Participation or rule - Which approach could have the better short term prospects of improving the working environment in South Africa?

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Which approach could have the better short term prospects of improving the working environment in South Africa?

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During the apartheid era, industrial relations in South Africa were highly adversarial. The large black unions were basically mass protest organisations campaigning against white political power and the general climate was not conducive towards the creation of participatory structures at the workplace level. On the contrary, shop stewards were nurtured in the skills of confrontation and disruption. This paper argues that barriers to workplace participatory structures sown under apartheid will disappear only slowly and that this will negatively influence the prospects of such structures to be a vehicle for improvements in the working environment - at least in the short term.

On the other hand, this paper argues, recent developments in the South African labour market are increasingly conducive towards the use of rules (or procedures) in the workplace. Companies increasingly produce and adhere to standard operating procedures (SOPs) a part of ISO quality management certification schemes. Furthermore, because of low levels of formal skills of the workforce, recent legislation requires employers to spend a certain percentage of the wage sum on skills upgrading. A likely consequence is that companies will standardise tasks by means of SOPs, train employees to follow the SOPs and then issue compliance certificates.

The Scandinavian countries have a tradition of consensus, participation and reliance on local activities to advance the working environment. The paper does not seek to decry this participation-based approach or question the value of it, but rather point to certain limitations and difficulties if a similar approach is transferred to other countries, for example as part of development assistance programmes.

1. Introduction
The influential UK Robens Report broke new ground in 1972 discarding the then dominant prescriptive regulation of the working environment. There was not only too much law, much of it was also irrelevant to the real, underlying problems. The Report suggested that this apathy should be counteracted by a self-regulatory approach devolving responsibility to participatory structures at the workplace. In short, the primary responsibility of workplace safety lies with those who create the risks and those who work with them.


2. Rules vs. participation
A rules-based approach to promote safety can be criticised on a number of accounts. Rules often lead to a behaviouristic approach to safety, which focus on training workers to follow safe behaviours. This approach owes intellectual debt to Heinrich's theories of the 1930s that accidents are caused by unsafe acts and that worker failure is the heart of the problem (Heinrich et al. 1980).

Critics argue that a behavioural (rule based) approach takes focus away from the real problems - unsafe and unhealthy
working conditions - and shifts it to workers. Instead of removing the underlying problems and hazards of the system, the focus is on modifying worker behaviour to protect them from such hazards.

Wallerstein and Weinger (1992) argue that the behavioural approach is based on the faulty assumption that people learn better through learning discrete chunks of knowledge in a linear sequence. For worker education to be effective, it must include the context of behaviours, including an analysis of obstacles to safe work practices and emphasise problem solving and critical thinking capability. This calls for participatory methods, empowerment education and action learning, they argue. Training is not effective if the focus becomes narrowed to teaching specific behaviours or competencies.

3. Barriers to participation at the workplace- the legacy of apartheid.

3.1 Adversarial labour relations.
The situation at the shop floor during the apartheid era has been resembled to that of a 'war of resistance'. Companies were simply seen as an extension of the oppressing apartheid regime. In the mid 1980s the head of a black union contended that "the struggle of the workers on the shop floor cannot be separated from the wider struggle for liberation" (Webster 1997:24). This began a process of so-called shopfloor ungovernability.

In a detailed study of a steel mill, Holdt (1995) records at pattern of frequent stoppages, ignoring of agreed procedures, disruption of disciplinary hearings and a culture of informal resistance to white authority. He quotes union representatives that "the aims were quite political, and it was simply to overthrow the government". The system of apartheid was perceived as working hand-in-hand with the capitalist system and "one way of resisting was through industrial action: the strikes, the stay-aways, the go-slow, the over-time bans. At that time we were never concerned about the economy. In fact, we wanted the to see this economy suffering because it had no significance for us other than keeping the very system of apartheid alive".

At a large car manufacturer Holdt (1990) quotes the company chairman, that supervisors used to clock in and then lock themselves in their offices for the whole day. They did not dare go out on the assembly lines. At time, the workers even stood at the assembly lines with mock AK47 assault rifles or bazookas strapped to their backs as a symbol of defiance and rejection of the company.

It was not uncommon for supervisors to assert authority through physical confrontation. A (white) official from another large car manufacturer recalled that "... historically, all the foremen where white, usually Afrikaans, and the operating level were black. So you had a situation: I'm the white, I'm the boss, I say, you do. If you think of some of the old foremen we used to have, they used to wear heavy boots and khaki ... and carry a big stick, and if I said, and you didn't do, you got a clonk! (author's own interview, 1998).

Webster (1997) argues that a contemporary workplace culture has emerged that is characterised by low trust and adversarialism. With the advent of majority rule in 1994 and the attempts by government to attract foreign investment, the industrial relations systems has undergone a major restructuring to promote more co-operative work and stable relations. Analysis of the level of industrial action (Baskin 1998) reveals that this, by and large, has been successful. It would be presumptuous however, to assume that co-operative practices at the workplace level after years of adversarialism are particularly deep-seated or widespread.

The author had on several occasions interviewed a medium sized manufacturing company, which was perceived to be both better managed and more sensitive to the importance of a healthy and safe working environment, than the average medium sized company. The company squarely refused to bring in workers representatives to a health and safety presentation because the issue was felt to be intrinsically conflictual. To
quote the (white) production manager: "You must understand, that although we now officially have democracy in this country, this is not the case in industry".

Companies have over time sought to use employee involvement structures, e.g. liaison committees, to seek to side-step union controlled shop-steward structures or to avoid unionisation (Macun 1989, Frenkel 1994). Unions are critically aware of this danger and remain sceptical of participatory structures, as they are perceived to have the potential to undermine the union and even to conflict with the very culture of a union (Phillips 2000).

3.2 Imbalance of powers
Participatory arrangements grant workers the right to exert influence over their own work situation. Two basic conditions must be met for workers to exercise such rights in negotiating structures.

First, the concept of a negotiation presumes a reasonable balance of powers between the parties. If workers are powerless, their threats are not credible, and they may fear unfair dismissals arising from voicing of complaints. Second, they must have information concerning the nature of the risks they face during work as well as knowledge of what to do with this informations. Both conditions are unlikely to be met in the South African labour market.

Weil (1999) finds that unionised workplaces are more likely to receive health and safety inspections and pay higher penalties for violating health and safety standards than comparable non-unionised workplaces. His findings support the view that a reasonable level of worker's bargaining power is required for mandated health and safety committees to function effectively.

Union density may be taken as a proxy for the level of worker's negotiating power. In South Africa it is currently around 40 percent of the workforce (Standing et al. 1996). Based on an analysis of a labour representative survey, Macun et al. (1997) characterise South African unionism as one that has substantial breadth, but little depth. The level of unemployment can be taken as another measure of workers negotiating power. Official rates are around 30 percent, also indicative of weak negotiating power on the part of workers.

4. Current trends supporting a rule based approach
South Africa's national system for education and training has been characterised as incoherent, inequitable, inflexible and inadequate (Samson and Vally 1996). Most black workers have been restricted to low-skilled, low-wage jobs with little opportunity to acquire skills to move onto higher paying employment.

The skills shortage is seen as a major barrier to economic growth and employment creation, which are the top priorities of the South African government. Several new pieces of legislation have been passed to develop and improve the skills of the workforce, notably the Skills Development Act no 97 of 1998. This Act introduces a levy-grant scheme to finance a new National Skills Fund. Companies will in 2001 pay a one percent levy on total wages into the Fund. If a company provides training to its workforce, subject to certain criteria, it can reclaim part of the levy.

Several companies visited by the author have been busy developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) covering key business activities. The predominant reason given is that SOPs are a requirement for quality management certification, typically to the ISO 9000 series.

The South African economy is opening up after years of protectionist trade policies and international sanctions. Many companies now face stiff competition from cheap imports and see specialisation and export markets as the only strategy of survival. An ISO 9000 certification is perceived as an indispensable requirement in order to penetrate attractive export markets.

One high profile company, visited by the author in 1998, linked the SOPs to its training programme. Employees would be trained according to a SOP and then after passing a so-called Planned Job Observation (PJO) receive a certificate of competency.
Such certificates would together with other more general adult basic education activities (literacy and numeracy) constitute the basis for reclaiming the skills levy.

This would be exactly what Wallerstein and Weinger (1992) characterise as competency based programs aimed narrowly at teaching workers specific behaviours, which they criticise profoundly in favour of participatory approaches.

**Conclusion**

There are many barriers for participatory structures to be a vehicle to advance the working environment in South Africa, for example as a component of development assistance programs.

There is no particular tradition in industry for liaison mechanisms, unions view them with mistrust unless under full union control, and most workers lack the information and skills to partake effectively in such structures. Old adversarial habits and general mistrust are still visible, albeit likely on the decrease.

On the other hand do task standardisation and formalisation appear to be on the increase through development of rule-based SOPs.

This revision of workplace practices could be an opportunity also to advance the working environment by incorporating OHS checkpoints when developing the SOPs. This approach would be based on rule enforcement rather than on participatory structures.

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Frank Huess Hedlund is on a PhD programme and has been living in South Africa for approx. 2 years.