

Organisational Culture, Productivity and Performance in the South African (S.A.) Workplace: Increasing Polarisation or Cohesion? A Case Study of Cranco Metals Ltd¹

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Introduction

Organisational culture and/or corporate culture constitute a core of the employers and managements' strategies aimed at creating an organisational and workplace environment conducive to profitable and productive running of business enterprises. This it aims to do by seeking to foster a common vision of the organisation amongst workers and employers, to create a sense of common identity, interests and belonging, and also the promotion of cooperative relations and commitments to the successful achievement of key organisational goals. As Hill and Jones (2001) pointed out:

Organizational culture is the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization. Organizational values are beliefs and ideas about what kinds of goals members of an organization should pursue and ideas about the appropriate kinds or standards of behaviour organizational members should use to achieve these goals. From organizational values develop organizational norms, guidelines or

¹ The name of this case study i.e. the factory studied is fictitious due to ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality.

expectations that prescribe appropriate kinds of behaviour by employees in particular situations and control the behaviour of organizational members towards one another (from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpo-rate_culture accessed on 3rd October 2006).

Informed by the labour process theory, especially Cressey and MacInnes's (1980) contribution, organisational culture and other related workplace strategies would thus be understood as an effort by employers and managements to overcome a historical challenge to capitalist enterprises i.e. how to convert workers' labour power into an actual productive force. This challenge is attributed to the limited nature of control that capital has over labour in the production process owing to the contradictory and dual nature of the capitalist labour process (see Cressey and MacInnes 1980). The dual nature of the capitalist labour process, Cressey and MacInnes (1980) argue (in Maller 1992), is due to the fact that 'not only does capital employ labour to create exchange values (commodities which are exchanged on the labour market), but labour also concretely employs capital in the sense that labour utilizes machinery and equipment ... to create use values'. Hence, while capital has formal ownership, in giving over the use of the means of production to labour, it needs to ensure that there are co-operative relations with labour so as to enhance the maximization of the social productivity of labour. It further follows that it is not in the best interest of capital to seek absolute coercive domination and control over labour (see Cressey & MacInnes 1980, in Maller 1992:5).

This has compelled employers and managements to move away from coercive measures towards consensual approaches and strategies in order to secure workers' co-operation and stabilise working relations. These strategies, Maller (1992) argues, can be traced to as far back as the 1920s' Elton Mayo's informal work groups in Chicago which have since then evolved in various forms such as the 1940s Scanlon plan and profit-sharing schemes. In later periods, further experimentations in industrialised countries manifested themselves through the autonomous workgroups in Britain in the 1950s; the introduction of the co-determination system in Germany in the 1960s; job-enrichment programmes in the U.S. in the 1960s; quality circles in Japan in the same period; the 1970s Germany's 'humanisation at work'

movement; and the 'employee share ownership trusts' in the US; all of which were introduced to promote and achieve greater worker motivation and involvement in productivity improvement (see Maller 1992).

SA, having strong industrial capitalist presence, has not escaped productivity and performance challenges experienced by industrialised countries. According to Maller (1994) productivity problems in SA are deeply rooted in the country's apartheid capitalist political economy that was characterised by the migrant labour system. In this system, black workers were considered as being employed on temporary, contract basis with minimal training. The system was also characterised by job reservation in which highly skilled and highly paid work was reserved for whites while black workers were excluded and marginalised; the inadequate apartheid Bantu education system for blacks which neglected vocational and general education; the racially skewed consumption market; and high tariff barriers which blocked external competition making low productivity levels a norm (Maller 1994: 4).

In response to these problems, especially at a workplace level, employers and managements of industrial enterprises developed and introduced productivity and performance improvement strategies. These took mainly the form of Japanese lean production techniques in the form of participation schemes such as green areas, quality circles, suggestion boxes, briefing sessions, and Quality of Working Life Programmes (see Joffe 1995; Von Holdt 1993). While there was some great support and enthusiasm expressed in favour of participatory strategies as appropriate for productivity and performance enhancement prior to the 1994 political democratic change (see Anstey 1990), their implementation has however not yielded much positive desired results. Amongst such enterprises are the Premier Milling Group (see Barret 1993); Jabula Foods, Volkswagen SA, and Cashbuild (see Maller 1992); Harmony Gold Mine (see Mapadimeng 1998); Ngodwana Paper Mill (see Bethlehem 1991). The general failure of participatory schemes was attributed to a wide range of factors including sharp conflicts around management's lack of good faith when introducing participatory schemes as noticed from unilateral tendencies towards decision makings and attempts to use the schemes to by-pass workers' trade unions (see Maller 1992; Barret 1993; and Mapadimeng 1998). Lack of a regulatory framework to both guide co-operation efforts between the management and workers, and

ensure that jointly made decisions are adhered to and implemented as agreed upon also contributed to the failure of the schemes. As Webster and Macun (1997) have pointed out, the absence of an institutional framework left the participatory schemes ambiguous, providing only consultative representation falling short of real co-determination. Hence, the schemes typified Pateman's *partial participation* which refers to a situation whereby two or more parties influence each other in making decisions but the final power to determine the outcome of decisions lies with one party (see Mapadimeng 1998:97). This led to lack of mutual trust and racial tensions between managements and trade unions, which in turn gave rise to workplace conflicts over discipline, racism, democracy, management prerogative and authority (see Von Holdt 1993).

Although in most cases participatory schemes in SA constituted part of the broader organisational and/or corporate culture and in some other cases were envisaged as part of efforts towards developing a particular organisational culture, as evidenced by Maller's (1994) study of the Carlton Paper plant and Koopman et al's (1987) text on Cashbuild's culture; there has however not been much greater effort to systematically study organisational culture as the main strategy aimed at improving productivity and performance. In fact, the above cited two studies are the only ones whereby such effort was made. As can be noted, both studies were conducted prior to democratic change in S.A. Maller's study was completed in January 1994 (S.A.'s first national democratic elections only took place in April 1994) and Koopman et al's was published even much earlier in 1987, suggesting a gap in this area.

This study is an attempt to move towards closing this gap and should thus be seen as well timed given that it has been conducted in 2003, almost a full decade into democracy in S.A. This is critical when considering that in the past, the failure of workplace participatory strategies could not be adequately understood without locating them within the broader context of apartheid capitalism which was mainly characterized by the absence of societal democratic values and practices. Within the workplace, this has been aptly captured by Von Holdt (2003) through the concept of *apartheid workplace regime* to describe the racial structure of power in the S.A. workplace characterised by the racial allocation of skills and power as well as racial insults and racial assaults. The question therefore is whether or not

the post-apartheid democratic environment has enhanced the effectiveness of organisational culture in terms of the latter's ability to create an environment conducive to the improvement of productivity and performance in the workplace – that is whether or not organisational culture in the post-apartheid S.A. helps in overcoming the historical social polarisation while helping to forge greater social cohesion in the workplace.

This study therefore provides a closer examination of organisational culture in the post-apartheid S.A. workplace, assessing its impact on productivity and performance. This is done through the empirical study of Cranco Metals Ltd, a base metal producing factory located approximately sixty kilometres outside of Johannesburg. Given the broad nature of the concepts of productivity and performance which not only cover a wide range of areas such as purchasing, stock-keeping, distribution, customer service, marketing and research, but also are determined by a wide range of factors such as government policy (as external factor) and certain styles of management (as internal factor) (see Maree and Godfrey 1998; Joffe 1995); this study will only concern itself with work performance and labour productivity as component of total productivity and performance. According to Macun (1995:51) central to work performance and labour productivity is the question of 'effort' of individual workers as it determines 'how much activity workers engage in, the pace and the quality of work that goes into various activities'. This, he argues, is dependent on the conditions under which it is undertaken i.e. the relationship between workers and employers and incentives given to workers for their effort in improving performance. It is therefore necessary that in examining the issue of work performance and labour productivity, attention is paid to production and working relations between both workers and management as key players in the process of work. Also to receive attention are issues such as house-keeping, levels of absenteeism, communication and worker's know-how, as well as satisfaction levels.

In the next sections, I will first provide an outline of the research methods used during the field work at the Cranco Metals factory for data gathering. This will be followed by a further outline on the factory's background and the workforce profile. Then a shift in focus will be towards the presentation, discussion and analysis of the findings arising from the field work whereby the Cranco Metal's organisational culture is outlined and

its impact on productivity and performance is examined through analysis of shop-floor attitudes and perception. The analysis also draws from other sources like the company's weekly and monthly productivity records during the period of the three month field work. Based on the analysis, some concluding remarks will be drawn. Key to this would be argument that the effectiveness of organisational culture in improving work performance and labour productivity is constrained by amongst others the neo-liberal market environment, the apartheid legacy of racial inequalities in the workplace, and authoritarian practices of line managements as well as perceived non-commitment by management to addressing inherited inequities.

Research Methods

The primary research methods used in this study are qualitative. At the factory floor, relations between production, workers and line management were investigated. This was done through in-depth interviews with both shop-floor production workers and management (both senior and junior or line management levels). In addition to several other smaller units that constitute Cranco Metals factory, there are seven large main production plants. It is from these seven production plants that I drew the sample for this study, following five days of orientation to the factory and all its plants by the Communications Manager. This gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the factory's layout and the production process, to be introduced to workers on duty and their shop-floor representatives and line managers, as well as to brief them about my study and its objectives. This turned out to be a really helpful exercise in terms of enhancing co-operation from the workforce and line management in my study. What made this even much easier was the Communication Manager (a black African male's) incredible fluency in all of the 11 South African official languages (i.e. to be precise in Tsonga, Venda, Pedi/Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa, English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Swati, and Tswana).

Given the interlinked nature of the main production plants, whereby the production process starts in the first plant in which raw material first arrives to be prepared for subsequent processing in the other plants and ends in the last plant (the seventh in the row) where the final metal product ready for the market is produced, I decided to conduct interviews in all of the

seven plants with the same number of production workers. Although the number of production workers varied depending on the number of workers per shift and per plant an average of 8 workers including team leaders and section leaders (who are basically production workers but tasked to represent workers in their sections) were interviewed. Since all the workers were exposed to more or less similar working conditions and could capably carry out work anywhere in the plant (this is attributable to both the workers' multiple skills and deep knowledge of work due to long job tenure as well as the integrated nature of the plant), I decided to use a random sampling technique to select respondents for the interviews without neglecting the methodological concern of the dangers of non-representativity. All interviews were conducted during both morning and afternoon shifts and none during night shifts. The advantage however was that all permanent production workers and some casual workers interviewed have worked in the night shifts. Thus the workers were able to reflect on night shift experiences as well and the implications thereof for performance at work. Interviews were conducted in English, Northern Sotho, and Zulu. In most cases, code-switching was used between either of the two latter African indigenous languages and the English language. Interviews with workers aimed to establish their social profile and their attitudes and perceptions of shop-floor relations; organisational culture and its role and relevance to their lives; and the culture's influence on shop-floor performance, productivity, and shop-floor relations.

Similar questions were investigated through interviews with management. Foremen for all the seven production plants were interviewed including where possible and available some supervisors (in total 2 supervisors were interviewed). Like the workers, foremen did work in both day and night shifts before. It was vital to interview all the plants' foremen as they are the main line managers with supervisors falling under their authority as subordinates. At senior management level interviews were conducted with the production manager, the human resources manager, the communications manager, and the general manager. Also interviewed were workers' representatives from all the three trade unions organising at Cranco Metals i.e. the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), a majority union whose membership is predominantly black production workers; the Mine Workers Union Solidarity (MWU) with predominantly white production

workers as members; and the United Association of South Africa (UASA), with white-collar membership. A representative from each of these unions was interviewed. Thus in total, 70 production workers, 7 foremen plus 2 supervisors, 4 middle and senior managers were interviewed making a total of 83 interviews conducted. Due to confidential and anonymity reasons, I refrained from using the correct names of the interviewees but only identified them in terms of their occupational level within the company as well as trade union and/or workers' association affiliations. Other complementary methods were also employed for data gathering. They included observations as non-participant both at the shop-floor level during the production process and also in meetings on safety and health programmes and social investment programmes. I also analysed some of the company's relevant documents such as on productivity and performance levels, grading systems and wages, safety regulations, and newsletters.

Cranco Metal's Background and Workforce Profile

First founded over five decades ago, Cranco Metals has gone through various phases influenced mainly by the changing conditions in the markets for the base metals and mining products. In response to the competitive market conditions and varying customer needs, the base metal product is now being produced in a wide range differing in terms of the size and quality and/or metal content. This followed the recent technological innovations aimed at enhancing the production process whereby Cranco Metals replaced the old furnace facility used to cast its base metals with a new modern furnace through which various metal products are cast to meet customer needs. Its production process is continuous, semi-automated, labour intensive and integrated.

Demographically, although Cranco Metals's workforce is diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, its shop-floor production workforce is however predominantly black African and male with the average age distribution between 30 and 49 (of the 60 workers interviewed; only 11 are in their late 20s and 5 are in their 50s). These workers have generally a long employment service with Cranco Metals varying between 5 and 15 years and 15 and 30 years. This rather long service with the company is however not matched by high job mobility and high wages. Most of the workers are in the lowest grades.

The literacy levels should presumably be high as the majority of the workers have both primary and secondary school education (of the 60 workers interviewed, 35 have completed grades at the primary schooling levels and 29 secondary schooling levels). Only one has completed standard ten (Grade 12) and is now pursuing university studies, and 2 have had no formal schooling at all. During interviews, the socio-linguistic background of the workers was investigated. This revealed that the majority of the workers at Cranco Metals are from rural areas of three provinces of the Republic of South Africa i.e. Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. 23 respondents said they were from the Eastern Cape and speak Xhosa, 22 are from Limpopo Province and speak Northern Sotho, Tsonga, and Venda, and 13 are from KwaZulu-Natal and speak Zulu. Only one respondent said he is from the Mpumalanga Province and speaks Swati. This linguistic diversity has however not generated tensions and conflicts amongst the workers. This could partly be attributed to the fact that most of the workers can speak more than one African indigenous language. The majority of black workers however cannot speak either English or Afrikaans well.

As the workers are mainly migrants, they view their stay in urban Gauteng as temporary and all are planning to settle at their respective rural homesteads at retirement. For their temporary stay, they reside in the nearby townships as tenants in the back rooms and/or *mikhukhu* or *iZozo* (i.e. shelters made of corrugated iron) and also in informal shack settlements within the vicinity of the factory while the remaining few stay in hired rooms at the nearby a middle class suburb residential area. Cranco Metals' management is predominantly white and is multi-layered. While the top level is comprised of only white managers, both the top and line management levels, although predominantly white, have some black presence and this is particularly so in areas of senior management such in the areas of Employment Equity, Human Resources and Communications. Of the seven production plants in which I conducted interviews and made observations, only two are headed by black line managers and the rest by whites.

The factory's General Manager acknowledges these racial disparities at management levels but mentioned that Cranco Metals is in the process of addressing the situation in line with the legislative equity requirements. He mentions that Cranco Metals has introduced a mentorship programme for junior black managers in order to prepare and equip them with the necessary

skills to enable them to take up senior positions. Arguing that Cranco Metals is committed to the Mining Charter and aims to make great strides towards achieving equity goals in the next five years, he mentioned that progress has already been made as there is already $\pm 30\%$ black representation.

Notwithstanding this proclaimed progress and commitment to equity, the management's view is however not shared by the NUM, which believes that management is in fact dragging its feet on addressing the equity question. Note, for instance here, the response by NUM's senior representative at Cranco Metals:

The management's approach to employment equity shows lack of commitment to employing black managers. This is a white place. Cranco Metals should employ black capable people from both outside and internally. I agree that Cranco Metals is trying to appoint black people into senior positions, but there is a ceiling. All four business units and other senior positions such as marketing management, procurement management, and general management are occupied by whites, and this is where crucial decisions are made. In the appointment of Closed Corporations (CCs) for sub-contracting of work, blacks are not considered.

This led to a protest action led by NUM in March 2003 against Cranco Metals' failure to comply with equity requirements as well as consult fully with the unions.

Cranco Metal's Performance Enhancement Culture (PEC)

Cranco Metals' management has set as its main goal to ensure that Cranco Metals becomes a leading global producer of affordable cost base metals and a dominant player in the base metals' markets. This goal, it aims to achieve through its high performance culture which rests on the following key principles and values: *Care; Mutual Respect; Fair Workplace Practices; Accountable Working Behaviour; and Integrity as well as Team Work Spirit, Belief in People, and Excellence*. This Performance Enhancement Culture (PEC) was developed to promote the living of these values, to achieve operational excellence and improve systems, as well as to ensure safety and

empower workers partly through regular recognition and rewards (interview with General Manager, 05-12-2003: 15h00). To promote PEC, management has embarked on a number of strategies. Amongst such strategies, is the use of the services of outside experts and consultants whose primary role is to assist in getting employees to internalise and live the guiding PEC values and principles as well as with diversity and equity management. At the time of my study, the consultant at work was a white motivational-type speaker and life strategist, Dr London².

Also used to promote PEC are industrial theatres and a so-called Wall of Fame in the Main Hall on which pictures of workers are mounted and the parent company's corporate group values are written. Notice boards, outside walls of buildings used as venues for meetings on which regular updates on productivity and performance levels are highlighted, and weekly and bi-monthly internal newsletters and/or publications are also used to promote the PEC. The internal weekly and bi-monthly newsletters and publications developed and used by Cranco Metals to promote its PEC are the *Weekly UpDate* and *Cranco News*, the latter is a quarterly publication, and both are used to inform and update the Cranco Metals community about latest developments and issues affecting them. Also used but as a complementary strategy to promote and live the PEC values is the Occupational Health and Safety Programme comprised of safety trainings; the factory-wide Safety Committee which meets regularly to discuss and address safety questions; the Occupational Health and Safety Department with staff that specialises in safety questions.

Over and above the PEC but seen as complementary, senior management developed the Business Enhancement Programme (BEP) known as *Sebenza Project* (a Zulu name for Work). According to the *Weekly UpDate* reports, the BEP or *Sebenza Project* was developed as a response to

² Please note that this is not the real name of the consultant. Once again, ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality had to be observed and the real name was thus omitted for a fictitious one. The contracting of Dr. London followed the termination of the contract with one of the acclaimed black African consultants on organisational culture and change, whom I also just call Dr. Afrika for similar ethical considerations of anonymity.

profit declines owing to extremely competitive business and market conditions, which are said to have been exacerbated by both the strengthening of the South African Rand against the U.S. dollar and the high prices of raw materials. The *Sebenza* Project is thus aimed to cut costs and improve revenues. Cranco Metals' General Manager expressed optimism about *Sebenza* while the project's implementation in 2004 may be a painful and challenging exercise (here referring to anticipated retrenchments), through everyone's co-operation, it was however seen as to be a success.

Although the PEC initiative was welcomed by everyone at Cranco Metals, management's enthusiasm about it and the BEP is however not fully shared by the majority union, the NUM, which represents mainly black production workers. This lack of enthusiasm stems from dissatisfaction with the management's approach in formulating and implementing the PEC and the BEP or *Sebenza* Project as a business enhancement strategy. When asked about the PEC, the NUM's representative and full-time shop-steward, stated that while they are not opposed to the PEC in principle, they are however unhappy with the approach used by the management. This is reflected in the differences between management and NUM over the hiring of consultants. While, according to the General Manager, both Dr. Afrika and Dr. London, were hired in their different capacities to assist Cranco Metals with diversity/ equity management and PEC-related performance management respectively, for NUM, the appointment of Dr. London shortly after Dr. Afrika was seen as a racially unfair substitution of the latter for the former. NUM also expressed concern about lack of transparency and full consultation. As a result, and to register its unhappiness, NUM embarked on industrial action in the form of after working hours protest against non-compliance with the Employment Equity Act and racism. NUM was also opposed to the BEP or *Sebenza* Project, especially its emphasis on labour cost cuts through lay-offs.

This clearly shows that while both management and NUM believe that it is essential to address the challenges of low performance facing Cranco Metals, they however differ significantly in how those challenges should be addressed, resulting in the hampering of implementation of the PEC. Poor communication and generally tense relations between management and trade unions seem to also explain these differences, which in turn further exacerbate the tension. This is confirmed by evidence arising

from interviews with both management and workers as outlined in the next section.

PEC and Impact on the Shop-floor, Performance and Productivity

Having outlined Cranco Metals' workforce and management profile and its performance enhancement strategies i.e. the PEC and BEB, the focus will now shift to the evaluation of the implementation at the shop-floor level, where these strategies are aimed to have maximum impact. It is thus necessary to examine how the Cranco Metals' management has communicated the PEC, Occupational Health and Safety Programme and *Sebenza* Project to both workers and line managers, to establish whether or not the workers and line managers are familiar with these interventions, and whether or not they have embraced and are living them or are guided by them in their daily conduct and activities. This section is therefore aimed to examine, on the basis of the findings from interviews with both workers and line managers, the impact that the PEC and its values have on shop-floor relations and work performance. In so doing, both the enhancing and hindering factors will be examined.

One area investigated through interviews with workers and line managers was that of production and working relations on the shop-floor. Both workers and line managers were asked to describe their working relationships. Interviews with shop-floor workers in all production plants of the factory revealed that the relationships with line managers are generally strained and conflict ridden. This is attributed to poor line management, racial practices and perceptions, and poor communication. Of the 60 workers interviewed, 14 described the relationships with the line managers (i.e. both the supervisors and foremen) as good and 30 described them as bad. Out of the remaining 16, 8 workers reported that while their relationship with the supervisor could be described as good, the same could however not be said of the relationship with the foreman. Similarly, the other 8 workers said their relationship with the foreman could be described as good but with the supervisor as bad.

The 14 workers who reported good relationships with their line managers would not however elaborate on reasons for their responses, but on

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the whole felt that the improved relationships with the line managers is due to the new political environment in S.A. of democracy and labour legislations and policies. Note, for instance, this response by one of the workers:

There are no problems with the foreman and the superintendent. The new laws are great. Before, a white person was a white person. The new laws help to guide relationships here at work. We respect each other.

The 30 workers who described relationships with their line managers as not being good cited racial tensions as straining the relationships on the shop-floor due to what they perceived to be racially biased treatment by foremen and poor communication. One worker's response went like this:

Whites are harsh when they speak to blacks. For instance, they would shout loudly saying that I cannot do my work properly.

The response below highlights not only racial practices inherited from the past apartheid system, but also authoritarian practices by the foreman. These strained working relationships impacted negatively on workers' morale and performance. In fact this worker felt that they perform well when the foreman is absent but as soon as he is back to work, the performance slacks down.

The foreman does not treat us well. When working, instead of appreciating and praising us, he would say to us *kom kom kom*. If he tells you something, he does not expect you to respond or ask questions. He says that if he is not around, we do not do our job and that is the reason he always follows us when we are busy working. It is not true that we are lazy. When he goes on leave for 30 days, work goes faster than when he is around. If he is around, we do not work as we are always scared. You (referring to himself and other workers) might get injured. *O sa swere mokgwa wa dipolaseng wa apartheid – maburu a dipolase ba be ba tlwaetse go sala batho morago go re ba kgone go ba gatelela* (this is a response in Sepedi

language – one of South Africa's indigenous ethnic language. In English, it could be translated like this: *He (i.e. the foreman) still behaves as in the past under apartheid – white farmers used to always be behind people just to oppress them).*

Workers are also unhappy with the method of control employed by the management in the form of the clocking system. The system uses an electronic card for clocking in when reporting to work and when leaving at the end of the shift. It is installed at the main entrance gate and in the change rooms. It records the time at which a worker arrives and leaves work. While, according to the General Manager, the system was installed with the view to protecting workers from intruders into their change rooms, the workers see it as being used to monitor and control their movements. They argue, for instance, that once they are at work, they are not allowed to visit the change room as that is considered loafing, and would lead to penalties such as wages being docked and cut. Note the responses below by one of the shopstewards:

The clocking system is used to control workers to ensure they are not going up and down while at work. It is able to tell whether you were at work or not and workers are not happy with it. It is used in the change rooms and in toilets. The longest time a worker can take in the change room is 10 minutes. If you stay longer, the foreman calls you and asks you why you have been away from work for so long. He would warn you and say in future further steps will be taken against you.

Other worker responses revealed inconsistencies between senior management and line management's approaches to worker management, and thus the failure of the latter to manage in line with the company policy and values. Note here their responses:

The foreman gives us his instructions but not as required by the company e.g. the company requires that two workers be posted there at each production point, but he instead only places one worker. That makes the job really difficult and tiring. The job itself suffers because the pressure is only on one person.

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The company has policies that guide relationships between workers and foremen, but the foremen have their own personal instructions which make us uncomfortable and unhappy as workers.

Other workers felt that relationships with line managers are constrained by the latter's lack of prompt response to their reports of faults on the production line, which they feel exposes them to health risks and work-related injuries. This is testified by the following response:

We do not work well with them (i.e. supervisors and foremen). If we report faults to them such as leakages, they would just ignore and instead tell us that they would call someone to come and fix it but that never happens. For example, there is now a problem with the forklift but nothing has been done about it as yet.

Owing to the perceived bad treatment by line managers, workers developed survival techniques as a form of covert resistance to what they perceive as harsh, unfair and racially-biased treatment by line managers. Note here this worker's response:

Foremen behave as if they own the job. We developed tactics to defend ourselves. When he approaches, we pretend to work hard. In the end we end up not working properly - just like soccer players performing poorly not because they can't perform but simply because they do not like the coach.

This suggests that the unfair, racially biased treatment by white foremen has, contrary to the spirit of commitment that the *Sebenza* Project is trying to promote, driven the workers into a situation in which they become less committed to cooperation with management to improve production and performance. This also surfaced during interviews with supervisors who complained about workers' lack of commitment at work.

As I have indicated earlier on, the breakdown in responses revealed that the remaining 16 workers interviewed were divided in half with one half (i.e. 8) reporting better relationships with foremen than with the supervisors and the other half reporting that relations with the supervisor were better

than with the foreman. Here are some of their responses:

We do not cooperate well, especially with the supervisor. He does not show us respect. When he speaks to us, it's as if he is speaking to children. The foreman is fine. Well sometimes when he gives instructions, he may sound like he is shouting at us but he is ok. The supervisor usually pretends when the foreman is around but once he is gone, he changes.

We are used to the foreman, if you do not know him; you may think he is bad. There is however a *boeremag*³ supervisor here. We clash with him but he does not have power. We ignore him. He has a bit of an apartheid problem.

Clearly, from the above findings, the overwhelming majority of workers are unhappy with their current relationships with their line managers. They attribute this poor relationships to racial bias on the part of line managers in their treatment of workers; authoritarian and unilateral practices in decision makings on work-related matters by line managers inconsistent with the top management's PEC-based approach which, although implicitly so, promotes joint-decision making; and to poor response from line managers to work-related problems reported by workers such as faults in the production process. This remains so despite the fact that this undermines performance and also exposes workers to work-related accidents and injuries. Hence persistent occurrences of minor injuries called Less Serious Injuries (LSIs), undermine the Occupational Health and Safety programme. While the *Weekly UpDate* newsletters show Cranco Metals' impressive success in achieving targets in terms of reducing and eliminating hours and days lost to injuries, they however also show that LSIs continue to occur. For instance, the Newsletters of between October 2003 and February 2004 show that a

³ This is a term normally used to refer to rightwing white Afrikaners who are considered to be racist and are opposed to the democratic dispensation of black majority rule. They have been supportive of the apartheid system and were resistant to democratic change in South Africa.

total of 22 LSIs occurred over this period. In fact, in my reading of these Newsletters, there has not been a week without a LSI.

Also constraining production relations is poor communication owing to the language factor. It was discovered that, while most black workers can speak more than one African language, they however lack proficiency in English and Afrikaans. Similarly, white managers both at the senior and line management levels, can only speak either English and/or Afrikaans but none of the African languages. The result here is that the two parties find it difficult to communicate effectively on work related matters leading to not only delays in action – therefore poor work performance – but also to tensions and conflicts due to misunderstandings. This could be seen from responses of some of the white line managers, in which they express frustration with the situation. Note, for instance, the following responses:

Performance is not satisfactory. This is not only due to engineering-related problems but also a problem of communication. We (i.e. white line managers) do not understand the culture and problems of our colleagues (referring to black workers). English is incomprehensible to black workers. This results in soft issues that could be easily resolved turning into hard issues. You say something and they would interpret it in a different way. It creates lots of misunderstanding which cause tensions and divisions. Because of all these, the next thing the union is on your doorstep. We have excellent people and even section leaders but Cranco Metals is not using their full potential. People on the lower level (i.e. supervisors and other foremen) do not recognise that potential.

When giving instructions, I do so with hand signals to show workers what to do and how to do it. I have been here at Cranco Metals for many years; I have now learned how to communicate through hand signs with workers which really helps. Someone who cannot speak English, Afrikaans or *fanakalo*, would normally use hands to communicate.

This problem of poor communication is also evident in workers' responses to the question that sought to establish their familiarity with BEP or *Sebenza*

Project and their perceptions thereof. While some workers showed understanding of the Project and its objectives, the majority however revealed either total ignorance or partial understanding. Of the 60 workers interviewed, 19 showed a good knowledge and clear understanding of the BEP or *Sebenza* Project, 16 showed no knowledge nor understanding thereof, and 25 have a vague idea and understanding of the Project, and are concerned that it would result in retrenchments.

Those with knowledge and clear understanding of the BEP or *Sebenza* Project made responses such as this when asked about it:

I heard about it. Management sent out BEP people throughout the plant to tell us about it. They said that Cranco Metals is not doing well financially due to the Rand/Dollar exchange. They said we as workers should bring forth ideas and suggestions on how to improve production and performance to enable Cranco Metals to realise its revenue increase target.

Those ignorant of the BEP or *Sebenza* Project made the following responses:

I know nothing about it. They never came to us to explain about it. We only hear about it.

I do not know about it. I just know about a certain school in the township called *sebenza*.

I just know about in the township when they distribute pamphlets saying *abantu ba sebenze* (i.e. *people should work hard*) but I never heard of it here at work.

Lack of clear understanding and knowledge of the *Sebenza* or BEP Project amongst most of the workers is revealed in the following responses which signal limited communication:

Sebenza means work. We heard about it from the superintendent. It came because of the need to retrench. If a worker is working, they monitor him. To us, it means '*indoda ifanele sebenze, uma inga*

sebenze, I ya hamba’ (This is a switch to IsiZulu language which when translated to English would read like this ‘Each and every man should work. Failure to do so, would lead to retrenchment or dismissal’). Management does not say so to us, but that’s how we as workers interpret it.

We were told about it at the meeting, but we do not know how it works. *Umlunku* (the Zulu word for the white person) told us about it and how Cranco is performing in terms of the Rand/Dollar exchange rate and then he urged us to work hard. As workers, we told them we can’t because the company employs casuals or contract workers. According to us, production is fine.

Strangely, these workers’ responses stand in contrast to senior management’s view that prior to the introduction of the *Sebenza* Project, there was an extensive process of consultation with workers. According to the General Manager, all the trade unions organising at Cranco Metals were consulted for two weeks and that there were road shows whereby each and every employee was invited and given an opportunity in his/her own language to discuss and ask questions. He further argues that a memo written in three languages outlining reasons for the implementation of the project was distributed to all. He also argues that the *Weekly UpDate* newsletters, morning meetings, and a storyboard were used to publicise the Project, helping to reach up to ±80% of the workforce.

The responses on shop-floor relationships are consistent with those on the question that sought to explore the extent to which Cranco Metals’ values, especially the Caring Value, are lived and practised on the shop-floor and the effect thereof on production relations and work performance. Of the 60 workers interviewed, only 16 felt that Cranco Metals cares about their (workers) welfare and 24 felt that it does not care. The remaining 20 workers agreed but had some reservations.

Those who felt that Cranco Metals cares for workers cited amongst others the management’s supply of workers with safety clothes, milk for those working in the plant where there is high concentration of acids, food for overtime workers, tea, first aid medical services, and safety courses as signs that show that Cranco Metals does indeed care for its workers. This

can be seen in the following responses:

Cranco Metals does care for its workers because they provide us with safety clothes and equipment to prevent us from getting injuries.

Yes it does care. There are courses on safety provided to workers. We also get regular medical check-ups at the clinic.

On the other hand, those who felt that Cranco Metals does not care for workers cited low wages; fears of being retrenched, management's failure to provide transport; racism; and non-recognition of worker's value, experience, input and skills by line management. Note here this response by one of the worker respondents:

According to policies written on paper, yes, but in practice no. There is no implementation. There are so many examples that show lack of care for workers. For instance, those working shifts that end at 10pm have to organise their own transport. What matters to the management is that you pitch up to work on time. They don't care whether you may get killed by *tsotsis*⁴ or not. Cranco Metals does not care. We do not have time to rest. We work throughout, we only get about five days off. When there are family functions, you can't make it. Days off are not enough. I cannot request for a permission because, let's say a relative passes away, it's difficult because when you come back, they will demand that you produce a death certificate, which creates problems. Maybe *ka sekgowa but ka setso it is impossible* (this is a code switch from Sepedi to English – when translated into English it would read like this: 'maybe in Western culture it is possible to ask for death certificate but in African culture it is not'). If you fail to produce a death certificate, they would not pay you for days that you were absent from work.

⁴ Tsotsi is an indigenous Sotho language word referring to someone who commits crimes such as muggings or robbing.

The workers who felt that Cranco Metals cares for workers but expressed some reservations had this to say:

Yes, Cranco Metals care about workers but it pays low wages.

Yes and no. The General Manager says it cares and says we should always wear safety clothes to prevent work-related injuries but on the shop-floor that is not the case because we get charged by line managers who always fill our names in on the pink form⁵.

The company cares because they give us a half day training on safety to ensure that we are safe at work. But we hear that Cranco seeks to retrench in January next year. This does not show it cares. We end up working unfreely and could even get injured.

Analysis of Findings

The above discussion was meant to evaluate and establish the extent to which the PEC values and other initiatives by senior management aimed to enhance productivity and performance at Cranco Metals have penetrated the shop-floor level, and influenced production relations as well as performance of work. In seeking to improve performance at work, the PEC strategy promotes collective team spirit and co-operative working relations. Shop-floor relations were thus examined to determine the degree of the impact of these values. The findings presented above suggest that the virtues and values promoted in the PEC have had both a limited desirable impact as well as a contradictory impact on the shop-floor relations. Shop-floor production relations are strained by racial tensions due to what is perceived as racially biased treatment of black workers by white line managers.

Also straining shop-floor production relations are authoritarian, unilateral practices by line managers on decision makings on work related

⁵ A pink form is a charge sheet form that the foremen use to record all incidents that occur on the shop-floor during work which may require further attention by the Human Resources Office for action to be taken such as disciplinary measures or warnings being issued to identified workers.

matters. The majority of the workers interviewed are unhappy about line managers would not allow them to have an input in decisions over work related matters, and feel that this not only undermines their intelligence and knowledge of work but also shows disrespect for them. They also complain of poor, delayed responses from line managers to reported faults on the production process such as gas leakages and machine break downs, which in turn not only undermines work performance but also puts their lives at risk of sustaining injuries and falling into accidents. Shop-floor relations are further strained by the repressive system of control i.e. the clocking system that results in wages being docked and restrictions imposed on worker's movements. These strained production relations, together with the workers' reaction through output restriction i.e. reduced commitment to working hard in order to cope with harsh treatment by line managers, not only undermine the PEC values but also impact negatively on production and work performance. This is evidenced in the *Weekly UpDate* in-house publications which reveal consistent failure to realize production targets. Between October 2003 and February 2004, Cranco Metals fell short to achieve its production target of 57 167, 1 tons of base metals by 4 396.1 tons. Only 52 771, 0 tons was achieved. It was noted that, contrary to the objectives set out by the Occupational Health and Safety programme of eliminating injuries at work, less serious injuries remain a common occurrence with consequences for work performance.

Strained shop-floor relations are compounded by the language factor, which impacts negatively on communication. While the majority of black workers are non-proficient in either English or Afrikaans, both of which languages are spoken by management, with English being used for formal communication; the predominantly white management, especially line managers, cannot speak any of the indigenous African languages. The result is that while communication amongst the workers is smooth since most can speak more than one African language, the same cannot be said about communication between themselves and management. This fuels the existing tensions between white line managers and black workers by creating too many misunderstandings and tensions. As evidence shows, effective communication between white line managers and black workers was hampered by the inability of both groups to speak each other's language. This has in fact led to social distance on the shop-floor, the escalation of

racial perceptions and attitudes, tensions and disputes, and mistrust. This, together with the unilateral practices, resulted in the 'us' and 'them' scenario which undermines team spirit and team work promoted by PEC. Language also hampers the effective implementation and living of the PEC values. As one of the foremen pointed out, *soft issues* are easily turned into *hard issues* due to poor language communication. This, as was noted, also tends to be time consuming and negatively impacts on production, performance and work process. Poor communication between management and workers became evident when the majority of worker respondents either showed complete ignorance or a limited knowledge and/or understanding of the management-initiated BEP or *Sebenza* Project. Although workers were generally willing to co-operate with management to ensure that Cranco Metals remains a viable and profitable company, notwithstanding their disapproval of the dominant management style, especially the line managers', they are however deeply concerned and discouraged by the 'rumours' that the Project aims at cutting down costs by laying off some of them. This depleted morale amongst the workers and created fear, uncertainty and anger that it is simply aimed to intensify exploitation and further marginalisation of workers and shows that management does not appreciate their effort and commitment to ensuring that Cranco Metals remains viable and profitable.

Thus, what *Sebenza* Project seems to have been able to achieve is the creation of further distance and division between workers and management as well as fuelling of the feelings of alienation amongst workers rather than helping to forge a common shared vision as well as a sense of collective identity, team spirit and team effort. This division and alienation is clearly discernable from workers' responses in which there is a strong sense of an 'us' and 'them' feeling such as, in their reference to the *Sebenza* Project, they use phrases such as 'They...' and 'Their *Sebenza* ...', clearly distancing themselves. Owing to this and the unfair treatment that workers are receiving from line managers, the majority felt that Cranco Metals does not care about their wellbeing and welfare contrary to the PEC's caring values. Workers developed survival tactics and resorted to collective resistance to management's authoritarianism.

What the *Sebenza* Project (a cost-reduction strategy at Cranco Metals) reveals is the negative effect that the broader neo-liberal

macroeconomic framework and its principles are having on the workplace, and in particular on workers - managements relationships as well as on productivity and performance improvement strategies. This confirms Von Holdt and Webster's (2005) observation, based on case studies-based evidence, that in the post-apartheid period, strategies embarked upon by the state and companies are characterised by reduced autonomy due to the pressures exerted by competitive, cost-conscious and quality-conscious global market forces. This, they argue, has been facilitated by the state through trade liberalisation, fiscal conservatism, and state assets restructuring through privatisation (Von Holdt and Webster 2005: 7). The consequential effect of this has been increased adversarialism between trade unions as working class representatives, business, and state. Workers' resistance to these market-driven restructuring processes has taken the form of annual nation-wide protests and marches. An example of these protest marches was the May 10, 2000 national strike led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) at which urgent steps were called for in order to proactively resolve the unemployment crisis in S.A. – the results of retrenchments. During this march, the following demands were tabled: making retrenchments a mandatory issue for negotiations; protection of workers in the event of liquidation; halting the unilateral restructuring of government assets; an end to accelerated reduction of trade tariffs; and a lack of job creation (see *The Star* 11 May 2000:1 & 5). Cosatu's president, Willie Madisha, also called for a halt to capital flight which he saw as being encouraged by the South African Chamber of Business's (Sacob's) affiliates which he claimed had invested R80 billion outside S.A. between 1994 and 1998 (*The Star Business Report* 11 May 2000:1). Cosatu's chairperson is reported to have described this action as not a strike but 'a war against poverty and joblessness' and the South African Communist Party's (SACP's) media officer viewed the action as 'a conscious offensive against capitalism'. This evidence suggests that the gap between employers and trade unions remains wide and is thus likely to remain a major obstacle to workplace co-operation and possibilities of joint decision makings on issues of common interest.

This environment constitutes an obstacle to management's ability to recognise and take advantage of opportunities presented by the post-apartheid democratic dispensation. The evidence presented from the findings

above based on the case of Cranco Metals supports this observation as management has failed to recognise and utilise opportunities to improve relations with workers to promote co-operation, especially around issues of common interest such as productivity and performance enhancement. Amongst such opportunities, which have so far not been fully exploited, is a clear evidence of a changed attitude on the part of the historically militant black workers organised by NUM from adversarialism to the expressed willingness and desire, in line with the new democratic dispensation, to co-operate with management and make South Africa a winning nation. This is consistent with Von Holdt's (2003) earlier findings that led him to argue that workers and unions in S.A. are willing to move away from the culture of resistance towards the culture of productivity. This changed attitude and culture is also necessitated by workers' material and socio-psychological needs. Workers stated that, in spite of the harsh treatment and unpleasant working conditions, they were happy to work at Cranco Metals as it not only enables them to earn a living for themselves and their families, but also keeps them busy and away from boredom. As was noticed, most workers are in their 30s and 40s and are married, thus implying that they have family responsibilities as bread winners. This suggests that there already exists, amongst these workers the zeal and commitment to work, which needs to be built upon and be further expanded to enhance the creation and promotion of a common vision and objective to strive to make Cranco Metals a viable and profitable company.

Another opportunity lies in workers' long tenure at Cranco Metals, which suggests that the bulky number of the workforce is tacitly skilled and highly experienced. This constitutes a skills capacity which has evidently not been fully and creatively utilised. This is a historical problem in S.A. whereby in the past black workers and their tacit skills did not receive any recognition from employers and managements owing to racially stereotyped attitudes held towards black people. Blacks being considered indolent, lazy, incompetent, unworthy, incapable of working with abstract concepts or numbers, colour-blind (meaning that they cannot draw distinctions between different colours), unintelligent, hidebound by culture and so forth (see Silberbauer 1968 and Becker 1974 in Webster 1976; Maller 1994; and Cock and Bernstein 1998). Wilson and Klaaste (1996) refers to this generalised situation with the fundamental maxim of apartheid which says 'whites are

better and blacks are backward'. This suggests that the past continues to impact on the present and this legacy that needs to be addressed in the interests of the whole country. The present skills capacity can also not be fully tapped without addressing workers' concerns such as remaining in the same grade for far too long without being adequately rewarded with promotions, improved remuneration, and other incentives such as profit-sharing schemes. This, Macun (1995) argues, is necessary if workers' effort is to be fully realised. Although, and as evidenced in the *Weekly UpDate*, the management regularly expresses recognition of workers who are showing commitment to upholding the Cranco Metals' PEC and Occupational Health and Safety values and principles through their actions; this is clearly inadequate to motivate workers without material incentives and better treatment by line management. Furthermore, the Cranco Metals' case suggests a need for senior management to monitor the situation on a daily basis to ensure that line managers do not wield unilateral powers and control over decision makings around work-related matters. This could be complemented with training for line managers to ensure that they are adequately equipped with the relevant people management skills.

At Cranco Metals, the above opportunities could however be offset by some potential constraints and challenges such as the apparent lack of co-operation between top management and NUM due to, amongst others, the union's view and feeling that management is not fully committed to equity. This perception runs in contrast with management's view that Cranco Metals has made headway towards achieving equity targets. These different views on the equity question has in fact become the matter of dispute between NUM and management, and generated tensions and conflicts, which are likely to continue to occur and further strain labour relations as well as hampering performance and productivity improvement efforts.

The BEP, rather than securing workers' co-operation and commitment, only served to aggravate the situation by further alienating them through creating uncertainty, instilling fear of losing their jobs, and aggravating tensions.

Conclusion

The organisational culture at Cranco Metals, the PEC, has only had a partial desired impact on production relations, productivity and work performance.

This is attributable to a complex web of factors including authoritarian, racially biased line management practices; the repressive clocking system of control which leads to wages being docked and restrictions being imposed on workers movements during working hours; poor communication due to language constraints; and low wages as well as lack of job mobility as workers stay in the same grade for extended periods of time. The perceived lack of commitment on the part of senior management to genuinely address equity problems for redress of past inequities also serves as a constraint. The past thus continues to have a negative impact on the present. The overall impact has been the straining of working relations, low motivation and job satisfaction, reluctance on the part of generally de-motivated and disgruntled shop-floor workers to put effort into work for improved performance and productivity; persistent adversarial attitudes; and a growing distance between the management and shop-floor workers. The situation is aggravated by the neo-liberal cost-reduction environment that promotes management strategies such as the *Sebenza* Project. The latter project at Cranco Metals fuelled adversarial attitudes and feelings of mistrust as workers felt increasingly insecure due to threats of retrenchments. The result has been the management's failure to recognise and exploit opportunities available for improving shop-floor relations and work performance as was evidenced by failure to realise production targets and eliminate the work related injuries. It is clear that the ability of strategies anchored in the organisational culture aiming at improving work performance and productivity within S.A. enterprises to overcome the historical capitalist challenge of converting workers' labour power into an actual productive force, are inhibited by a combination of a global neo-liberal capitalist environment and the inherited legacy of apartheid capitalism, especially as it still manifests on the shop-floor. Thus, workplace relations are characterised mainly by greater polarisation rather than social cohesion, constraining efforts to work jointly on matters of common interest for mutual benefits. This remains so despite the new democratic environment in S.A. and the opportunities that it presents for genuine transformation of workplace relations and for joint worker-management strategies.

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