects of management training programmes (Pym 1968). Rowley (2003:161) states that the evaluation of training can be difficult

> …as results may not be observed immediately and may be more medium or long term. As a result, this often makes it hard to validate the relationship between the incidence of training and organisational performance. A number of factors may come into play.

At Great Noligwa mine, positive and negative aspects in the design and implementation of the supervisory training course were identified.

Positive aspects

Recognising supervisors as change agents

As stated earlier, first and foremost, mine management did a good thing by involving supervisors in workplace change processes. Jimmy, the shift-boss, appreciated the course as follows: 'I enjoyed the course in the sense of it. It is the right way to work'. Deon, the mine captain, echoed the same sentiments: 'It's a good thing. Everybody should go through it'. Research evidence reveals that in certain organisations, workplace change initiatives have failed to live up to expectations because of the marginalisation of supervisors from participating in such initiatives (Wray 1949, Manz and Sims 1993, Fenton-O'Creevy 1996 and 2001). Contrary to the notion that the role of frontline supervisors in team-based work systems has become redundant, the case of Great Noligwa mine suggests that the frontline supervisor is a significant player whom top management cannot afford to bypass in workplace change and productivity-enhancing initiatives.

Informative and interactive

The course was informative and interactive. This was made possible by management's presentations on the local and international aspects of the gold mining business and team-building exercises. The supervisors were made aware of the operational challenges the mine was facing. The course participants were asked to play their part to improve the productivity of the mine. The supervisors were identified as the means by which to motivate mine employees at various levels to do their part in increasing the productivity of the mine.

Negative aspects

Very top-down

The manner in which the course was presented to the course participants was very top-down. Much of the discussion on operational issues was dominated by top managers' perspectives. To a large extent, the course appeared to be an information sharing exercise. It seemed as if top management simply wanted to make supervisors aware of the fact that the mine was becoming unproductive and unprofitable. The course revealed a series of contradictions between what mine management told the supervisors and what really happened at the rock-face underground. The sessions were dominated by management perspectives on work design often contradicting what really occurred at the point of production. The organisational dysfunctions encountered in the underground gold mining workplace and the manner in which the supervisors and their subordinates responded to them were not thoroughly discussed and addressed in the training room. I am of the view that the course could have been of great value had the supervisors been given the opportunity to share their day-to-day experiences of supervising production with top management in the training room.

The work relations between supervisors and their superiors were to a large extent overlooked. As discussed earlier, it is not enough to design training without fixing the workplace (Pym 1968, Hodson 2002). In the mine studied, poor coordination of production, such as material and labour shortages, were organisational and managerial factors, among others, that were crippling safe production of gold in the mine. The extent to which supervisors and their charges dealt with these organisational dysfunctions on a daily basis was not adequately addressed. Ironically, the top managers of the mine did not spell out how it intended to create a working environment conducive to greater levels of productivity.

Exclusion of underground work teams

The supervisors pointed out that the exclusion of team workers from participating in the course hampered effective implementation of what was learned on the course. Japie, the miner, remarked: 'It's a nice course but difficult to implement underground. They must take the whole panel – the shift-boss, the miner and the crew – for a week so that all of us are on the same page'. Jimmy, the shift-boss, echoed the same sentiments: 'I think the course would be good if we could send the people below my level on the same course. You know, I am not talking miners. I mean still lower ... obviously making the course simpler for them to understand'.

One day, after an underground shift, I bumped into Alwyn, the shift-boss with whom I went to the course, outside the mine officials' change house. We were actually in the same group when we participated in various team-building exercises. We were both pleased to see each other. He asked me jokingly if I had already started implementing what we learned on the course. When I asked him the same question, he shared Japie's and Jimmy's views: 'It is difficult to implement the course at this mine. The mindset of the people makes it difficult'. Deon, the mine captain, viewed the failure of the course to bear fruit as follows:

> The other thing is that the training is for shift-bosses and miners at this stage, and they work on one, two or three panels. They are running around. They are doing the team leaders' work. The team leaders are doing team workers' work [stope workers]. So, there is no time for communication on those points.

Juan, the mine captain, had this to say: 'It's not always possible to apply it here in the mining workplace, but it is a good thing [the course]'.

Lack of management commitment

Management support was evident in the training room. However, in the workplace, it was questionable. As Jimmy, the shift-boss, pointed out:

> At the end of the day, you know, systems can be put in place ... In the course, it has been said that this is how we want to work, but management does not follow the principles. So, how are we going to, you know. Your leaders got to lead and if they are not leading the same way, and so on and so forth ... Yah, exactly. I can apply the course to my crews and to my people, but it's got to be applied to me and it's got to be applied to my manager [mine captain], to him and so forth. If that link is not working, obviously, somewhere down the line the system is not gonna work.

The course participants were asked to make a list of the factors that affected the productivity of the mine. They were promised that mine management would look at the list and respond appropriately to organisational dysfunctions. For instance, mine management urged supervisors to adhere to work standards for safety and productivity reasons, but the reality is that this was not the case in the underground miming workplace. As stated earlier, in response to production bottlenecks such as material shortages, the shift-bosses and their charges improvised production through the informal work practice of planisa (Phakathi 2002 and 2009). The following remark made by Deon, the mine captain, illustrates the point: ‘The problems they raised there were not fixed. There is no feedback to the people on the points that were raised there. It [the course] is not working at this stage’. The senior management team also failed to follow up on and effectively address the organisational dysfunctions raised by the supervisors in the course.

Concluding remarks

This article has discussed and assessed the changing nature of frontline supervision in deep-level gold mining in the light of Great Noligwa’s supervisory training course. The supervisory course was an important step taken by mine management to improve operational efficiency through supervisors. Contrary to the notion that the role of the frontline supervisor had become redundant, the case of Great Noligwa mine indicates that the frontline supervisor is a significant player whom top managers cannot afford to marginalise in workplace change and productivity-enhancing initiatives. This finding is in line with Lowe’s (1992:165) assertion that:

> …while most analyses of the supervisor have tended to emphasise the redundancy of the role ...current changes in work organisation encourage a different view: one which sees the supervisor as performing an important managerial role in both technical and human resource areas.

The course had its positive and negative aspects. The course was good in the sense that it was informative and interactive. However, its top-down approach prevented the supervisors and their charges from making a meaningful contribution to the course. It did not make use of the subjective, day-to-day work experiences and practical knowledge of the shift-boss, stope team leaders and production crews. The sessions were dominated by management theory without much reflection on what really went on at the point of production underground – especially the significance of the informal organisation of work through the gold miners’ underground practice of planisa.

All in all, poor organisational and management systems prevented supervisors from implementing what they learned on the course effectively. For reasons discussed in this article, the course was, to a large extent, more management rhetoric than practice – an information-sharing scheme. Involving employees in the lower job categories, through team training programmes, will complement supervisory training. If the supervisory training course is to bear fruit in the workplace, the mine would need to align the current organisational and management systems with the objectives of the supervisory course.

It is important to integrate new management policies such as Great Noligwa's supervisory training and what actually happens in the work environment. This points to Pym's (1968:170-1) assertion that:

> Most management training ... emphasizes individual experience, neglects the context in which man works and therefore is based on the assumption that behavioural changes can be brought by transforming personality alone (increasing skills or developing attitudes). ... effects of training can be nullified even by ignoring merely the social aspects of organisation ... The essential purpose of management training ... is the development of the organisation. Therefore, a successful training programme may need to be one which sets off a chain-reaction of transformations in the firm (Pym 1968:172).

It is not always the fault of the frontline supervisor if a workplace change programme fails to live up to expectations. As this article has shown, a host of organisational and managerial factors, especially the behaviour and attitudes of supervisors' bosses, might prevent workplace change processes from producing the desired results. Given the past racialisation of the employment relationship and transition to democracy, the South African gold mining industry is in dire need of effective management and leadership. In South Africa, criteria for selection into management roles often reward technical ability over other abilities. While outstanding technical ability is necessary, the ability to communicate, motivate and build an organisational culture that improves safety and productivity is far more important. Management behaviour is critically important in understanding the response of frontline supervisors and their charges to new management policies. Therefore, a well structured supervisory training programme complemented by meaningful human relations and organisational changes is essential for improving productivity and safety in South African gold mines.

Notes

1. This article is drawn from the author's doctoral thesis. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for insightful and helpful comments. The author is grateful to AngloGold Ashanti management and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for granting him permission to conduct fieldwork at Great Noligwa mine. I wish to thank the shift-bosses and mine captains for sharing their working experiences in light of the mine's supervisory training course. The author is grateful for the financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. Opinions expressed in this article, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the NRF.
2. My identity was revealed to the course participants: that I was a researcher who had come to the mine to learn about their working experiences. The course participants did not mind sharing their space and time with me. They accepted me.
3. The names of the informants mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.
4. I have to say, doing this presentation was not easy. I was not sure whether to refuse or agree when my group nominated me as the spokesperson since I was not really part of them. To some extent, I had bonded with them. As stated earlier, they knew who I really was. However, my identity tended to be blurred at times as I found myself totally part and parcel of the research setting and its inhabitants (Burgess 1984). I noticed that at times the course participants regarded me as one of them. The point I am trying to make here is that when my group nominated me as spokesperson, I could not refuse. I felt that had I refused, I would have betrayed them.

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