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**COMPETENCIES TO INCREASE THE  
EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LABOUR  
RELATIONS OFFICER**

***P.A. MAHARAJ***

***2005***

**COMPETENCIES TO INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LABOUR  
RELATIONS OFFICER**

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***Dedicated to:***

**My late grandmother  
My late dad  
My mum and my brothers  
My wife and,  
children, Lekrisha and Udhav.**

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*Paresh Maharaj*  
*October 2005*  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the nineties, the new political dispensation in South Africa ushered in an era where power and relationship structures of government would be people centered. Section 23 of the Constitution provides for fair labour practices, and subsequent employment laws gives effect to these constitutional rights. Laws introduced new structures and procedures that required greater cooperation. This required a change in mental models, while transcending past unfair labour practices and moving towards more harmonious relationships.

Labour Relations is a relatively closed system, because the rule of law is specific about the outcome of a particular action. The Labour Relations Officer is only required to mechanically apply the legislation and policies when providing guidance and support in the organisation. The success of the Labour Relations Officer may be measured by the degree to which they make themselves redundant; that is the extent to which policies, structures, systems and processes instituted and the advice given, allow other managers and supervisors to manage their people on their own. While the transactional role and competencies for Human Resources practice are easy to define, the substantive issues like labour relations are less clear and there is no consistency in the manner in which labour relations is structured, practiced and managed.

Prior to the new employment laws, government departments operated on a staff rotation system. Employees were placed in labour relations through the rotation and placement exercise. As a result Labour Relations was staffed with administrators without the appropriate qualifications, skills and experience. Labour Relations is located within the Human Resources Section in the Government Departments in KwaZulu Natal. At the commencement of this study I was employed by the Provincial Department of Housing as an Assistant Manager. The employer and employee relationship was poor, and this was evident by the number of grievances and disputes. Advice was not provided timeously by Labour Relations and advice was also not accepted by

management, thereby resulting in disputes. Unions complained that they were not consulted on matters of mutual interest and Labour Relations was accused of being rigid around employment issues. Labour Relations Officials were also viewed as being “partial” because they actively participated in the discipline and arbitration process. The Department of Housing fell under the jurisdiction of the General Public Service Sectoral Bargaining Council, and even collective bargaining was entrenched in the “*us and them*” mentality. Issues for negotiation were on the agenda for months as the parties were not willing to compromise.

The purpose of this study is to explore the emerging set of competencies for Labour Relations Officers operating within the General Public Service Sectoral Bargaining Chamber in KwaZulu-Natal. Competencies refer to the set of knowledge, skills, abilities and behavior. This qualitative study was undertaken through conversation interviews with Labour Relations Officers, employees and unionists that operate within the jurisdiction of the Bargaining Chamber. The intention of this study is to add value to the practice of labour relations, by assisting Labour Relations Officers to re-invent themselves as the champions of transformation. Furthermore this research would be of value to labour relation’s and Human Resource Management staff and students.

***NOTE:***

***1.*** For the purpose of this study the title of Labour Relations Officer and Labour Relations Practitioner are taken to mean the same thing.

***2.*** Reference to the Labour Relations Officer in this study is in the masculine.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND**

Change requires transformational skills. This is the ability to shape a vision of the future, mobilize the employees behind the vision and guide the different systems towards achievement of the vision. The new political dispensation in South Africa introduced change, and the parameters within which the state, employer and employees as actors within the labour market should conduct themselves. This chapter concentrates on the relationship between the employer and employees and will seek to clarify the meaning of the term labour relations, industrial relations and competencies.

### **1.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

In order to obtain an understanding of what is implied by the terms competencies and labour relations the following definitions needs considering:

*Competencies* refer to the set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviours that enable a person to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function in such a way that it meets or exceeds the standards expected according to *Richy [2001:1]*

It is a state of being qualified to perform a function or job.

*Nel and Rooyen [1989:18]* believe labour relations include the relationship and interaction between workers and management, the structure designed to formalise the relationship, and the systems created to support the interaction. Labour Relations is one

of the activities of Human Resource management.

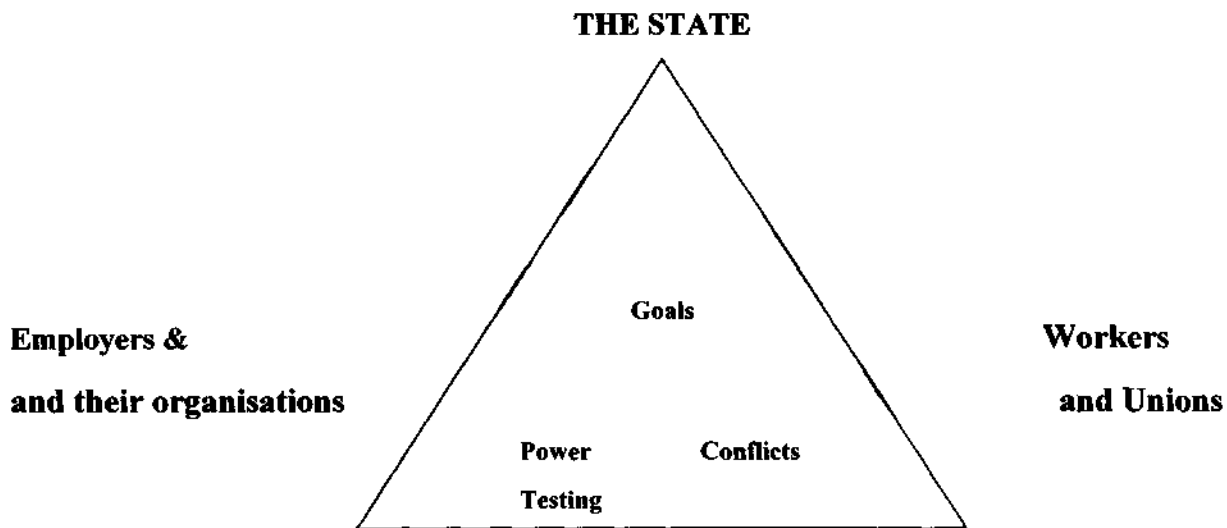
*Salmon [1987:24]* defines industrial relations as a specialist area of organisational management and study, which is concerned, with a particular set of phenomena associated with regulating the human activity of employment.

*“Labour relations refer to the relationships between people who work and those for whom they work” [Bendix 2001:3].* According to *[Bendix 2001: 4]* labour relations may also be described as encompassing a study of Relationships, Work situations, Problems and issues of modern industrialised and post industrialised society, Processes, Structures, Institutions and Regulations.

Labour relations is about interactions and although conflict may exist in this interaction it is actually symbiotic. In essence, the interdependence between the parties to the employment relationship ensures mutual realisation of respective aspirations, whether work or non-work related. The purpose of labour relations can therefore be viewed as the creation and promotion of harmonious working environment through regulation of the employment relationship. Labour relations is tripartite in nature and deals with various interactions between the three core players namely employees [or collectives of employees], employer [and employer organisations], and the state. The state plays a dominant role as an employer and lawmaker.

It is also imperative to deal with the confusion regarding the distinction between the term “industrial relationship” and “labour relationship.” *Bendix [2001: 3]* contends that no such distinction should be made and that both these terms be used interchangeably.

The parties to the labour relationship are depicted in the **figure 1**.



ADAPTED FROM M.FINNERMORE & R.VAN DER MERWE 1994

**Figure 1**

As can be observed in Figure 1 the state is represented at the top of the triangle and plays the dominant role in legislating, creating conflict resolution structures and is also the largest employer in South Africa.

### **1.3 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE**

During the nineties the new political dispensation in South Africa ushered in an era of change. There were important legislative changes that impacted in the way the state, employers and workers engaged in the labour relations field. The Labour Relations Act of 1995 eliminated discrimination and introduced mandatory rights for the workers. Disputes were moved from the courts to structures that were accessible and less adversarial in nature. An important achievement during this period was the introduction

of an independent dispute resolution structure like the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) and the establishment of Bargaining Councils and Chambers for the different sectors of the Public Service.

The Bargaining Councils and Bargaining Chambers for the different sectors in the Public Service were easily accessible and were accredited to deal with dispute resolution. The legislation also placed a burden on employers for consultation and joint decision-making thereby requiring a fundamental change in the manner in which this employment relationship was dealt with. These developments required a new approach to labour relations.

According to *Cuming [1994: 19]* the labour relations specialist like the legal officer or work-study officer offer an expert advisory service to line managers to help them perform their jobs. These officials work with their line colleagues through ideas relying mainly on persuasion. These new changes required new skills and behavioural change in order to be persuasive and embrace the new approach to employment relations. Labour relations in the General Public Service sector in the Province were located as a personnel service and not ready to deal with the issues introduced by the series of labour legislation after 1994. Disputes increased and collective bargaining issues in the chamber were on the agenda for months as parties failed to find compromises. Advice by the Labour Relations Officer was not relevant and also not readily accepted. The Labour Relations Officer was also accused of being impartial, as they actively participated in the discipline process.

The Labour Relations Officer would advise and support an employee on the one day, and the following day may lead evidence against the employee in a dispute. This breaks down the trust and employees become reluctant in seeking advice and support from the labour relations unit in general. The appointment of labour relations personnel with appropriate

competencies or their retraining will contribute to the effective management of labour relations. It is therefore the objective of this study to explore the emerging competencies necessary to increase the professional effectiveness of the Labour Relations Officer.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research was exploratory in nature and data was collected through qualitative research conversations. Structured and unstructured questions were used to establish the experiences of the Labour Relations Officials, employees and unionists. Contact interviews and telephonic interviews were conducted and the study was confined to the departments and unions that operate under the auspices of the General Public Service Sectoral Bargaining Chamber. Conversations were appropriate because they occurred in natural settings after collective bargaining sessions and other labour forum meetings. All the participants to these Chambers were familiar with each other and greater cooperation was possible. It was also easier to go back to the participants and continue the conversation if further clarity was required. Furthermore the dialogue was not restricted by time and the interviewer was in control. Conversations provided first hand experience of human behaviour, and understanding of why things were the way they were, and why people acted in the ways they did.

Labour Relations was viewed from a systems perspective, as it is a holistic approach that emphasizes the connections between issues and components in the complex situation. A systems approach will assist to foster a multiple perspective approach to complexity and assumes that insights and ways of improving situations will be generated by facilitating stakeholders and participants to shift their established way of thinking about the problem situation.

## **1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

English was the medium used in the study, and this was not the first language of all the interviewees. The researcher knew the people interviewed and it could have limited or restricted their responses. Furthermore interviewees may have felt that when they expressly supported a particular competency, they would be supporting a process of enriching their own needs and desires in the job.

## **1.6 ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTERS**

*Chapter 2* deals with the theoretical framework and attention is paid to the systems theory to provide an understanding of the relationship between the labour relations system in the Public Service and the interaction with the other sub systems. The various approaches to labour relations are reviewed as this will assist in understanding the labour relations system.

*In chapter 3* the role of the Labour Relation Officer is constructed in relation to ethical and moral considerations. “Unfortunately little attention is paid to a system of ethics as a regulator of the labour relationship and hence the need for a ethical framework to conduct labour relations” [Bendix 2001:18]. The chapter also deals with the Labour Relations Officer as a leader and leadership models and the foundations of leadership is explored.

*In chapter 4* the functions of the Labour Relations Officer is looked at in relation to the labour relations system while the research methodology and data collection methods are covered in *chapter 5*. *Chapter 6* deals with the findings of the research and contains

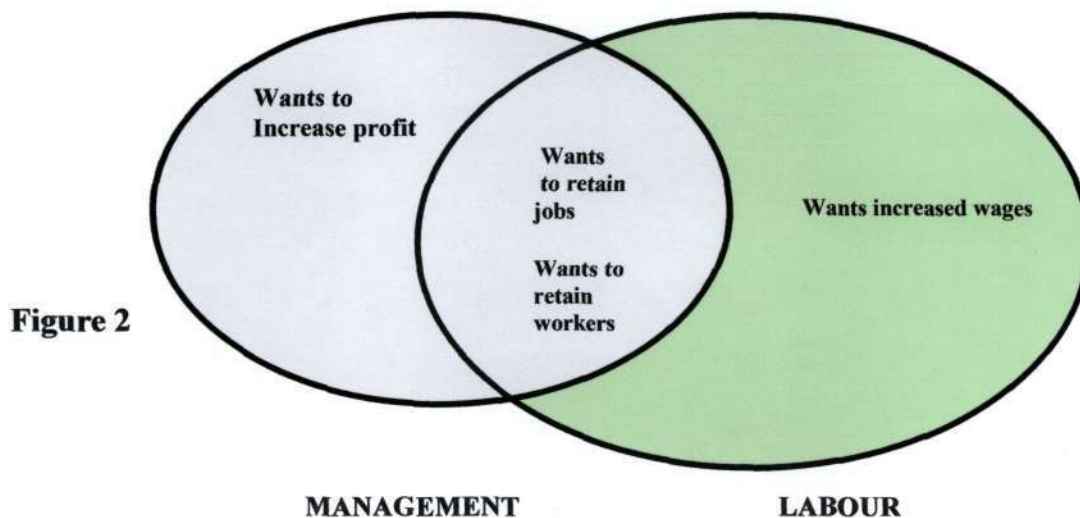


reflections that are also related to the literature review. *Chapter 7* covers the interpretations and provides recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 BACKGROUND

The primary partners in the labour relations scenario are management, labour and the state. With the introduction of new employment laws the state is increasingly fulfilling a master and servant function. In the master role, the state legislates employs and creates and funds external dispute resolution mechanisms. The state plays the servants role when it renders services like health and welfare. The concern is the point at which management and labour meet each other and it is at this point that is critical to both parties in that mutually acceptable goals are achieved for a good relationship to exist. The two parties are therefore interdependent but unfortunately often having opposing objectives. This is illustrated in **figure 2**.



\* ADAPTED FROM S. BENDIX p. 19

Viewed from a systems perspective, the two circles in the figure represent the respective boundaries with the goals or interests of the management and labour system respectively. The management system wants to increase profit while the system represented by labour desires to increase wages. Furthermore the activities of one part affect the other part, but at the point of common interest there is also turbulence. However both these systems interact with the environment and are influenced by it and this will be explored later.

During times of economic boom where the company does well, this may result in better wages, and when the company performs poorly, it may not be able to grant wage increases and this leads to turbulence. It is the ultimate aim of labour relations to maximise the overlapping area by encouraging new approaches for improving on the knowledge that already exists.

## **2.2 LABOUR RELATIONS AS A HUMAN RELATIONSHIP**

Labour Relations deals predominantly with people, because of their involvement in the work situation, workers get placed in a specific relationship with fellow employees and the employer. According to *Bendix [2001: 4]* the relationship is a human one and therefore contains elements common to all other relationships such as friendship, business partnerships, social, religious and political liaisons.

Like all other relationships the labour relationship will be nurtured and developed by mutuality of interest, understanding, trust, support, shared goals and values. The relationship will not be sustained if any of these elements falter.

## **2.3 UNIQUENESS OF THE RELATIONSHIP**

Just as the institution of marriage is unique, in that it involves two persons committing to each other, so to is the labour relationship with its unique characteristics and problems. According to *Bendix [2001:7]* the relationship arises from the need for economic activity from within the society and from man's need to work and earn a living. The uniqueness of this relationship is found in the societal and individual importance of the relationship, conflicting attitudes of the parties involved and the depersonalized relationship. Human beings derive their identity from the type of economic activity they are engaged in, and who you are generally depends on what you do.

Employees take on a job and enter a relationship to fulfill personal needs and from the beginning there is no sense of partnership and mutual commitment as found in other types of human relationships. This is because the power levels between employer and employee are not the same. This relationship sours if there is uneven distribution of wealth, lack of trust and respect and other unfair practices. However this may not be always unfair but employees perceive this to be unfair.

Likewise the employer has no personal interest in this relationship and is not interested in the individuality of the worker as the worker is part of a replaceable labour force. Although debatable, employers are often of the view that no worker is indispensable.

## **2.4 APPROACHES TO THE LABOUR RELATIONSHIP**

Labour relations theory identifies three approaches to the labour relationship. On a macro - level the approach adopted within a particular system will depend on the dominant sociopolitical economic orientation. At a micro - level, the parties will naturally have to adapt to the approach on which the system is based although for themselves, the individual

parties may prefer a different approach.

#### **2.4.1 UNITARY APPROACH**

This approach has its origins in classical liberalism and is individualist in nature and does not recognize collective action. According to *Bendix [2001: 21]*, workers have contracted their labour to ensure an income while the aim of the organisation is to gain a profit. Everyone in the organisation should therefore share the same value, support the free enterprise, respect authority and perform their allotted duties diligently and loyally. In this approach there is no need to question the employers or their managers, as they are there to manage, and the employees to work.

This approach is paternalistic because individual efforts are rewarded and lack of effort punished but the employer generally 'cares' for his employees. Because of its unitary goal, the approach negates the necessity to recognise a conflict of interest between the parties. Those conflicts that arise are attributed to interpersonal friction or to troublemakers.

There is therefore a general antipathy to trade unionism as this is viewed as unnecessary, and as competing with management for the loyalty of employees and engendering mistrust between the parties. With the promotion of collectivity and the rise of trade unionism in the twentieth century this approach has been gradually eroded.

All sectors in the South African labour market have also moved away from this approach since the nineties. However the trade unions federations are also concerned about dwindling membership numbers and worker loyalty in general. The dwindling membership numbers have been brought about by retrenchments and antipathy towards unions by

workers in general.

#### **2.4.2 RADICAL APPROACH**

This approach holds that the capitalist economic system establishes political and legal structures, which favour the employer, whose power is always greater than that of the employee, the latter being continually, exploited. Conflict is inherent to the socio-economic system and not only to the relationship per se. Consequently, structures established within the system will not resolve the conflict, but merely perpetuate it.

While it is essential to conscientise the working class, trade unionism cannot achieve equality within the system. Trade unions through collective bargaining can at best provide challenges to employers while working on the political front towards the overthrow of the capitalist system, since, only if it occurs, can an equitable dispensation be achieved.

Unions often promote the Radical approach although not in its extreme form. The extreme form or radical Marxism is not in favour since the demise of communism in Europe. It is interesting to note that the South African Communist party does not advocate this approach any longer and is generally silent on the more liberal policies of its alliance partners namely the African National Congress and the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

#### **2.4.3 PLURALISM**

With the rise of trade unionism and the liberal democratic ideal, the Pluralist approach was proposed as the best means of accommodating the interest of the working class within the capitalist economic system. It rests on the conflict model of society, which proposes that,

in order to prevent dominant groups from gaining absolute control and to contain conflict within manageable limits, power should be more widely distributed. Pluralism seeks to reform or manage capitalism unlike the Radical approach, which seeks to abolish capitalism. Pluralism when applied to the labour relationship, accepts that there will always be conflict between employers and employees. There is the assumption that the inherent power of the employer can be balanced by the power of the union and conflict can be contained by orderly collective bargaining.

Because there is a common interest, some form of compromise will be reached. In this pluralist mode the parties are essentially positional and view each other as adversaries or on opposing ends. Power underlies the relationship but conflict is accepted as the norm. This approach is dominant in the South African industrial relations system since we have come to bear the fruits of innovation and development through opportunities brought about by conflict.

An interesting development in South Africa that takes pluralism further, and gives effect to it is the launch of **The National Economic Development and Labour Forum (NEDLAC)** in February 1996. It is important to look at the role being played by Nedlac.

## **2.5 NEDLAC**

As a statutory government funded body, Nedlac seeks to negotiate and reach consensus on socio economic issues. There are four participants namely organized labour [represented by 3 federations - Cosatu, Nactu & Fedusa], organised business and the community [represented by 5 sectors namely, civics, women, youth, disabled & rural people]. The government representatives are appointed by the President, and come from the Department

of Labour, Trade and Industry and Finance. There are chambers that deal with specific issues but this paper will focus on the chamber that deals with labour relations.

This chamber considers all matters relating to work and considers all proposed labour legislation before this legislation goes to parliament. The current Labour Relations Act was first debated at Nedlac before proceeding to Parliament. Because of various perspectives of the stakeholders it is not easy to reach consensus, and the recent amendments to the Labour Relations Act spent about 8 months at Nedlac before reaching Parliament.

### **2.5.1 GOALS OF NEDLAC**

As a statutory body Nedlac must strive to:

- \* Promote the goals for economic growth, participation in the economic decision- making and social equity;
  
- \*Seek to reach consensus and conclude agreements on matters pertaining to social and economic policy;
  
- \*Consider all significant changes to social and economic policy before they are implemented or introduced in Parliament;
  
- \*Consider all proposed labour legislation relating to labour market policy before it is introduced to Parliament;
  
- \*Encourage and promote the formulation of coordinated policy on social and economic



matters.

In order to fulfill this brief, the Act stipulates that Nedlac should:

- \* Make such investigations, as it may consider necessary;
- \*Continually survey social and economic affairs;
- \*Keep abreast of international developments in social and economic policy ;
- \*Continually evaluate the effectiveness of legislation and policy affecting social and economic policy;
- \*Conduct research into social and economic policy;
- \*Work in close cooperation with all departments of states, statutory bodies, programmes and other forums and non-governmental agencies engaged in the formulation and implementation of social and economic policy.

In the light of this partnership at the various levels, we will now look at systems in order to bigger view and understanding of this employment relationship.

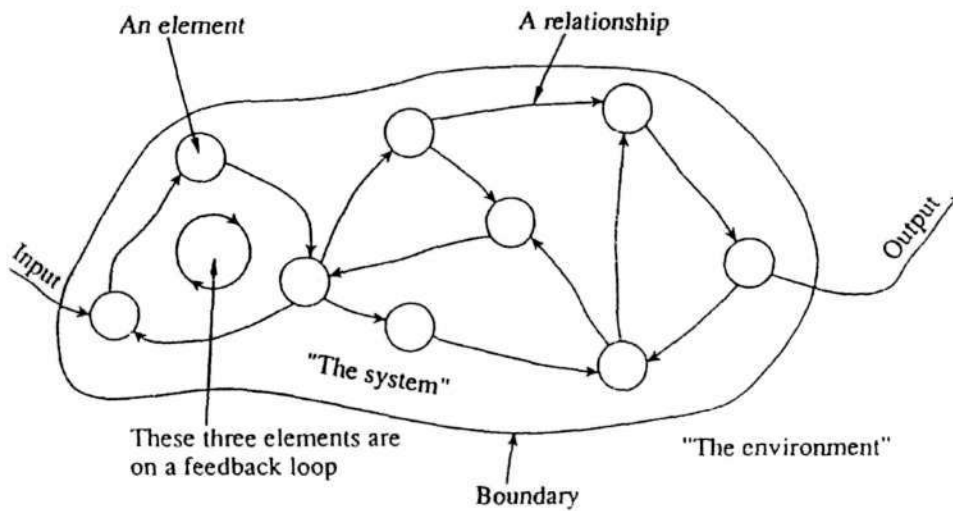
## **2.6 CONCEPTION OF SYSTEM**

“A system consists of a number of elements and the relationship between the elements” *[Flood & Jackson: 1991]*. These elements interact and the group of elements can be separated from those in which few or weak interactions occur. This can be achieved by drawing a boundary around those that interact richly. The system identified by a boundary will have inputs and outputs, which may be physical or abstract in nature.

The system works by transforming inputs into outputs. The process in the system is characterized by feedback, whereby the behaviour of one element may feed back; either

directly from one element by way of their relationship, or indirectly via connected elements to influence the element that initiated the behaviour.

The system is separated from the environment by its boundary but interacts with the environment and is therefore regarded as an open system. The system is able to sustain an identity by maintaining itself in a dynamic steady state even though the environment is constantly changing, and this is termed homeostasis. **Figure 3** illustrates a general conception of a system.



GENERAL CONCEPTION OF A SYSTEM ADAPTED FLOOD & JACKSON. P.6

**Figure 3**

## 2.6 SYSTEMS APPROACH TO LABOUR RELATIONS

Systems theory provides a framework to understand labour relations. *Ackoff [1999:114]* suggested that the world is undergoing a fundamental change in worldview. His argument was that the world is moving away from the mechanistic view to one that is holistic. Systems thinkers work from the basis that people/managers have mental models of the world. Mental models are perceptions or views that people hold. These mental models influence the manager's perception of the ways things are done in the organisation. Systems thinkers also work from the premise that the organisation is part of a greater context, which influences inner systems of the organisation. The systems approach provides a set of ideas, tools and methods for engaging, understanding and improving complex situations.

This holistic approach emphasises the connections between issues and components and simplifies the complexity by thinking at a greater level of abstraction or generality. A systems approach fosters a multiple perspective or approach to complexity and assumes that insights and ways of improving situations will be generated by facilitating stakeholders or actors to shift from their particular way of thinking.

According to *Smith and Cronje [1992:26]* synergy is another concept of the systems theory that can be applied to management. It means the synchronization or joint application of individual subsystems in a way that the result of their simultaneous application is greater than the sum of their individual efforts. In other words if the different departments or sections in the organisation work together as subsystems, the result is a more productive whole compared to individual efforts. Therefore human resource management must be considered in the context of the organization as a whole,

because it interacts with other functions and contributes to the success of the organization.

*Morgan [1996:4]* mentions: “Metaphors are used whenever we try to understand one element of experience in terms of another”. Metaphors proceed through implicit or explicit explanations that A is {or is like} B. When we say “the man is a lion” we use the image of the lion to draw attention to the lion like aspects of the man. The metaphor frames our understanding of a man in a particular fashion.

The use of metaphors therefore assists in seeing and understanding a problem from different angles and therefore concluding on a variety of solutions or interventions. There are a variety of metaphors that assist in viewing things differently and some of them are:

### **2.6.1 CULTURE METAPHOR**

Culture can be considered as the unspoken but familiar way of thinking and acting that exists in organizations. *Morgan [1996:9]* contends that cultural change is necessary if we are to create new forms of organisations and new ways of doing things. The challenge of transforming mindsets and beliefs involves the development of shared systems of meaning. This type of transformation can be achieved by influencing the values, ideologies, rituals and other social practices that shape and guide organisational action.

### **2.6.2 BRAIN METAPHOR**

*Morgan [1996:5]* through the use of metaphor of the brain thinks of systems where qualities of the whole are enfolded in all parts so that the system has the ability to self organise and regulate itself in a continuous way. This favours a more decentralised form

of control and intelligence. Although there is decentralisation, such types of self-organising systems always require a degree of hierarchical control.

### **2.6.3 POLITICAL METAPHOR**

The political dispensation is reflective of a particular ideology and will determine the type of industrial relations system and influence the power balance between the employee and employer. The political metaphor applied to a problem situation looks at relationships between individuals and groups as competitive and involving the pursuit of power. There are three contrasting views on the character of any political situation. These are labeled unitary, pluralist, and coercive. The political metaphor focuses on issues of interests, conflict and power. It is through these three issues that the political character of a situation may be assessed as unitary, pluralist or coercive. The assessment of the political character will assist in understanding the situation and will prompt the necessary intervention.

**Figure 4** reflects the political characteristics *interests, conflict* and *power*.

	Unitary	Pluralist	Coercive
Interests	Common objectives – a well integrated team	Diverging group interests with the organization as a mutual focal point – loose coalition	Oppositional and contradictory interests – rival forces
Conflicts	Rare and transient	Inherent, but may have positive aspects	Inevitable and likely to lead to radical change of whole structure
Power	Replaced by conceptions such as leadership and control	Medium through which conflict of interest may be resolved	Unequally distributed thus allowing domination and subjugation

**Figure 4**

\*ADAPTED FROM MORGAN P.188-189

In order to demonstrate that no system exists in a vacuum it is imperative to look at the various influences on labour relations. These influences assist in understanding why the system operates in the manner it does, and how to deal with the issues brought about by the influences.

## **2.7 INFLUENCES ON THE LABOUR RELATIONSHIP**

### ***2.7.1 Socio political influences***

No relationship functions in a vacuum. It is a product of time and place, and as such will be subject to influences from the wider society in which it exists. *[Bendix 2001:19]*

Conversely the type of labour relationship established will also impact on society at large. The political dispensation is reflective of a particular ideology and also determines the type of labour relations system in place and will influence the balance of power between employer and employee. In South Africa the 'apartheid' policy and its legislation like influx control influenced labour relations in the country because it led to unequal collective bargaining and the politicization of the trade union movement.

### ***.2.7.2 SOCIETAL INFLUENCES***

Employees bring to the workplace perceptions, attitudes and stereotypes established in their societies. If for example there is tension about race and gender in their society, this will be carried to the workplace and likewise individuals and the unions will carry tensions from the workplace into wider society. On the micro level problems like a lack of housing, water and other facilities will impact on the labour relationship and become issues of the collective bargaining process.

### ***2.7.3 ECONOMIC INFLUENCES***

The economic dispensation will, impact on the conduct of labour relations at a macro and micro level. The question of whether a country favours a free enterprise or another type of economic system will determine the type of labour relations system that will be in place. The rate of unemployment and fiscal policies and the rate of growth also influence the type of labour relations. In South Africa there are attempts currently to keep the inflation rate

low and therefore the need to keep salary increases lower than the inflation rate and this angers the unions and employees. The dilemma however is to address the salary gap because workers who are underpaid would not want to accept inflation related increases.

#### ***2.7.4 INFLUENCE OF TRADE UNIONS***

Trade unions arose as a result of the workers dissatisfaction and although they are part of the system they very much oppose the system. Today unions are affiliated to political parties and therefore have a larger support base. This has resulted in the government recognising the labour relationship and even consulting unions on macro economic issues. There is a trend of co-operation and partnership developing on this front.

**\*\*** There are other additional influences and the labour relationship system and the sub systems with the various influences can be best represented in the following figure.



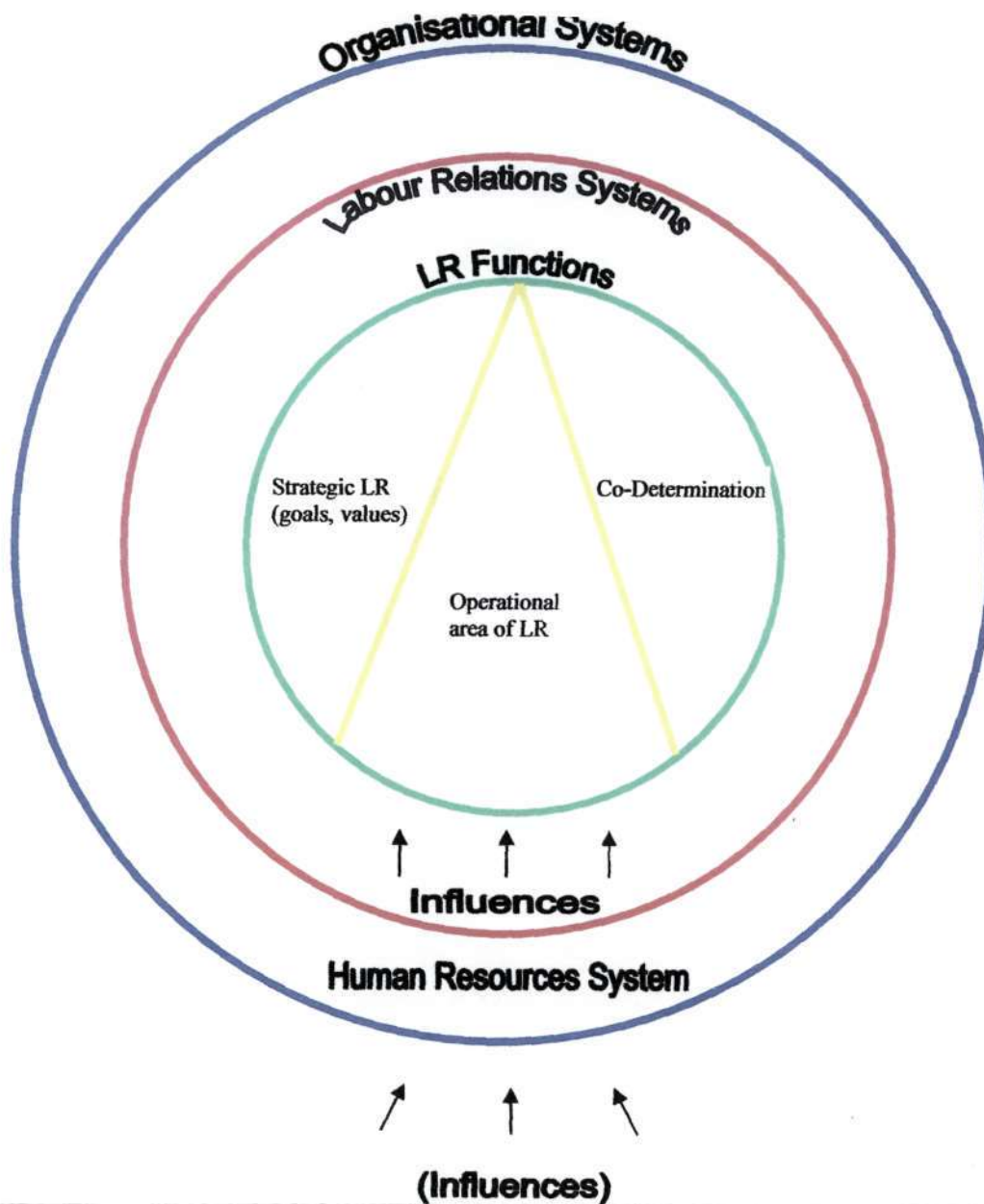


Figure 5

As is evidenced from the representation above it is clear that the external influences are out of the square that depicts the labour relations system. Further explanations are as follows:

**A. The major components of the labour relations systems are:**

*A.1/* The external or environmental variables represented by political parties, economic factors, social structure and technology form one subsystem.

**A.2/** The organisational system represented by management and workers with their specific ideology, attitudes, goals, values and interest.

**B/** The labour relations' inputs into the labour relationship or operational subsystem are:

- \* Collective agreements
- \* Labour legislation
- \* Arbitration and labour court findings
- \* Labour relation strategies

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

The chapter has illustrated that the labour relations system consists of subsystems that are interdependent and consists of different actors. Furthermore systems theory provides a conceptual framework of the labour relations system. The systems approach provides a holistic approach that emphasizes the connections between issues and components and simplifies the complexity by thinking at a greater level of abstraction or generality.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines the labour relations function, investigates the partnership and uses the role of the Labour Relations Officer to explain the expected behaviour of the Labour Relations Officer.

### **3.2 THE LABOUR RELATIONS FUNCTION**

“Contrary to common belief, Human Resource and Labour Relations Practitioners do not manage people. This is the responsibility of Line Managers” *[Bendix 2000:177]*.

Furthermore Bendix underscores that these Practitioners may have staff within their section that they supervise, but in general it is the function of the line managers to manage people in the organisation.

Labour Relations like other sections or components within Human Resources is present to support and advise line and senior managers and equally to provide advisory services to employees. As an integral part of the Human Resource Department the Labour Relations Officer provides support and advice to line management regarding matters such as:

- \* grievances and discipline
- \* collective agreements
- \* dealing with trade unions
- \* consulting employees and joint decision making processes
- \* dealing with disputes
- \* interpretation of labour related policies, agreements and legislation

Labour Relations plays an important role in managing information by ensuring that the line functionaries and Human Resource Department conform to all new developments on the labour front and also attempt to ensure the smooth conduct of the work relationship. Labour relations share a close relationship with those they serve while they strive to create and sustain relationships and it is important to look at and understand this partnership.

### **3.3 LABOUR RELATIONS AS A PARTNERSHIP**

A partnership is described as a “contractual relationship between two or more people carrying on a joint venture”. *[Oxford Dictionary]* At general level partnerships are seen as a joint venture where synergy is created and people rely on each other in order to achieve a common goal or objective. The line functionaries and human resources unit need to partner the labour relations section from the formulation of strategy to the operationalizing of the strategy, in an integrated fashion. This could include the developing and communicating of policies, procedures, programmes, and budgets.

It is useful to think of and use the partnership metaphor as a means of examining the relationship of labour relations with the various stakeholders in the labour relations systems. At a simple level of understanding partnership, it can be seen as a union or form of marriage where two individuals come together in a relationship for the purpose of sharing a life together. At an organisational level the labour relations unit and the other sections could be striving for the same end, namely the objective and vision of the organisation and partnership in this context may be easier to sustain. The public service creates spectators, due to a lack of accountability by workers, and partnerships are rare. Line managers will plan and implement without consulting and would only come to the

Labour Relations officer when problems arise.

### 3.4 PARADOX OF PARTNERSHIP

Partnership is a balancing notion between good and bad. In the labour relations system the labour relations unit for example serves to support management and employees in this partnership. However when one considers the tripartite nature of the labour relationship, organised labour as one of the actors in this partnership is generally opposed to the employers objectives and hence the paradox. Partnership however uses paradox to create space for innovation and creativity to deal with problem situations. By exploring differing views and objectives, new possibilities that parties previously overlooked may emerge.

Partnerships are largely about teamwork but one needs to stress the integrity of the individual in the partnership. If we focus too much on the individual we lose the synergy of the team or partnership and if we focus too much on the team we lose the importance for individuality. According to *Scott and Harker [1998:111]* in all of these dichotomies there is a dynamic potential because in confronting paradoxes we generate tensions. It is out of these tensions that we receive the energy to improve and manage the organisation. According to these authors successful organisations are those that can assimilate the paradoxes.

This therefore requires seeing the organisation from a more holistic perspective - a perspective that eschews a "this or that" approach in favour of one that is happy to accommodate some of the attributes of both differences. The Labour Relations Officer is an important partner in this relationship and often needs to distinguish between the good and bad. In making this distinction he may be required to deal with ethical issues that

confront him. In the light of this it is worthy to consider the ethical framework within which the Labour Relations Officer is expected to perform.

### **3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Labour Relations Officers promote ethical conduct while they themselves need to abide by a system of ethics. According to *Bendix [2001:18]* there is a need for an ethical framework for labour relations as little attention is paid to a system of ethics. The lack of an ethical code is evident by the lack of trust that permeates the labour relationship. According to Bendix fair is not fair unless others perceive this fairness in action. Labour Relations Officers in the Public Service are confronted with two primary imperatives i.e., satisfying their individual standards of professional performance and conduct and adhering to those imposed upon them by their employer, public policy and society at large.

Labour relations officials are confronted with dilemmas when having to make a choice between these two imperatives. This is as a result of them having to look after the interests of the employer who pays their salary, and then worrying about employees or clients whom they also need to guide and support.

### **3.6 MEANING OF ETHICS / MORALS**

**The Oxford English Dictionary** defines ethics as “the department of study concerned with principles of human duty and the moral principles by which a person is guided”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines morals as “of pertaining to the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to the actions, volitions or character of responsible beings”. With the study of ethics we have to make a distinction with that

which has *moral* weight. For the purpose of this study ethics and morals will be taken to mean the same thing. Ethical inquiry, on one hand, consists of asking what is evil; what is right and what is wrong. Ethics is a sort of inner eye that enables people to see the rightness or the wrongness of their actions.

### **3.7 EVALUATION**

Ethics is about evaluation but not all evaluation is ethical in nature. One would be evaluating if one looked at people in relation to their deeds and conduct. Even the person who says he never judges anybody or anything is in the business of evaluation. Firstly, he or she is probably lying and secondly by refusing to judge he or she is saying that judging is bad. That is still regarded as a judgment and he or she is still taking a stand.

### **3.8 ETHICAL EVALUATION**

This study will not cover the kind of evaluation that involves having an opinion on whether something is good enough, pretty, stupid or whether a soccer team plays well for that matter. Of concern is whether a person, an action, an attitude or whether a system is regarded as good or right, in the way that we regard kindness as good, or democracy as good or looking after ones family as the right thing to do. Another way of looking at this is talking of the traditional concepts of virtues and vices. Virtues are simply those qualities, which make us think of somebody as good, virtuous or admirable, and vices are regarded as those that are bad or despicable.

### **3.9. PROFESSIONALISM & ETHICAL CONDUCT**

*Van der Walt and Du Toit [1997:53]* refer to professionalism as the way in which public

managers and their employees behave, and to the fact that this conduct is evaluated according to the standards unique to the activities of the public sector managers. Professional conduct from Labour Relations Officers further requires adherence to sound moral conduct and reasonable performance in all circumstances in achieving the organisation's goal.

The general principles which should govern the conduct of all public officials are based on the premise that the maintenance of high standards of honesty, trust, integrity and impartiality is essential to assure proper performance of government tasks and the maintenance of public trust, confidence, and respect of the citizens for their government. Public officials at all levels of government bear a special responsibility to be fair and impartial when dealing with all citizens. This also requires adherence to particular norms and standards.

### **3.9.1 NORMS & VALUES**

Norms refer to the expectations of how people are supposed to act, think, or feel in specific situations. Norms could be formal or informal. Formal norms are written down in the form of laws and carry a specific punishment for violators. Informal norms are not written down but are understood by the public officials.

Values are all about preventing harm and promoting the well being of the self and others. Values are those things that we prize, cherish and treat as important. A value is an idea shared by the people in a society about what is good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. Values are general, abstract ideas that shape the ideals and goals of a society and values shape our choices. *Bendix [2001:25]* highlights fairness, trust and respect as some of the key values underlying the employment relationship.



The Public Service Code of Conduct gives practical effect to the relevant constitutional provisions relating to the public services, whereby all employees are expected to comply with this code. This should thereby act as a guideline to public service employees as to what is expected of them from an ethical point of view both in their individual conduct and in their relationship with others in the workplace. Compliance with the code can be expected to enhance professionalism, enhance consistency and help to ensure confidence in the Public Service.

*Chapter 2* of the Public Service Regulations [*Government Gazette 21951*] contains the Code of Conduct for the Public Service. The Code of Conduct, exists to provide guidelines to public officials with regard to their relationship with the legislature, political and executive office, other employees and the public and to indicate the spirit in which officials should perform their duties, what should be done to avoid conflicts of interests and what is expected of them in terms of their personal conduct in public life. For the Labour Relations Officer this code of conduct also provides a framework for his individual conduct, and also requires him to be familiar with the contents in order to guide managers that have to deal with subordinates who transgress the code of conduct.

Due to the nature of the work the Labour Relations Officer may be confronted with ethical dilemmas that require a particular set of skills in order to deal with these dilemmas.

### **3.10 ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Very often, ethics is portrayed as a matter of resolving conflicts in which one option appears to be the clear choice. In the normal employment relationship there could be

situations in which an employee is faced with whether or not to lie, steal, cheat, abuse another, break terms of a contract, etc. However, ethical dilemmas faced by Labour Relations Officers are often more real-to-life and highly complex with no clear guidelines, whether in law or in religion.

An ethical dilemma exists when one is faced with having to make a choice among these alternatives. Although dilemmas may exist in any work situation, support functions like labour relations will be confronted with this more often, because they support and guide employees and the employer, while having to foster relations with organized labour. In the labour relations environment a typical real-to-life example would be: *“The organisation is about to retrench an employee and the Labour Relations Officer learnt of this at a senior management meeting. This retrenchment is not to be communicated to the employee at that stage in order to prevent fear and uncertainty through the entire organisation. This employee has in the interim however confided in the Labour Relations Officer by informing him of his intention to purchase a new car. What should the Labour Relations Officer do?”*

### **3.10.1 METHODS TO RESOLVE ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Organizations should in these turbulent times develop a document or procedure for dealing with ethical dilemmas as they arise. The following ethical checklist by *[Mcnamara 2002:15]* may be applied to assist with the decision one takes when confronted with a dilemma.

### **3.10.2 ETHICAL CHECKLIST**

- *Relevant Information Test:* Here the need is to ask - Have I / we obtained as

much information as possible to make an informed decision and action plan for this situation? Therefore the need to determine what, who, where when and how?

- ***Involvement Test:*** Have I / we involved all who have a right to have input and/ or to be involved in making this decision and action plan? Make sure what the ethical issues are.

- ***Consequential Test:*** Have I/ we anticipated and attempted to accommodate for the consequences of this decision and action a plan on any who are significantly affected by this?

- ***Fairness Test:*** If I/ we were assigned to take the place of any one of the stakeholders in this situation, would I / we perceive this decision and action plan to be essentially fair, given all of the circumstances?

- ***Enduring Values Test:*** Does this decision and action plan uphold my/ our priority enduring values that are relevant to this situation?

- ***Universality Test:*** Would I / we want this decision and action plan to become a universal law applicable to all similar situations, even to myself/ourselves?

- ***Light-of- Day Test:*** How would I / we feel and be regarded by others like working associates, family etc, if the details of this decision and other action plan were disclosed for all to know?

\* After asking the above questions it is essential to balance the consequences against your primary principles or values, and select the alternative that best fits.

All workers have a role to perform in an organization. The role of the Labour Relations Officer will highlight the instances where ethical action and introspection becomes necessary.

### **3.11 THE ROLE OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICER**

Formal organisational structures are empty boxes and only come alive when employees are placed in these boxes to play a specific role. As with acting in any film or sketch, the organisation comes alive when these actors play their specific roles. The role or roles that any individual plays in an organisation, is according to *Mullins [1994:186]* influenced by a combination of situational factors such as requirements of the task, style of leadership, position in the communication network and personal factors such as values, attitudes, personality and ability.

A role within an organisational context can therefore be defined as the formally expected behaviour or conduct within a particular job or position. The following roles highlight instances when the role-played by employees may lead to conflict.

#### **3.11.1 ROLE INCONGRUENCE**

Incongruence refers to mis-perceptions or a state of imbalance between what is expected and what is received. In one's daily life and work routines one experiences different relationships. Difficulties with role congruence can arise from the nature of the groupings and formal relationship within the structure of the organisation. An example could be with the line- staff relationship that exists in the public service; for instance, a relatively junior member of the labour relations department (staff) informing a senior departmental

manager (line) that an official policy has not been complied with.

*Mullins (1994: 187)* states many role expectations are prescribed formally and indicate what the person is expected to do and their duties and obligations. Formal role prescriptions provide guidelines for expected behaviors and may be more prevalent in a “mechanistic” organisation. Examples are a written contract of employment, rules and regulations, standards, policy decisions, job descriptions and directives from superiors. Formal role expectations may also be derived clearly from the nature of the task.

Not all role expectations are prescribed formally. There will be certain patterns of behavior that, although not specified formally, will nonetheless be expected by members. These formal role expectations may be imposed by the group itself or at least communicated to a person by the other members of the group. Examples include general conduct, mutual support to co-members, and attitudes towards superior, means of communicating and dress and appearance.

### **3.11.2 ROLE CONFLICT**

Role conflict encompasses opposing ideas, goals, interests and objectives. This conflict is caused by inadequate or inappropriate role definition. In labour relations this is an ongoing problem where line managers expect the labour relations officer to conduct the disciplinary hearing on their behalf. The disciplinary code and procedure for the public service [*Resolution 2 of 1999 as amended*], clearly states that discipline is a management function.

### **3.11.3 ROLE INCOMPATIBILITY**

This takes place when an individual worker faces a situation in which a simultaneous difference or contributory expectation creates inconsistency. Compliance with one set of expectations makes it difficult or impossible to comply with other expectations. An example is a person like the Labour Relations Officer who faces expectations from both workers and from the management.

#### **3.11.4 ROLE OVERLOAD**

With an overload a worker has too many tasks (roles) to fulfill. This may result in either the tasks not getting done or results in a burnout.

#### **3.11.5 ROLE AMBIGUITY**

Here the worker is not sure what is expected of their role and there is uncertainty surrounding the role. “Regardless of the level at which an official works he/she must play a specific role,” [Smith & Cronje: 1992:34]. The Labour Relations Officer does certain things for the organisation, satisfies certain needs and accepts certain responsibilities. The success of these respective roles depends on the requisite skills, and this is discussed briefly hereunder.

#### **3.12 SKILLS AT VARIOUS LEVELS**

“Although management is found at all levels and in all functions of an organisation, the personal skills required at each level and for each role differs, in the performance of their duties” [Smith & Cronje 1996:36]. The different skills as required by all levels of employees in the labour relations unit are *conceptual, interpersonal and leadership*.

- **Conceptual skills** are the mental ability to view the operation of the organisation and its parts holistically.

- **Interpersonal skills** are the ability to work with people. It stands to reason that if the majority of our time is spent at work then the ability to communicate, understand people's behaviour and motivate individuals and teams is imperative.

- **Leadership skills:** People give life to the enterprise and therefore are the most important resource. People are also the most complex resource in the organisation, because they are unpredictable and difficult to understand. Directing this complex resource requires a complicated management activity namely leadership. Leaders are basically those who are able to influence others and may have managerial authority.

This study looks at the importance of leadership in the labour relations function, and will now deal with this subject as an important role of the Labour Relations Officer. The Labour Relations Officer provides leadership to his employees within the labour relations section, and also requires leadership skills when dealing with the other stakeholders in his system.

### **3.13 NATURE AND COMPONENTS OF LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is the process of leading and one of the fundamental relationship tasks that set the work activities in motion. Leadership involves elements such as giving orders, motivating and handling people, managing conflict and encouraging communication. Leadership infuses energy to get things done in the organisation. Leadership is about the **influence** a leader has on his followers and the organisation in general.

The components of leadership are power, influence, delegation, responsibility,

accountability and authority. These components are discussed hereunder.

**- AUTHORITY**

This is the right of the leader to give orders and demand action. The Labour Relations Officer will have this sort of authority only within the labour relations unit and not within the entire organisation. This authority may be gained if the Labour Relations Officer is respected and easily influences the others in the organisation.

**- POWER**

Power refers to the ability of the leader to influence behaviour without necessarily using power. This is an important ability for the Labour Relations Officer to have when dealing with his immediate subordinates and when having to conciliate in grievances between employees and their supervisors. Employees tend to trust and believe the Labour Relations Officer rather than their immediate managers.

**- INFLUENCE**

Influence is ability to apply authority of power in such a way that followers take action like influencing subordinates to make sacrifices for the sake of the organisation. This is the opposite of the management mode of controlling.

**- DELEGATION**

Delegation is passing authority to someone else to do something on his behalf. One may also delegate tasks but without the necessary authority.



## **- RESPONSIBILITY & ACCOUNTABILITY**

The final component is accepting responsibility and accounting for oneself and simply accounting for one's actions. "It is imperative to have a delicate balance of the six components of leadership for the good of the organisation because excessive authority for example leads to autocratic style and this will not motivate staff and instill confidence" *[Scott and Harker 1998: 66]*.

Performance and success of the organisation depends on leadership. Not all managers are leaders and therefore making them into leaders is the aim. Leaders are distinguished from non-leaders by the traits they possess. The aim is to define what successful leaders do to motivate, influence and encourage others so that these skills / competencies and behaviour can be acquired.

### **3.14 LEADERSHIP APPROACHES**

*Grobler [1996:12]* states that it is important to choose a leadership approach that will enable South African organisations to reach levels of accomplishment never dreamt of before. This can be found in the approaches discussed herein:

#### **3.14.1 TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH**

Here leaders inspire their followers, deal individually with staff to develop and encourage new approaches to solving problems. *Grobler [1996:12]* found that the leader who followed a transformational approach by building a shared responsible team continuously developing the skills of individuals and determining a shared vision created a superior performance. Transformational leadership consists of three factors: *charismatic*

*leadership, intellectual stimulation and individualized attention.* Transformational leadership raises both the leader and follower to higher levels of motivation and morality.

### **3.14.2 TRANSACTIONAL APPROACH**

Here leaders are characterized by reward and management by exceptional styles of leadership. Followers are informed what they will receive if they do something right or wrong. This type of approach lasts for so long as both the leader and followers are satisfied.

### **3.14.3 COACHING**

An area of charismatic leadership and individualized attention is coaching. According to **Zeus and Skiffington [2001:2]**, coaching at work is an ongoing conversation and a ongoing learning process that helps people develop tolerance of their struggles and accelerates the unfolding of skills with the attention of a dedicated coach.

Basically here a coach will agree on a topic with the subject/follower and identify the goals to be achieved. The follower/subject will discover on their own how to achieve the objectives or goals while the coach will draw out the consequences and share his personal experiences. It is important that the coach listens actively and then set the parameters, and then authorizes and empowers the follower/subject to carry out the task on their own.

The lesson here is that individuals learn when they discover for themselves as opposed to being lectured to. There is resistance to coaching because supervisors and people in authority fear losing control and use the excuse that the quality and standard of work will suffer.

### **3.15 LEADERSHIP MODELS**

Leadership studies over the years clearly showed that leadership was more complex than studying behaviours or certain traits. The failure to obtain consistent results led to a new focus on situational influences on leadership.

The relationship between leadership and effectiveness suggested that under condition  $x$  style  $y$  would be appropriate and so on. This is easily illustrated by the following: *Would Mr Nelson Mandela be such an icon had he not served those years in prison and lived in South Africa?* What is implied here is that the situation gives one the ability to behave in a particular fashion. Many attempts have been made to isolate or identify some of these situations where a particular style of leadership would be appropriate and the following four situational theories will be reviewed briefly.

#### **3.15.1 THE AUTOCRATIC - DEMOCRATIC CONTINUUM MODEL**

Here autocratic and democratic behaviour are merely two of the many positions along the continuum. At the one extreme the leader makes the decision, tells the subordinates and expects them to carry out the decisions. At the other extreme the leader fully shares the decision making power with the subordinate allowing the subordinates an equal voice. Figure 6 shows there is a relationship between the degree of authority used and the amount of freedom available to subordinates in reaching decisions. As one gains the other loses and vice versa.

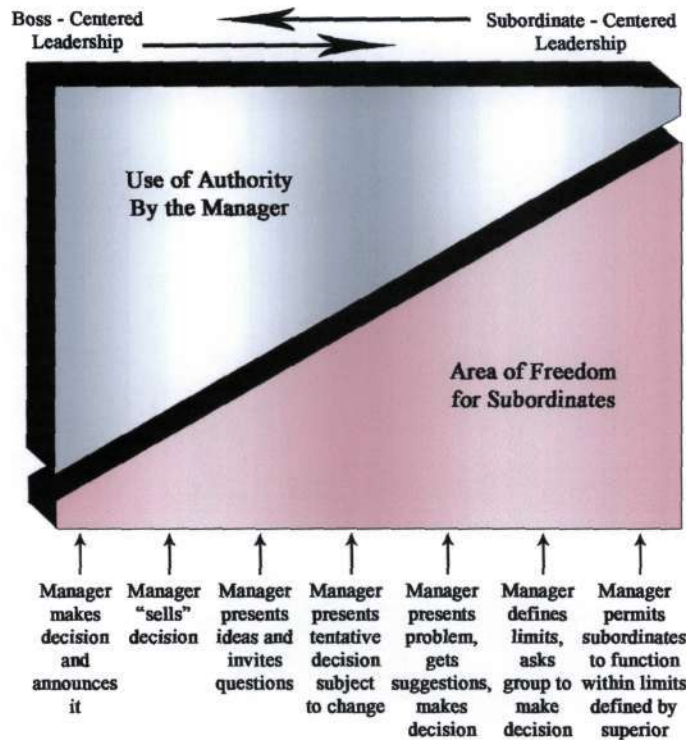


Figure 6

ADAPTED FROM TANNENBAUM & SMITH.1997

### 3.15.2 THE FIEDLER MODEL

This contingency model developed by Fiedler proposes that effective group performance depends upon the proper match between the leader's style of interacting with his subordinates and others in the organisation and the degree to which the situation gives control and influence to the leader.

This model assumes that an individual's leadership style is fixed. This means that if a situation requires a task oriented leader and the person in the position is relationship oriented, then either the situation has to be modified or the leader removed if effectiveness is to be reached. This model also argues that leadership style is innate and

you can't change your style to fit changing situations.

According to this model once a leader's style has been assessed it is necessary to match the leader with the situation. In this type of situation people have a high degree of confidence, trust, and respect in the leader.

There are problems with this model because it assumes that the leadership style is fixed and one would have to change the leader to fit the style. The other alternative would be to change the situation to suit the leader. Restructuring tasks, or increasing or decreasing power that the leader has to promote or discipline employees for that matter could do this.

### **3.15.3 THE HERSEY - BLANCHARD SITUATIONAL THEORY**

This theory focuses on the followers. According to *Hersey and Blanchard [1982:96]* there are two types of behaviour namely *task behaviour* and *relationship behaviour*. In the former the leader spells out and organises the tasks of his staff. Relationship behaviour implies the degree to which leaders maintains interpersonal relationships between themselves and their subordinates.

Here selecting the right leadership style is contingent on the level of maturity of the followers. Maturity in this context refers to the ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for directing their behaviour. It has two components namely *job maturity* and *psychological maturity*.

Job maturity refers to the level of understanding and experience the employee has while psychological maturity refers to willingness or motivation to do something and these kinds of people need no motivation, as they are intrinsically motivated.

This model also highlights four specific leadership styles namely:

**- Telling *{high task-low relationship}***

In this leadership style the leader defines roles and tells people what, how and where to do various tasks.

**- Selling *{high task -high relationship}***

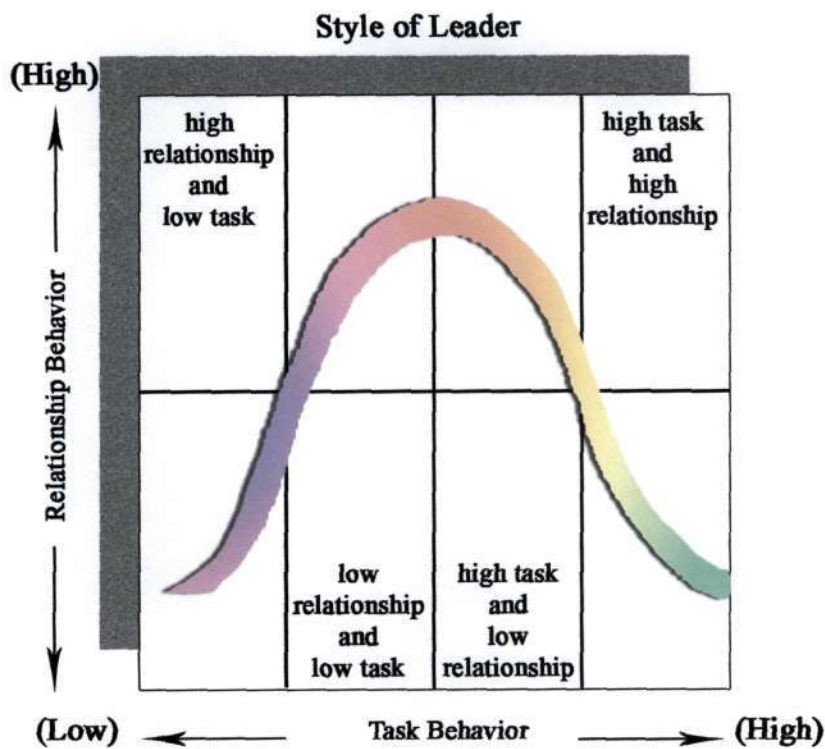
Here the leader provides both supportive and directive behaviour.

**- Participating *{low task- high relationship}***

Leader and follower shares in decision-making and the leader merely facilitates communication.

**- Delegating *{low task-low relationship}***

Here the leader provides little direction or support. As followers reach high levels of maturity, the leader responds by not only decreasing control over activities, but also by decreasing relationship behaviour. Figure 7 is indicative of this.



**Figure 7**

ADAPTED FROM HERSEY P.63

### 3.15.4 PATH - GOAL THEORY

The last of the situational theories developed by *Robert House of the University of Toronto* contends that the leader's job is to assist their followers to attain their goals and to provide support and direction in ensuring that their goals are compatible with the overall objectives of the organisation or the group. Effective leaders will clarify the path to help their followers get from where they are, to where they want to be.

According to this theory, a leader's behaviour is acceptable to subordinates in so far as they view it as an immediate source of satisfaction or means of future satisfaction. In labour relations the Labour Relations Officers behaviour is effective and motivational to the degree that it makes all stakeholders need satisfaction contingent on effective performance, provides coaching, guidance, support and rewards that are necessary for effective performance.

### **3.16 ROLE MODELS OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICER**

A role model provides a framework for performance of the Labour Relations Officer. There are 3 models that are identified by *Scholtz [1991:43]*

#### **3.16.1 THE PATERNALISTIC LABOUR RELATION ROLE MODEL**

This model emphasises the existence of common values, interests and objectives shared by all members of the organisation. Considerable time and resources are spent on the development and maintenance of attitudes, which favour identification with the organisation or company's objectives, acceptance of management prerogatives and which does not see the role of organised labour as important. This model makes use of the unitary frame of reference discussed earlier in this chapter. The problem with this model is that workers are regarded as the property of the employer so long as they display obedient behaviour that is in line with the organisation's goals and objectives.

In the Public Service the older civil servants still support this type of model, and hence the difficulty in entrenching collective bargaining and general fairness and equity in the workplace. Even intervention by all support staff is deemed unnecessary because the supervisors believe they know what is best for the employee.



### **3.16.2 THE TECHNOCRATIC ROLE MODEL**

The technocratic role model prescribes criteria related to efficiency in the organisation, such as effectiveness and productivity as parameters for the Labour Relations Officers' role performance. In terms of these criteria, his first objective is the efficient management of the labour relations function. Complementary to this is the maximization of the output per unit labour, the minimization of the unit cost of labour and the integration of employees' needs with those of the organization. He is, however, limited in some of these endeavours by the nature of any labour relations function, which restricts direct contribution to organizational goals. This is, amongst others, caused by the advisory nature of his role.

In the Public Service, labour relations and other support functions are not called upon to contribute to the goals and objectives of the respective departments. Line managers tackle this task on their own but attempts are currently plans to implement an integrated approach where support functions like HR are part of the strategic planning. This will enable Labour Relations to understand the entire operations of the organization..

### **3.16.3 PROFESSIONAL ROLE MODEL**

The professional role model is characterized by an independence of both management and workers. This independence is based on the service to society as determined by a compliance with related principles of fairness and the exercising of the organisation's social responsibility. The Labour Relations Officer must act as society's 'interpreter' and 'advocate' in the organisation. The Labour Relations Officer is more concerned with aspects of fairness and natural justice.

Here the Labour Relations Officer is seen as being morally astute serving the

management, society and workers. The major limitation of the professional role model is its lack of organizational power and authority. This is evident in its incompatibility with any of the labour relations role expectations in the organization.

Workers who provide support and advice lack the power and authority to be effective. It is essential therefore to have certain skills and personal characteristics to overcome these limitations. Emotional intelligence may provide the answer to overcome this.

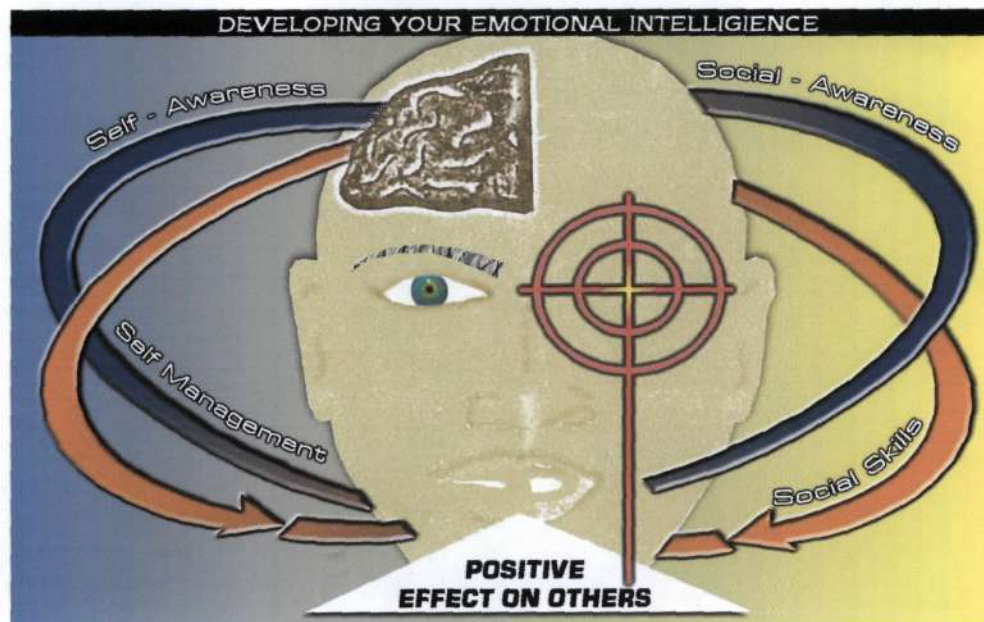
### **3.17 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

An emotional competence is a “learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work” [*Goleman 1998:17*]. Today’s world is no longer just about financial efficiency and being a forceful leader. There is instead a growing global focus on a need to develop what is termed soft skills, such as empathy, communication and sensitivity.

Emotional intelligence is about having the necessary skills like self-awareness, social awareness and self-control / management and relationship management. According to *Goleman [2001:1]* if an individual masters these four skills it translates into on-the-job success. Emotional competencies are learned abilities: having social awareness or skills at managing relationship does not guarantee that we have mastered the additional learning required to handle a customer adeptly or to resolve conflicts - just that we have the potential to become skilled at these competencies. Emotional competencies are job skills that can and must be learned.

In practical terms individuals for example with self-control, avoid emotional responses like sulking or exploding in anger. It is about trying to feel and think at the same time,

rather than responding to the way we feel before we think. These are essential attributes for a Labour Relations Officer whose fundamental task is to promote and sustain sound relationships. Figure 8 is a conceptual mode of emotional intelligence.



**Figure 8**

ADAPTED FROM D.GOLEMAN P.2

### **3.17.1 FRAMEWORK OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Below is the framework of emotional competencies that will be addressed individually.

	SELF PERSONAL COMPETENCE	OTHER SOCIAL COMPETENCE
	<b>Self-Awareness</b>	<b>Social Awareness</b>
<b>Recognition</b>	- Emotional self-awareness	- Empathy
	- Accurate self assessment	- Service orientation
	- Self confidence	- Organisational awareness
	<b>Self-Management</b>	<b>Relationship Management</b>
<b>Regulation</b>	- Self-control	- Developing others
	- Trust worthiness	- Influence
	- Conscientiousness	- Communication
	- Adaptability	- Conflict management
	- Achievement drive	- Leadership
	- Initiative	- Change catalyst
		- Building bonds
	- Team work and collaboration	

**Figure 9**  
ADAPTED FROM D.GOLEMAN

**Emotional self – awareness** - this is basically what one feels and senses and how this affects ones performance. Self-awareness also assists in realizing ones own strengths and weaknesses and to learn from the mistakes that are made.

**Emotional self-management** – this relates to the ability to regulate distressing affects like anxiety and anger and to inhibit emotional impulsivity. The other abilities associated with conscientiousness competencies include being careful, self disciplined and attending to responsibilities.

***Social awareness*** - here the competency of empathy and feelings or concerns for those around you is crucial. The concern for others feelings and concerns flows from awareness of our own feelings.

***Relationship management*** - relationship management or social skills relates to the ability to attune us to influence the emotions of another person. This ability rests on other self-management and social awareness because if we cannot control our emotional outbursts or impulses and lack empathy, there is less chance that we will be effective in our relationships. Relationship management has two facets namely leading others and working with others.

Leading others requires aside from leadership, being a good communicator, an initiator and manager of change and to develop capabilities of others and to wield influence.

When it comes to working with others the leader must be able to resolve conflicts, build bonds and develop teamwork. When dealing with conflict for example one has two options. One can either walk away without achieving the objective of having the conversation or one can “counter- influence”. The second action involves “tailoring the message to have the greater influence”.

A Labour Relations Officer with skills in conflict management will spot trouble as it is brewing and take the necessary steps to calm those involved. Here the art of listening and empathizing are crucial to the skills of handling difficult people and situations with diplomacy, encouraging debate and open discussions and striving for win - win situations.

Effective conflict management and negotiations are important to long-term symbiotic relationship with organised labour, government and business. Closely related to emotional intelligence is personal mastery that is discussed briefly.

### **3.18 PERSONAL MASTERY**

*Senge [1990: 7]* describes Personal Mastery as the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. Personal mastery has to do with surfacing all the things that matter to us and thereby living life to the fullest and reaching for all that matters.

Learning is powerful, enjoyable, and rewarding and it is imperative to become masters of learning.

Mastery might suggest gaining dominance over people or things. But mastery can also mean a special level of proficiency. People with a high level of personal mastery are able to consistently realize the results that matter most deeply to them. In effect, they approach their lives as an artist would approach his work of art. They do that by becoming committed to their own lifelong learning.

### **3.19 CONCLUSION**

The Labour Relations Officer has a choice of role models to adopt. The most appropriate will depend on the type of organisational structure that exists and the status in respect of labour relations in the organisation. In the leadership process, the Labour Relation's Officer is affected by his qualities, his subordinates [group or followers] and the situation. The Labour Relations Officer has to possess or acquire emotional competencies which can assist in the leadership role.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the functions associated with attaining the goals of the Labour Relations Officer. The functions may also surface competencies essential to direct the goals of the Labour Relation Officer.

### 4.2 TYPE OF FUNCTIONS

Theoretically and according to *Gerber, Nel and Van Wyk [1998: 16]* three functions of a Labour Relations Officer can be distinguished namely *service*, *control* and *advisory* function. The *service function* involves every day tasks such as training and development, liaison with employees, supervisors and unions. The *advisory function* involves expert advice being given on discipline and grievance matters or the interpretation of collective agreements. *Control function* involves more strategic work like analysis of strikes and disputes and understanding what causes these events and how to avoid them in the future. Because labour relations strategy is an important function it is necessary to look at this closely.

### 4.3 THE LABOUR RELATIONS STRATEGY

Strategic planning according to *Robbins [1998: 156]* plays a critical role in performance and the organization's success. The labour relations strategy is geared to deal with internal and external actors and the strategy should therefore be based on long and short term forecasting.

Here strategies will be influenced by the power and strength of organised labour, employer and employee relations and other influences discussed in this paper earlier. Conceptual skills are necessary to view the operation of the organization and its part holistically. Linked closely to the strategy document is the labour relations policy which provides the expression of the management towards its workforce.

#### **4.4 LABOUR RELATIONS POLICY**

“A labour relations policy establishes a behavioural framework relating to a particular activity or group of activities and will, in turn, inform the type of structure and procedures which should be established in order to implement the agreed behavioural framework [*Bendix 2000 : 180*]”. The labour relations policy generally expresses top management’s expressions towards human resources of the organisation. It is a declaration of the fundamental values, beliefs, standards and principles that underlie the behaviour of the organisation.

Such a policy is necessary and in response to the threats and opportunities that exist in the various layers of the labour relations system.

The policy deals with matters such as the maintenance of the labour relationship, the relationship with trade unions, discipline and are simply a declaration of the basic values; norms and beliefs that underlie labour relations in the organisation. Such a policy covers the relationship in broad terms and will necessitate later development of structures and procedures. The Labour Relations Officer should initiate and draft the labour relations policy in consultation with senior management and organised labour. Intensive consultation may result in consensus, and the possibility of effective implementation. It is imperative that the labour relations policy is integrated with the organization’s strategic plan and goal, as this will contribute towards the overall objectives of the organisation.



According to *Gerber, Nel and Van Dyk [1998: 365]* it is line managers who should implement labour relations policies. However it is imperative for the Labour Relations Officer to monitor the implementation for effectiveness. This monitoring can be done through interviews questionnaires and observing interpersonal relationships.

#### **4.5 HUMAN RESOURCE PLANNING**

This is the process by which management ensure that it has the right number and kinds of people at the right places, and at the right times, who are capable of effectively and efficiently completing those tasks that will help the organisation achieve its overall objectives. Human resource planning therefore involves three steps:

4.5.1 assessing current human resources

4.5.2 assessing future human resource

4.5.3 developing a program to meet the future human resource needs

The process that follows is the recruitment, selection and appointment of the necessary human resources. It is not the intention of this study to expand on these areas of human resources but it is important to note that the Labour Relations Officer has this responsibility in the labour relations section and the other sections in the organisation.

Due consideration should be taken of the organisation's recruitment policy that should relate to legislation like the Employment Equity Act, Labour Relations Act, Public Service Act and the Public Service Regulations. For the labour relations section it is imperative that the Labour Relations Officer determine the number of posts and the basic requirements of the posts that should include necessary qualifications, skills, knowledge and experience required for the various posts. Without the appropriate staff the Labour

Relations unit would not be able to perform optimally.

The other major function of the Labour Relations Officer is the maintenance of acceptable and fair recruitment and selection procedures in the other sections of the organisation. The Labour Relations Officer needs to be proactive to ensure the inclusion of fair employment standards throughout the organisation. Ensuring fair standards at the beginning of the process will avoid disputes in the future. The whole reward system of the organisation should be directed at supporting employee behaviour, which underpins the organisation's labour relations.

It is essential that the Labour Relations Officer keeps abreast of the latest developments in the labour relations system and to keep all levels of management informed of these developments. Labour relations is prone to changes, and it is the function of the Labour Relations Officer to analyze and assess contemporary labour relations issues and to take the necessary steps to ensure compliance and alignment of the organisation.

#### **4.6 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Globalisation and the new political dispensation according to *Finnemore and Van Der Merwe [1996:59]* have revealed the shortcoming of human resource development in South Africa. There has been a concerted effort since the nineties to remedy and address the training deficiencies of the South African workforce from past policies and practices.

Labour relations is affected by changes as there is constant development of legislation and collective agreements that impact on the working relationship. This in turn requires

that rules, policies and procedures be amended or developed within the framework of the new legislation. Furthermore in the Public Service collective agreements at a central level take months to conclude and are often lengthy documents that require interpretation. The Labour Relations Officer who works with these kinds of documents should be responsible for ensuring that all in the organisation are kept abreast and understand the contents and implications thereof.

Part of the responsibility of the Labour Relations Officer's function is to empower and develop his subordinates and other employees in the organisation. Training and development needs to be provided to all levels of employees commencing from the cleaner to the Head of Department. Employee representatives or shop stewards may also be included as this will facilitate a better understanding and develop cordial relations between organised labour and management.

Training on the labour relations strategy and policies of the organization should be provided to all in the organisation. Line managers in particular need to support the labour relations strategy in the management of their shop floor relations. It is generally at this stage of the interaction that grievances are initiated. The behaviour and actions of the line managers at this level greatly influence the behaviour and morale of the employees. Training on how to deal with grievances and discipline should be provided to supervisors and workers.

In order for line managers and employees in the organisation to have faith in the labour relations section, it is imperative that all employees in the labour relations section be competent with all the rules, policies and procedures relating to labour relations. In the Public service there is a need to have strong administrative support to get through the

paperwork as a result of the hierarchy. It is incumbent on the Labour Relations Officer to ensure that his subordinates are empowered to deal with issues raised by employees and other actors in the organisation. A Labour Relations Officer needs to be a generalist. By this it is implied that he together with his subordinates need to be familiar with the functions of the other operational sections in the organisation. This will assist in his understanding complaints and assist in the resolution of grievances.

While the Labour Relations Officer may be involved in empowerment sessions through workshops, seminars and information sessions it requires him to work closely with the skills development facilitator for the formal development of all levels of staff in order to ensure that it leads to the recognition of the training initiatives. Furthermore the *Skills Development Act of 1999* requires that a skills audit be conducted in order to establish individual training needs. This will assist in establishing the gap and providing appropriate training. The activities of the Labour Relations Officer revolve around communication and this function is an integral part of his responsibilities.

#### **4.7 COMMUNICATION**

Communication is an integral part of any relationship. Communication is the transference and understanding of meaning {including facts, ideas, attitudes, and opinions} and in the organisational context it is more complex than interpersonal communication because it involves roles and the authority hierarchy. *Cuming [1994:333]*

In the labour relationship, the Labour Relations Officer spends a lot of time communicating and communication is an important function that he performs or inputs into the system. The Labour Relations Officer communicates with both internal and external actors. The internal actors are the line functionaries and his immediate

subordinates, while external actors may be unions and other interest groups. This requires the Labour Relations Officer to be a good communicator and to also encourage and develop sound communication throughout the organization. “Numerous disputes and even labour actions are the result of poor or ineffective communication, and it is estimated that approximately 70 percent of all disputes are resolved by improved communication” [*Bendix 2000: 181*]

According to *Bendix [2000: 181]* the labour relations practitioner as the facilitator of the relationship should ensure that structures and processes are established to provide opportunities for communication. The traditional work relationship was top-down, one-way communication in the form of instructions or information from management. In these situations managers rarely request feedback from employees, and they do not ascertain whether communication has actually been understood. Communication involves the transfer of meaning and if no information or meaning has been conveyed then no communication has taken place.

#### **4.7.1 METHODS OF COMMUNICATION**

The use of language and terms, which are unfamiliar to employee(s), further hampers proper understanding, as does lengthy verbal communication of a complex nature. If the material to be communicated is complex, it should be broken down into separate, simple parts and written down. However, it is not enough to communicate important matters only in writing. Written communications are usually followed up by face-to-face communication during which the person receiving the communication can ask questions for clarification and provide feedback, and the communicator can check that the message has been clearly understood. In the public service, due to its size and the hierarchy face-to-face communication is rare. Policy, legislation and other prescripts are circulated

without controls being in place to ensure that all levels of employee receive and understand the contents.

The time and place of communication is also important according to *Cuming [1994:337]*.

It is unwise to communicate with employees on a noisy work floor or when they are preparing to leave work. In these circumstances, a message can go unheard, be ignored or forgotten immediately afterwards. Individuals ignore or misinterpret communication in terms of their mind set. If their thoughts are elsewhere, and if they have preconceived ideas about the communicator, or if they are antagonistic towards him or her, a message can be incorrectly received. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the communicator to ensure that the proper mental set is created, and that listeners are attuned to receiving the communication correctly.

Until now only the correct sending of messages has been emphasised but the correct receiving of communication is equally important. Perhaps the most important part of communication lies in the art of listening. Unfortunately few people that engage in communication concentrate on this aspect. Often people are so preoccupied with their own message that they neglect to listen to the message being transmitted by the other party. In this way precious feedback is lost. It is essential that the listener concentrates on and goes through the message being relayed to make sure that he or she has understood it correctly.

Direct or face-to-face communication is the preferred mode because the feedback can be obtained immediately. This is most advantageous in individual or small group situations. When communication is directed at large groups it is likely that much of the communication will be lost, unless the receivers are trained listeners or they are given

ample opportunity for interaction and feedback. Speaking and writing are not the only means of communication. Visual images, gestures and other oral stimuli such as music also communicate messages to the receiver. The use of different communication methods to transmit a message enhances the possibility of the message being correctly received, although care should be taken that the messages sent in different ways do not contradict each other.

To communicate effectively with any individual or group of individuals, a communicator needs, firstly, to gain an understanding of his or her audience and secondly, to place his or her communication within a frame of reference familiar to that audience. For example, communication is misplaced and ineffective if a group of children are addressed from an adult frame of reference. This is important in a multi-cultural situation where concepts, images, words and gestures differ according to different frames of reference.

#### **4.7.2 COMMUNICATION, POWER AND PERSUASION**

According to [*Cuming 1994:345*] staff problems pose difficult situations where communication techniques can decide a course of events. This may require strong persuasion where the communicator must first convince himself and clarify the objective and have realistic answers for possible difficult situations.

Many grievances occur in the workplace due to poor or ineffective communication. The Labour Relations Officer needs to ensure that communication is done in a free and open fashion. Control of information must be eliminated at all costs. As long as information is controlled, it is virtually impossible for anyone to challenge the decision and this is the power. Subordinates depend on their superiors for information and advice.

Since the supervisor has the power to withhold that information, the subordinate is dependent on the superior. An important part of the Labour Relations Officer's function is to communicate new developments in the labour relations field and this communication should be ongoing in order to educate and empower all the internal actors in the labour relations system.

#### **4.8 MANDATORY FUNCTIONS IN THE LABOUR RELATIONSHIP SUBSYSTEM**

The Labour Relations Officer is responsible for facilitating and promoting joint decision making through:

##### **4.8.1 Consultation and participation**

*Section 84[1] of the Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995* as amended specifies the areas for employer and employee consultation. Employees or their unions need to be consulted on issues like restructuring, education, training, mergers and transfers. Apart from coordination and secretarial support the Labour Relations Officer may also act as the facilitator during these consultation sessions. As a facilitator one needs to be attentive, alert and be impartial.

During consultation no settlement needs to be reached as the parties come together freely to explore common interests. The Labour Relations Officer needs to firstly ensure that he is familiar with the consultative issues and secondly to ensure that there exists a forum for this consultation.

##### **4.8.2 Collective bargaining**



*Section 23-26 of the Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995* spells out the issues for collective bargaining and joint decision-making. Collective bargaining is a process where employers and employee or their representatives come together to negotiate on matters of mutual interest. According to *Grobler [1996:515]* collective bargaining involves two broad and closely related processes: contract negotiations and grievance handling. The first process involves activities associated with creation of the labour-management contract and spells out aspects of the employment contract like discipline and other procedures and other substantive issues like salaries, working hours and so on. In the Public Service this type of bargaining is undertaken centrally under the auspices of the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council. All resolutions reached at this council becomes applicable to all Government departments. Individual Departments are not represented here but will need to implement all agreements. The Provinces are represented through the Office of the Premier and the Labour Relations Officer is not directly involved.

The Labour Relations Officer should however interpret and empower all employees on the contents of the agreements. The second process where collective bargaining takes place is in individual and collective grievance handling. Grievances may arise out of certain dissatisfaction or unhappiness and may require joint negotiations to reach a settlement. Collective bargaining may be approached in two different ways namely *integrative bargaining* and *distributive bargaining*.

*Distributive bargaining* is perhaps the most common and takes place when labour and management are in disagreement over issues and is referred to as a win -lose type of bargaining because a win to one party represents a loss to the other. *Integrative bargaining* takes place when there is co-operative negotiating relationship that benefits

both parties and is often referred to as a win- win situation. There is common interest and mutual trust between parties in this type of relationship and is evident in organisations that follow a pluralist approach.

In the Public Service there has been many concessions in the bargaining process recently that is indicative of us moving towards an integrative style of bargaining. Organised Labour and the Government have recently signed a 3-year multi term salary agreement and this reduces conflict on a yearly basis, and shows maturity on both sides. In order to promote sound labour relations, integrative bargaining should be promoted by the Labour Relations Officer. Furthermore he needs to assess the strengths and weaknesses of both parties before steering parties to a solution. There may also be a need for the Labour Relations Officer to caucus and advise management on tactics. According to *Bendix [1989:92]* the labour relations practitioner has to advise management on how to replace hostility with friendliness, suspicion with trust, and competition with co-operation.

Finally It is also the responsibility of the Labour Relations Officer to ensure that collective bargaining in respect of collective and individual grievances takes place speedily and as close to the point of origin and therefore the need to ensure logistical support like venues, refreshments and secretarial services.

#### **4.8.3 Dispute resolution**

Disputes are generally grievances that cannot be resolved internally and are therefore handled externally. *Section 135 of the Labour Relations Act No 66 of 1995* makes provision as the first step for the resolution of the dispute through conciliation. This is a voluntary process where the parties to the dispute come together with a Commissioner to resolve their differences. The Commissioner merely guides the process, as the parties

need to settle on a voluntary basis.

If the dispute remains unresolved, it proceeds to the next level namely arbitration or the Labour Court. As discussed labour relations as a staff or support function cannot take the decisions for the line functionaries at these external dispute resolution sessions. He must however guide and advise the line at the conciliation and attempt to get the parties to find a solution. Proceeding to arbitration or the Labour Court is costly and strains the employment relationship further. The skills of the Labour Relations Officer in problem solving and persuasion therefore become necessary.

As previously mentioned there is no consistency in this aspect in the public service as some departments request the Labour Relations Officer to undertake arbitration while others engage the services of the state attorney. Although the Labour Relations Officer should provide a support role it is imperative that he is familiar with dispute resolution procedures in order to provide appropriate guidance.

#### **4.9. MANAGING CONSISTENCY**

The Labour Relations Officer should ensure consistency in the manner in which similar issues are treated within the organisation. The labour relations unit should in fact monitor the actions of the line functionaries in response to problem situations and strive to educate the line managers on the need for consistent practices. For example the employer may not dismiss an employee for theft today, if an offender was merely warned for theft previously. Consistency enhances fairness and equity in the organization and creates certainty around the standards expected of employees.

#### **4.10 CONCLUSION**

The post apartheid government is promoting a form of societal corporatism. This means that business, organized labour and other interest groups are given a position within the decision making process of government, through structures like the CCMA, NEDLAC and legislation like the Labour Relations Act. The Labour Relations Officer must ensure that institutions for consultation and collective bargaining are set up and includes the managers with the authority to ensure meaningful participation. The Labour Relations Officer is responsible for empowering all levels of employees to fulfill their role and obligations to the labour relations system and the organisation.

## CHAPTER 5

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

After about two decades of neglect, action research had re-emerged in the 1980s as a significant form of research into practice according to *Feldman [1998:1]* Conversation and self-reflective inquiry is now increasingly being used in collaborative and participatory research. This method will be used in this paper to obtain responses relating to the topic. The aim is to obtain insight from an informed group of people rather than quantitative data from a representative sample of research participants.

### 5.2 METHODOLOGY OF ACTION RESEARCH

As its name implies, action research can be viewed as having two main outcomes- action and research. According to *Dick [1999:1]* action research is intended to produce both change {"**action**"} and understanding {"**research**"}

It therefore requires two sets of procedures, one to achieve each of its outcomes. In terms of the distinction between content and process, these are both instances of process. Content consists of the "what": the data. Process consists of the "how": for example the process for participation or for data collection.

#### 5.2.1 CYCLES

Action learning actually constructs a recurring learning cycle with four cognitive stages namely planning, acting, observing and reflecting, within a meta-cognitive cycle of

problematizing the learning and research process according to *[Hardman: 2002:7]*.

It often begins with only a rough or fuzzy research question, and perhaps a fuzzy methodology. It is common that the early cycles will yield fuzzy answers. These answers can be used to refine both questions and methodology.

According to *Dick [1999:4]* a typical cycle may look something like this:

**1a** Decide, which questions you wish to have answered; if it is the first step the question needs to be broad

**1b** Decide who to ask, and how to ask them. *[This and the previous step are planning]*

**2** Ask. *[This is the “act” component]*

**3a** Check the information you collected; devise ways of testing it in the next cycle.

**3b** Interpret the information-what does it mean? Devise ways of testing your interpretation in the next cycle.

**3c** Check your data and interpretation against relevant literature; can limit this to a few cycles in a reflective fashion.

This method was suited to this study because I wanted to change personally [action] and also achieve understanding [the research] at the same time.

## **5.3 RESEARCH METHODS**

### **5.3.1 CONVERSATION INTERVIEWS**

*Kvale [1996:3]* describes interviews as a conversation through two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer – as a miner or as a traveler. In the *miner metaphor*, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal.

Some miners seek objective facts to be quantified; others seek nuggets of essential meaning. In both conceptions the knowledge is waiting in the subjects' interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of the subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions.

The alternative *traveler metaphor* understands the interviewer as a traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer-traveler wanders through the landscapes and enters into conversations with people encountered. The traveler explores the country, as unknown territory or with maps, roaming freely around the territory. The interviewer asks questions that lead to subjects telling their own stories of their world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as "WANDERING TOGETHER WITH" What the traveler reporter hears and sees is described qualitatively and is reconstructed as stories to be told to the people of the interviewer's own country, and possibly also to those with whom the interviewer wandered.

According to *Kvale[1996:4]* the potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through the travelers interpretations; the tales are remolded into new narratives, which are convincing in their aesthetic form and are validated through their impact upon the listeners. The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as well. The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the interviewer to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for granted values and customs in the travelers home country. Through conversations, the traveler can lead others to new understanding and insight as they, through their own story-telling, may come to reflect on previously natural-seeming matters of course in their culture.

According to *Seidman[1991:16]*, interviews has long been a method of research, and

conversation and participant observation can be a way to collect and analyze data.

According to *Feldman [1998:10]* conversation is more than interchange, discourse or talk. Instead conversation suggests a connection that is sustained or sustainable and goes beyond chit-chat or chatter. There should be an exchange of views, a dialogue that consists of connected remarks and cooperation among the participants.

“Conversation is an activity that is done by people together. A person cannot be acting alone but with others: the act of conversing is a form of shared collective behaviour and must be seen as such to understand the nature of conversations” *Searle [1992:22]*.

Socrates encouraged engagement in conversation and discussion {dialectic} to make investigation of a topic a “conscious act” according to *Stumpf [1994:38]*. It is important that conversation have direction, a direction that arises through and in conversation and is associated by a process of understanding.

The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation, with a structure and purpose according to *Kvale[1996:6]*. It goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge. The research interview is not a conversation between equal partners; because the researcher defines and controls the situation.

### **5.3.2 REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE**

This research also explores reflection as part of the learning on the programme. Reflection requires one to return to the experience, by replaying it in the mind and describing it as factually as possible. Reflection is a process of thinking back about the situation under question and projecting to the future with a new understanding. *Schon [1987:27]*



describes two types of reflections, namely reflection in action and reflection on action.

Reflection in action means to think what one is doing while doing it, while reflection on action involves a cognitive process of looking back on experiences to explore again the understanding brought in the light of the outcomes. During reflection one has to re-interpret by ensuring that all mental models and other stereotypes are challenged and considered while attending to feelings that are surfaced. I have also reflected on my experiences during the conversations and through the modules and explored my feelings and understandings. Reflection is undertaken in this study to expose the experience, feeling and understanding of the modules that inspired me. The intention is to also highlight that action research is essential for learning.

### **5.3.3 INTERVIEWS**

This qualitative study was undertaken by means of conversation because it was hoped to obtain primary yet influenced opinion about the topic. Questionnaires don't capture "the full story," while contact interviews surface the story fully. Questionnaires tend to restrict participants and the process is somewhat formal. Furthermore the research problem was based on perceptions of unionist and labour relations officials and interviews can unlock these perceptions. I am familiar with the stakeholders in the labour relations field and was able to engage with them after bargaining chamber meetings. Two telephonic conversations were held with unionists because time constraints and geographical factors restricted the contact sessions. Contact conversations allowed the interviewer to assess the emotions of the interviewees through facial expressions and their tone of speech.

The interviews were semi structured and open ended thereby allowing topics to be discussed in detail. The study was conducted over a few months and conversations were conducted in English and generally lasted between 20 to 30 minutes.

### **5.3.2.2 QUESTIONS**

Initially there was much difficulty in determining the content and the number of questions. It would have been easy to pose just one question that determined the views of the interviewees regarding competencies. However this would have been influenced by the interviewees own skills, qualifications, experience and their world views. Instead short questions around the problems and possible solutions would provide a greater understanding of the issues.

The introductory questions obtained the length of experience qualifications, skills, training and experience of the interviewees in labour relations. This assisted in relaxing interviewees while creating a link to subsequent questions. Apart from this, five questions were posed to all interviewees during the telephonic and contact conversation sessions. The first four questions were asked in order to determine whether the new employment laws brought about any change in the way labour relations was being practiced. If changes were brought about, interviewees were probed further about these changes, and the impact it had on their practice. The questions also ascertained what problems were being experienced and participants were also probed about possible interventions and whether they were in a position to intervene and bring about change.

Apart from these main questions it was also necessary to ask clarifying questions from the respondents. These were spontaneous from the interviewer and varied from respondent to respondent. Apart from the last closed question, the rest of the questions were designed to elicit comment around skills, roles, behaviour, feelings expectations, and the experience necessary in the application, promotion and maintenance of labour relations. The five questions that were posed to all interviewees during the conversation are attached as

## ***Annexure 1***

Qualitative interviews should be fairly informal according to *Hancock [2002:10]*. The interview sessions were informal and allowed a lot of leeway with the participants conversing at liberty and advancing their own opinions. This approach allowed participants to give more detailed opinions on other issues that were of concern to them.

### **5.3.2.3 PARTICIPANTS**

The Public Service is a large employer to conduct research and this study had to focus on a narrow scale. The conversations were therefore restricted to the stakeholders within the General Public Service Sectoral Bargaining Chamber in KwaZulu- Natal, as the Department of Housing belonged to this Bargaining Chamber. Furthermore this Chamber has a manageable number of stakeholders to interview, and was in close proximity to the interviewer. The interviewer was familiar with the stakeholders in this Chamber having been involved in its activities for some time, and this made the interactional skills easier. The conversations were conducted with the 8 Labour Relations officials, 3 employees and 4 union officials. Of the 3 employees interviewed, 2 were supervisors. The Bargaining Chamber has 2 recognized unions and both union officials from the respective unions were interviewed.

### **5.4 DATA ANALYSIS**

*Hancock [2002: 16]* maintains that analysis of data in research involves summarizing the mass of data collected and processing the results in a way that communicates the most important features. In quantitative research, analysis involves coding items like frequencies of variables, differences between variables and statistical tests mainly through

counting.

In qualitative research he contends that there is no system of precoding in order to identify and label items of data collected in order to compare data from other interviewees.

However in order to discover the big picture, content analysis is used. “Content analysis is a procedure for the categorization of verbal or behavioural data for qualitative research” according to *Hancock [2002:17]*. The content can be analyzed on two levels. The basic level is a descriptive account of the data: this is what was actually said with nothing read into it and nothing assumed about it. The higher level of analysis is interpretative: it is concerned with what was meant by the response, what was inferred or implied.

This approach was used in this study. Notes were kept of the individual conversations and later consolidated. A body of opinions and remarks was obtained, and the repeated responses became visible. The responses were categorized into a way that describes what it was about. The number of categories that were linked in some way was consolidated into major/minor categories or themes. Causal relationships and patterns were also identified in the themes. This process was time consuming, as data had to be revisited and themes reviewed. *The responses to questions have been arranged into themes and attached as annexure 2.*

The experiences during the modules in the masters programme are briefly returned to, and the feelings and prior knowledge is interpreted critically in relation to the new knowledge being surfaced.

## **5.5 RELIABILITY**

*Chenail [1995:2]* describes openness in the qualitative research for validity and reliability.

This requires presenting the story of the research methods opposed to just being descriptive and narrative in the findings. If openness is maintained then other researchers can come along at a later stage and take over. In order to share the wealth and to invite another to continue the conversation, raw data is available for interested parties.

## **5.6 LIMITATIONS**

English was the medium used in the study, and this was not the first language of some of the interviewees' All the people interviewed were known to the researcher and it could have limited or restricted their responses. Furthermore interviewees might have felt that when they expressly supported a particular view, idea or skill, they would be supporting a process of enriching their own needs and desires in the job.

## **5.7 CONCLUSION**

A qualitative approach was chosen because the aim was to gather data from an informed group of people rather than quantitative data from a representative sample of research participants. Due to this approach, rich first hand experiences and feelings of stakeholders involved in labour relations was obtained.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter covered the research methodology and data collection methods. This chapter presents the views of the different people that conversations were held with, and the views and findings will be presented as accurately as possible. This will then be related to literature review and new theories will be highlighted. The reflection on the modules that inspired me to think and act differently will also be presented.

### **6.2 INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

Both the contact and telephonic interviews revealed turbulence in the relationship, and I was glad to discover the issues that I previously never thought about or experienced. The questions were broad and as a result some responses had no relevance to competencies. The disadvantage of this was having to sift through unnecessary information and this was time consuming. However the advantage was that certain deficiencies in the competencies were extracted from the other questions and in the end, the extra work was worthwhile. The details of the interviews have been arranged into themes and attached as Annexure 2. I will report on some of the common themes and findings.

### **6.3 GENERAL FINDINGS**

#### **Representation by race and gender**

An interesting finding was that the Labour Relations officials and the union officials within the General Public Sector Bargaining Chamber were dominated by African males.

### **Qualifications, skills and training**

The unionists and Labour Relations officials were critical about the skills that they felt the other required, and this was influenced by their mental models, experiences and demands of those they serve. The common qualifications held by the Labour Relations Practitioners were Public Administration degrees, while they had attended various training sessions, workshops and seminars related to labour relations. The training frequency had increased since the introduction of the skills development legislation. Only one unionist had a three year qualification in human resources while another was studying towards a law degree.

*Responses to the questions were as follows:*

#### **Question 1. WHAT IMPACT HAS THE NEW LABOUR LAWS HAVE ON LABOUR RELATIONS?**

The employment laws promoted a less legalistic approach to labour relations. These laws required the employer and unions to work jointly, reach consensus and encouraged cooperation. The laws required compliance with new procedures and promoted more humane treatment of workers through the introduction of corrective counseling measures. Generally positive outcomes have emanated from the Employment Equity Act where parties jointly took responsibility for the plan, and as a result departments in the general sector were representative of all the race groups. A negative outcome was the increase in disputes, because of easy access and low costs involved in conciliation and arbitration. There was a greater budget for training and the money was being spent for this purpose.

#### **Question 2. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS BEING EXPERIENCED CURRENTLY WITHIN LABOUR RELATIONS?**

It emerged that communication and teamwork in industrial relations was lacking. Leadership was another concern raised by all the interviewees. Labour Relations officials were blamed for unethical conduct as they could not be trusted. Gaps in employment practices were as a result of the absence of HR policies and inconsistent application of collective bargaining resolutions. Unions blamed labour relations for not doing enough to resolve issues while Labour Relations officials blamed unions for bringing unreasonable and having frivolous demands. The advisory and support role of labour relations was also blamed for the ineffectiveness of labour relations and the unionists felt that this could be overcome through the right leadership. Labour Relations performed the discipline functions of line supervisors and this annoyed unionists.

***Question 3. HOW IS LABOUR RELATIONS DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS?***

Labour relations training needs have been conducted and budget for this purpose has been increased. Communication and consultation with shop stewards had increased while research is undertaken more frequently in order to support labour law arguments. Labour Relations officials also acknowledged that they lacked the power to convince management on decision taken or the decision they should take. Labour Relations Officials were not part of the decision making process in the public service and were lobbying for this Provincially.

***Question 4. CAN YOU PROVIDE SOME SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICERS POSITION THEMSELVES TO TRANSFORM THIS SECTOR?***

The dominant feeling from unionists was to professionalize Labour Relations with



compulsory registration and adherence to a Code of Conduct. Labour Relations officials should be “visible” and approachable. Interviewees also felt that Labour Relations Officials need to concentrate on developing the people management skills of managers. Labour Relations Officials felt that they needed to be taken more seriously by management.

**Question 5. WHAT COMPETENCIES SHOULD A LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICIAL HAVE IN ORDER TO RENDER AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SERVICE?**

Experience, qualifications and appropriate leadership abilities were common responses by all the stakeholders. Interpersonal and litigation skills were also highlighted.

**6.3 PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS**

I found no link with problems (question 2) in the labour relations arena and the last question on competencies. It is either people were not prepared to think or where not familiar with soft skills. I observed that responses alluded to and/or indicated the need for experience and soft skills or qualities associated with leadership. While leadership skills were spoken about, I tried to unpack this but responses were not forthcoming. I had to make sense and interpret this from the questions. All the respondents mentioned the generic mandatory competencies for labour relations mentioned in chapter 4 of this study.

Finally with qualitative research there is no statistics to present, but this study was a profound experience that added to my knowledge and brought about change to the way I will conduct my work in future. Certain remarks that were made during the interviews touched me and are therefore reported:

*“They are dogs with only a bark and cannot position themselves for change”*, was a remark made by a Unionist. This was leveled against labour relations and I was able to understand this metaphor being used to describe the feeling. A previous event or experience had convinced the interviewee that labours relations is not effective.

One Labour Relations Official had this to say *“it is difficult to push top management for decisions, because we fear being worked out. When we fail, unions should do so”*. This type of statement questions the integrity and maturity of top management and the Labour Relations Official concerned.

The previous statement was collaborated when one employee mentioned that *“labour relations profess to promote the employer and employee relations, yet they have a clear bias towards the employer”*.

*“The country has the most progressive labour laws yet the statistics from the various Bargaining Chambers and the CCMA reflect an increase in industrial unrest. No amount of reconciliation will reduce the conflict. What is required is for the culture of entitlement to be addressed’*. This comment was made by a Labour Relations official who also had previous experience in human resource management. If the comment was indeed true, then the inference that was drawn was that labour relations were not in a position to deal with problems of this nature.

## **6.4 REFLECTION**

Reflection is integral to this research and this masters Programme has been a marvelous

learning experience. Whilst in conversation with colleagues from the unions I identified with their concerns as I previously worked for a union. I was equally able to identify with problems expressed by my peers in other Departments and the reflection in action was apparent.

I will reflect on the modules and the dominant themes that emerged during the conversation, as this made the research even more intriguing because it made me look at my own practice critically.

#### **6.4.1 SYSTEMS THINKING & PRACTICE**

This was my first exposure to systems thinking and I battled to see the bigger picture on the first two days. The use of rich pictures and metaphors was a marvelous way of depicting stakeholders and understanding the boundaries, links and interdependence within systems. The use of metaphors to look at situations enabled me to see the Department of Housing as an organism. As an open system I was able to see the constant interaction with the external environment. I realized that the interconnectedness was not being exploited to understand the complexity of the components.

This holistic thinking helped me realize the shortcomings of there being a lack of consultation with stakeholders on the labour relations function because no clear goals, role and function were established for the Labour Relations Officer. The diverse perspectives of the unions, managers and employees were not part of the conceptualization of the labour relations section, although there is consensus among the stakeholders for sound labour relations in the organisation.

After the third day of lectures I developed a better understanding of systems and the

cultural and political metaphor. Through these metaphors I understood why the various stakeholders have their own ways of thinking and acting thereby resulting in competition. Line managers, employees and organized labour for example see Human Resources as the stumbling block and the enemy. Line managers and supervisors refer all employee benefit and behaviour queries to human resources and labour relations respectively because they see these units as the problem solvers.

Also line managers and employees do not understand Human Resources processes and policies, and when Human Resources prescribe corrective or preventative action, the line managers and employees blame human resources and labour relations. Conversely it was also discovered that there is too much reliance on Human Resources and as a result Human Resources use this to their advantage and therefore dictate to the Line Managers instead of advising and supporting them. There is an ongoing problem with Human Resources defining their own boundaries of operation or working outside their mandates when it pleases them.

Genuine change can take place through meaningful participation of all actors at the various levels of the organisation. In order to enhance synergy and cohesion the core problems must be surfaced and explored. The systems approach is refreshing and empowering as it allows one to test alternative behaviour and to develop ways to operate with interest and increased effectiveness in the environment, which previously confused or restricted creativity.

I have also realized that systems are resilient and the more things change, the more they remain the same. I have also learnt to believe in efficacy and ethical value of adapting relational practices and therefore the need for qualitative change in the way labour relations operate.

## **6.4.2 MODULE ON ETHICS**

This module introduced me to the power to distinguish between right and wrong. It was the first formal introduction to tools for dealing with ethical dilemmas that I am normally confronted with in practice. I found the lectures interesting and was excited in recording my journal which confirmed the good in me. According to *Bendix* in chapter 3 of this study, Labour Relations requires a special type of individual who is able to integrate elements of emotional quotients and ethical conduct. The Labour Relations Officer needs to harmonise and even integrate these values to the values of management. This module allowed me to review my conduct at work and my life in general.

From the study it became clear that the Labour Relations official needs to have the ability to balance ethical, religious, cultural and other concerns while displaying and building the highest standards of ethical and moral conduct in order to promote confidence and trust in the management of labour relations.

## **6.4.3 LEADING IN TURBULENT TIMES**

Ms Denise Hill was a dynamic facilitator who made me review the kind of support I give to my organization. Her presentations were relevant to today's world and included role play, practical exercises and assessments. I was touched and felt a measure of guilt when she mentioned that lawyers and unionists operate within closed systems that restrict interaction. The modules on mentoring, communication, feedback and coaching made me realize how little attention was paid to this in the labour relation.

In my practice field discipline is relatively closed because the rule of law is specific about

the outcome of a particular action. If a line manager requests advice in respect of a misconduct relating to theft, and the corresponding sanction for this offence is dismissal, then my mental model would dictate that I recommend the corresponding punitive action of dismissal. This is a results orientated approach and I do not look at corrective or underlying issues that may have caused this employee to get involved in theft in the first place. No attempts are made to ask questions to see what the employee thinks and feels. Discipline also requires a holistic approach. In fact the root of organisational problems relating to conduct is an inability to optimise our own and others emotional energy.

Emotional intelligence quotients like empathy, self-awareness and social skills need to be developed and will assist in refocusing attention to the limbic system. This limbic system is the deep brain structures associated with emotion, behaviour and motivation. Here communication skills are necessary because if I am to move away from the results orientated approach I need to become an active listener and become more empathetic. The employee must be looked at holistically for the cause of the particular behaviour. I need to be motivated enough to work for reasons other than money, status or role. Finally I need to practise tolerance in order to have self control and be forgiving. I must strive to cover in a positive way the faults and weaknesses of others for the benefit of the organization, while extolling their virtues. This will assist in all levels of employees developing trust in the Labour Relations Officer. In chapter 3, of this study these self-awareness and self-management qualities are indicated as important competencies for regulating the self.

In my practice field I also tend to concentrate on task issues. There is little attention being paid to relationships, listening and receiving feedback. The labour relations unit in general is too busy with paperwork and providing statistics on the number of dismissal and victories achieved, that we tend to forget that we are dealing with people. Too much effort is paid to winning as opposed to us striving for a win - win situation. After all the public

service pays my salary, and my performance is also assessed by the nature and type of guidance and support provided. It is this guidance and support that I provide, that determines the result at the disciplinary hearing or at arbitrations.

We interact with staff and Line Managers in a very formal way because of the hierarchy in the Public Service. I feel that the Labour Relations Officer requires greater interaction as I am too serious in the interaction and this is less energising. As a rule, Labour Relations Officers should not be directly involved in the discipline process. Labour Relations as a support function is there to advise and guide both staff and line functionaries and therefore taking sides would destroy the trust and the relationship.

The challenge is therefore to ensure that learning is ongoing through the transfer of skills to the line functionaries and staff. There is a need to move away from my current style of lecturing and holding information sessions, and instead concentrate on coaching. As discussed in **chapter 4**, coaching as an art of transformational leadership inspires learners to discover by doing things for themselves.

The Labour Relations official must have sound judgment in order to identify and grasp the complexities that tend to be overlooked by other stakeholders. This requires looking and thinking through problems from various angles in an objective way.

#### **6.4.4 MODULE ON LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND PRACTICES**

The module on Leadership theories and Practices were the most exciting 4 days I spent in my second year of study. Presentations by Mr Angajan, Professor Taylor and Mr Shivaar Singh were practical and could be used out of the work context. This module confirmed that leading is a key responsibility of the Labour Relations Officer.

Bureaucracies like the Public Service breed spectators and shift the burden of responsibility and accountability. I find myself as a spectator because I merely advise and support Line Managers and rarely expose myself to accountability because I avoid the concomitant vulnerability of my actions. As a spectator I don't see myself as a leader. I need to become more accountable to myself and by doing so; I can interact with others with integrity and honesty. I need to stimulate maturity in order for interactive leadership to be meaningful.

The situational models on leadership also covered in this research have however convinced me that the choice of an individual to lead in a given situation will depend on the situation and the challenge being faced - not on the title or seniority of the person. Notwithstanding the fact that the Labour Relations Officer plays an information and advisory role, he can still make a difference through his leadership qualities.

**In chapter 3 the professional, technocratic and paternalistic role models were discussed. It was also concluded that not all of these models enhance a pluralist approach to labour relations. The unitary approach to labour relations supported by the paternalistic role model has no viability in South Africa given the constitutional entrenchments of the rights to strike, rights to associate and rights to collective bargain.**

A pluralist approach with a combination of the technocratic and professional role model is therefore proposed as it will contribute to the enhanced performance by the Labour Relations Officer. The limitation of the professional role model namely the lack of authority and organisational power can be overcome through appropriate situational leadership interventions like influence and inspiration. Influencing skills is essential for the Labour Relations Official when he has to interact and deal with unions, employees and



management. His ability to influence will make these stakeholders understand and contribute to the effective and efficient labour relations in the organisation.

The technocratic role model promotes efficiency and effectiveness in all spheres of the organisation. It is imperative that the initial goal of the Labour Relations Officer should be the efficient management of the labour relations unit. It is logical that the Labour Relations Officer cannot strive for efficiency and effectiveness in other sections of the organisations if his section lacks this.

Adaptation of this approach will enable the Labour Relations Officer to get acceptance and support from the line managers because they will be striving for the same goals. Similarly acceptance and support from the employees will result in the integration of the employees needs with those of the organisation. Currently I must stress that the Labour Relations Officer is merely occupied with issues relating to the functions of the labour relations section and do not concern himself with issues relating to production and service delivery.

I feel there is however a need for the Labour Relations Officer to expand on the traditional service standards or production orientated type of relationship in the public service by establishing and maintaining acceptance of a wider set of criteria like ethical and moral standards, fairness and equity and sound human relations. This is often neglected by the Labour Relations Officer although it is an important function of the Labour Relations Officer.

A morally astute official will also concern himself with the impact of his and others action on the society at large. His loyalty should lie beyond the boundaries of the organisation. It is obvious that the role of the Labour Relations Officer will be also influenced by the expectations of the management in general from the respective organisation. His task will be made difficult if he has to deal with managers who have paternalistic and unitary

tendencies. His task will be made that more difficult having to deal with resistance and change.

**Chapter 4** of this study underscored the challenge for an integrated approach to labour relations. Therefore interactive and transformational leadership will result in me also learning from line managers regardless of their position in the organisation. By interacting and listening I can surface their fears and deal with them in an open manner.

*Lauron Buys and Belinda Davies [2002:2]* wrote that leaders need to assess their performance and pinpoint strengths and to stay focused by coaching others in the organisation to translate their vision into something that comes to fruition. This must be done without fear of losing his job.

I need to admit that I am also guilty of not coaching and empowering my staff and the line managers. There is this fear that unlocking the potential of staff and those I serve will lead to our own demise or popularity. This was also confirmed during the research where employees revealed that knowledge was not being shared and communication was generally top down.

My own feelings surfaced and I have also on occasion not shared information and knowledge with my superiors when frustrated over work issues. There is also the need to justify the existence and need for the labour relations unit. Performance of the labour relations unit is unfortunately assessed on a yearly basis by the number of queries and instances of guidance offered by the unit. This is a poor tool to assess performance. Instead proactive attempts to promote sound labour relations should instead be assessed. People management and empowerment is a typical competency necessary to manage and encourage people thereby optimizing their outputs and fostering good relationships.

During my theory search it was apparent that leaders are counted by the number of leaders they create and not followers. Personally I now see empowering and transferring skills to all within the organisation as an ongoing learning cycle and understand that transferring skills will result in an improved skills pool, employees in general will be more committed to the goals of the organisation and communication will improve. Rewards will be self-satisfying because I will have less stress due to fewer queries from employees and the managers. Managers will be able to deal with their staff on their own.

#### **6.4.5 LEARNING AND CHANGE**

This was the first module that I attended on the programme and was introduced to cause and influence diagrams and group work. Being in groups invoked some anxiety and uncertainty but I settled in. The work by *Donald Schon* and others made a remarkable contribution to my understanding of the theory and practice of learning. His thinking around action learning and reflection in action has been used in this paper and has become part of my work.

I have realized that society as a whole is in a constant state of transformation and one has to learn and improve all the time. I am guilty of fighting to remain the same and therefore lose out on the positive impact that change can have.

This module and the module on partnership surfaced the need to embrace the paradox of being a leader in my practice field. Whilst I may promote care, love and support to those I interact with, I may also have to advise line managers on dismissing an employee. This entire study has assisted me in finding that balance. Adaptability and managing change is an essential competency for the Labour Relations Officer. He needs to have the ability to work effectively in a sector where change is ongoing and there is a need for a resourceful

response to new circumstances and demands. He needs to have the ability to initiate and drive transformation in order to achieve the goals of the organisation.

#### **6.4.5 PARTNERSHIPS**

This was another interesting module where I learnt that at general level partnerships are seen as joint venture where synergy is created and people rely on each other in order to achieve a common goal or objective. I feel that as a support function labour relations needs to use the partnership as a balancing tool between good and bad. Labour Relations needs to promote and sustain the partnership between unions, management and employees. I experienced that partnerships do create space for innovation when dealing with complex situations.

During the course of this research the Public Service was undergoing restructuring and unions and the various Departments worked together in task teams when dealing with employees who were excess to their needs. I was part of the process and saw the leadership traits on either side that drove the partnering process. The employer leaders created the trust and love when dealing with possible retrenchments while union leaders were willing to deal with risks and the uncertainties. I also felt a new energy from all the stakeholders and feel partnerships needs to be explored between the various sections in the workplace. Being a team player assisted in promoting collaboration and achieving synergy, as the Labour Relations Officer has to work with unions, employees and management.

#### **6.5 CONCLUSION**

Reflection enables a greater level of understanding, while questioning helps to make sense

of ones own practice. Reflection enables one to critically interpret prior learning and understanding the new knowledge being surfaced. The interpretation, recommendations and conclusion are discussed in the final chapter.

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## CHAPTER 7

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Through the journey in this study, I was able to uncover the meaning of the experiences of the interviewees and learnt as a result. Some experiences were easy to relate to, and therefore brought me to the understanding that although we have progressive laws, not much has changed in the practice of labour relations. However I have also come to realize that individual stakeholders like the Labour Relations Officer can bring about change.

### 7.2 INTERPRETATION

According to *Hancock [2002:17]* the higher level of data analysis is interpretative: it is concerned with what was meant by the response, what was inferred or implied. We will discuss this in terms of behaviour, I will also reflect on the linkages between the literature that was covered in the study.

#### *Behaviour*

According to *Bendix[2001:18]*, there is a need for an ethical framework for labour relations, as little attention is paid to a system of ethics. The literature review also referred to professionalism to the way in which public managers and their employees behave, and to the fact that this conduct is evaluated according to the standards unique to the activities of the public sector managers. Labour Relations Officials are confronted with two imperatives i.e., satisfying their individual standards of professional performance and conduct and adhering to those imposed upon them by their employer, public policy and society at large. Professional conduct from Labour Relations Officers requires adherence

to sound moral conduct and reasonable performance in all circumstances in achieving the organisation's goal. The general principles which should govern the conduct of all public officials are based on the premise that the maintenance of high standards of honesty, trust, integrity and impartiality is essential to assure proper performance of government tasks and the maintenance of public trust, confidence, and respect of the citizens for their government. Public officials at all levels of government bear a special responsibility to be fair and impartial when dealing with all citizens and their work colleagues.

From the conversations and my observations, it appeared that the lack of an ethical framework is evident by the lack of trust that permeates the labour relationship. Labour Relations Officials were concentrating most of their energy on maintaining sound behaviour throughout the organization. This was being done through various training and awareness campaigns but there was little attention being paid to adhering to the same moral principles.

### ***Emotional Intelligence***

The literature review and reflective exercise made me believe that the root of all organizational problems relating to conduct was the inability to optimize our own and others emotional energy. Instead we tend to concentrate on the conduct on a superficial level. In chapter 3, Goleman's framework of emotional intelligence highlights four emotional skills namely self awareness, social awareness, self control and management and relationship management. According to him if people master these skills, it translates to on the job success. The findings revealed that the legislation promoted a more humane and people centered approach to labour relations and a major deficiency was the lack of soft skills on the part of Labour Relations Officials.

### ***Leadership***

Linked closely to behaviour is the Hersey-Blanchard situational theory. This theory which focuses on followers highlight two types of leadership styles and behaviour namely *task behaviour* and *relationship behaviour*. In the former the leader spells out and organizes the task for the followers. The relationship behaviour implies the extent to which leaders maintain interpersonal relationships between themselves and others. Selecting the right leadership style is contingent on the level of maturity of followers. Maturity in this context refers to the ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for directing their behaviour. One of the leadership styles that this theory highlights is the participative style where the leader and follower shares in decision-making and the leader plays a facilitating role in activities. The findings revealed that the Labour Relations Official as a follower was not part of the decision-making process that top management was involved with, and as result could not provide expert advice and guidance when decisions were taken. However in their interaction with unionists, Labour Relations official assumes the role of leader and is guilty of not invoking the participative style of decision-making.

### ***Training, Development and Empowerment***

Since the nineties there has been a concerted effort to address the training deficiencies in all sectors. The ability to train has emerged as a competency for the Labour Relations Official during literature review. The findings also revealed that since the introduction of the new employment laws, attention was being given to training and creating awareness throughout the organisation. Whilst the theory confirms this as being an important function of the labour relations official, the question is whether those receiving the training are developing and learning and whether the training was relevant to their needs. The findings reflected poor attendance at training sessions while a further observation was that training revolved around employment laws or was related to the labour relations function.

### **Action Research**



I found the fieldwork during the assignments and in this research to be a profound experience, but the analysis and interpretation was time consuming. During this research I felt alone and lost when trying to categorize and interpret data, because it was difficult to establish whether the interpretation was logical. Notwithstanding this, the descriptive level of the conversations exposed me to certain deficiencies in my own abilities.

### **7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The masters programme did contribute to my personal development and has changed my approach from operating within a closed system to an open one. The knowledge that was gained will improve my performance and I will share this knowledge with colleagues, in order to improve our practice. The competencies recommended are provisional and may need a rethink in the future, and further research needs to be done in other sectors to establish dominant and successful competencies that enhance and promote sound labour relations. The competencies listed herein should be reflected in the recruitment of Labour Relations Practitioners.

*Bendix [2001:4]* talks about labour relations as a human relationship which requires mutuality of interest, shared goals and values, understanding and trust. Due to the nature of the labour relationship, addressing the competencies of the Labour Relations Officer alone will not address the problem situation. Although some competencies may be generic, further research may be necessary to investigate the competencies essential for unionists. Leadership is about increasing service to others and taking a more holistic look to work. According to *Spears [1995:195]*, it is not possible to talk about a new type of organization without a new type of leadership. Therefore any shift in the predominant character of a business will be inseparable from a shift in the predominant theory and practice of

leadership. The research surfaced some of the challenges that were facing the Public Service and in the light of this; the following specific interpersonal and leadership and interpersonal skills are discussed and recommended.

***Development of emotional competencies***

Emotional competencies are essential to realize success at work and are increasingly being introduced to understand and change the behaviour of individuals. As managers move from a control style to a commitment style, they need to develop learned capabilities like empathy, influence and flexibility.

***Judgment*** – This is having the ability to differentiate and look at issues holistically, and objectively. The Labour Relations Officer should be able to adapt to change and be able to respond to new demands or situations in a resourceful fashion. It is essential that for trust to prevail, and good relations to be sustained, that the Labour Relations Officer maintains the confidence of all stakeholders. This requires that he does not evaluate but needs to maintain the utmost *confidentiality* when rendering guidance and advice.

***Customer Focus*** – Leadership needs to concentrate on internal and external requirements of stakeholders. It is essential to actively seek feedback and ensure that the needs of the internal and external clients are met. This also requires a work ethic that ensures that leaders are committed and focused on the work at hand. Customer focus means initiating and maintaining independent and prompt action at all times.

***Persuading and Influencing others*** – Labour Relations Officials need this ability to motivate others to achieve desired goals by directing and delegating as the situation requires. This skill is necessary to gain cooperation and commitment from others.

***Decision Making and Problem Solving*** – means creatively identifying, surfacing, analyzing and resolving current and anticipated problems effectively and efficiently. The Labour Relations Officer must have the ability to apply expertise in selecting a course of action from multiple options depending on the situation. This competency will be useful when confronted with new and existing risks and challenges that require initiative.

***Direct and simple communication*** should be undertaken by Labour Relations Officials as it will help to exchange ideas and information in a clear and concise way. Direct communication can persuade, convince and influence. The skill of listening and feedback are important for accurate communication. Communication also requires *self-awareness and management*, and the Labour Relations Officer needs to regulate himself in order to be calm, control emotions and adapt his behaviour and work methods to changing conditions and obstacles.

***Conflict management*** – This is the ability that is required to manage and resolve conflicts effectively. During conflict resolution, being *assertive* can influence conflicting parties to resolve problems or achieve particular goals.

***Coaching*** – The challenge is for Labour Relations Officials to equip line managers and employees to deal with the complexities of the employment relationship. In the Public Service the value and competitive edge lies in its people and not a product. Building strategic value around the employees is therefore important. The Labour Relations Official needs to take the initiative to continuously develop, encourage and empower the people he supports, in order to optimize their outputs. Coaching should be encouraged because it requires a focused attempt at sharing knowledge and experience, while providing feedback to the development attempts. Coaching will allow the coach to determine whether attempts at transferring knowledge and skills are successful.

Systems thinking enable holistic thinking in order to understand the complexities and the interconnectedness between the elements of the system. The system interacts with the environment and is also influenced by the environment. The Labour Relations Officer needs to *manage the political, social and cultural influences* in the workplace, by having the ability to understand operations, structures, functions and objectives of government. He needs to display tolerance and be sensitive towards issues of politics, culture and religion.

#### **7.4 CONCLUSION**

Legislation alone will not bring about change or encourage and promote cooperation in labour relations. More resources must be concentrated on training and development in interpersonal and leadership skills. My theory is that the shortcomings of the traditional advisory, support and information role can be overcome through a professional, strategic and ethical approach to labour relations. While there is interdependence and interaction between the role and function of the Labour Relations Officer, the role he plays is also influenced by the functions expected of him from the people he support and guide. Furthermore the roles of the Labour Relations officer are influenced by the competencies, and the role that he plays, will be determined by his competencies.

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## **ANNEXURE 1**

### **\* INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS AROUND EXPERIENCE, LENGTH OF SERVICE, QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING**

***Question 1.* WHAT IMPACT HAS THE NEW LABOUR LAWS HAVE ON LABOUR RELATIONS?**

***Question 2.* WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS BEING EXPERIENCED CURRENTLY WITHIN LABOUR RELATIONS?**

***Question 3.* HOW IS LABOUR RELATIONS DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS?**

***Question 4.* CAN YOU PROVIDE SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICERS POSITION THEMSELVES TO TRANSFORM THE PUBLIC SERVICE?**

***Question 5.* WHAT COMPETENCIES SHOULD A LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICIAL HAVE IN ORDER TO RENDER AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SERVICE?**

## **ANNEXURE 2**

**INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS** – *interviewees existing skills, training, experience and qualifications were categorized as:*

### **Qualifications, skills, training, experience**

Public administration degree

Human Resource Management diploma

Collective bargaining training

Junior management course

Discipline training

Conciliation and arbitration

Management of grievances

**Question1. WHAT IMPACT HAS THE NEW LABOUR LAWS HAVE ON LABOUR RELATIONS?**

### **Training**

Discipline a management function

New procedures introduced

### **Progressive discipline**

Counseling

Human touch to discipline

### **Other**

Introduced participative structures  
Encouraged interaction cooperation  
Ensured greater representivity of the population groups

**Question 2. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS BEING EXPERIENCED CURRENTLY WITHIN LABOUR RELATIONS?**

**Discrimination & inconsistency**

Conditions of service

**Behavioural**

Insubordination

Fraud and corruption

Alcohol & substance abuse

Poor work ethic by all employees

Negligence

No trust in Labour Relations officials

**Relationship**

No teamwork

Labour relations lack social skills

**Employment Practices**

Nepotism

Absence of labour relations and HR policies

Inconsistent application of policies

Incompetent staff

Management's failure to discipline

Fewer promotion opportunities due to employment equity

### **Leadership**

Failure by labour relations and senior management to take decisions and poor decision making

Poor people management skills

Lack of response and adherence to time frames by labour relations officials

Top management not decisions which are in conflict with prescripts

### **General**

Increase in grievances and disputes

Poor attendance at training sessions

Training lacks focus and not relevant

High expectations of redress by workers and unions

Lack of confidentiality by labour relations staff

Information not being shared

Labour relations performing discipline functions

### **Question 3. HOW IS LABOUR RELATIONS DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS?**

#### **Communication**

Information/Awareness sessions on disciplinary code and behaviour standards to employees and management

Information sessions/workshops on labour related prescripts

Facilitation of grievances and disputes

Newsletters

**Other**

Researching trends to determine causes and intervention

**Question 4. CAN YOU PROVIDE SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICERS POSITION THEMSELVES TO TRANSFORM THE PUBLIC SERVICE?****Professional conduct**

Independent and objective

Professional registration

Honesty

Ensure equity and fairness

Empathy

**Interpersonal**

Enhance and promote dialogue within the organization and with stakeholders

Timeous communication on collective agreements

Ensure consistency in application of rules and standards

Be assertive and operate without fear or favour

**Other**

Yearly training seminar to keep abreast of case law

**Question 5. WHAT COMPETENCIES SHOULD A LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICIAL HAVE IN ORDER TO RENDER AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT**

## **SERVICE?**

### **Qualifications /Experience**

Labour Relations

Human Resources Management

### **Litigation skills**

Arbitration

Investigation and chairing of disciplinary cases

### **Leadership skills**

Responsiveness

Ethical conduct

Problem solving

### **Interpersonal skills**

Communication

Being able to influence

Conflict management

Chairing and Facilitation

### **Management skills**

Collective bargaining

Research skills