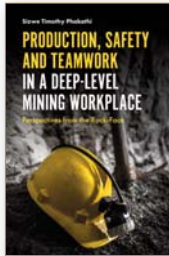


Book review: Production, Safety and Teamwork in a Deep-level Mining Workplace



In almost any industry, the day-to-day experiences of workers directly shape production processes. Those experiences are of fundamental importance to a range of managerial concerns, including organizational behaviour and human resource management, organizational safety and risk management, production systems, work relationships, and change management. Yet they are too often overlooked by the executives and managers who design management strategies.

In this book, Sizwe Phakathi, Head of Safety and Sustainable Development at the Chamber of Mines, addresses such issues head-on, providing insights into the underlying social, human, managerial, and organizational processes that shape workers' orientations towards reorganization of work, production, safety, teamwork, and work relationships. Through an in-depth study of a deep-level mining workplace, Phakathi brings to the fore the realities of how work processes shape the actions of frontline teams, production supervisors, and managers. He points out how these realities trigger the informal work practice of making a plan, which is an indispensable organizational tactic for production, safety, teamwork, and work relationships in the mining workplace. In the process, he highlights frontline miners' perspectives of managing, balancing and coping with the competing demands of physically challenging work, production, safety, and team dynamics while at the rock-face.

This book will help practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers to understand the factors influencing work processes, production, safety, teamwork, and work relationships, not only in a mining workplace but more generally as well. The insights it provides into the importance of day-to-day working experiences will help them to improve organizational, employee, and team performance.

The book can be purchased through Emerald Book Store at a 30% discount until April.
<http://books.emeraldinsight.com/page/detail/Production-Safety-and-Teamwork-in-a-DeepLevel-Mining-Workplace/?k=9781787145641>

James McLuskie, one-time operations director of Western Deep Levels Ltd and Elandsrand Gold Mining Co Ltd, has provided a brief review and critique of this book.

Before I left deep-level mining in 1995 I had reached the conclusion that training based on "do as I say" and rote learning of standards was not sufficient. We needed to add risk assessment and evaluation of alternatives based on experience. In many ways standards should be a guideline. Of course, the government could never accept this and so you have the situation of *planisa* (making a plan) by frontline teams and collusion by supervisors and managers.

I agree that strict adherence to standards is not always possible, or desirable. *Planisa* is a must. Standard practices or standard operating procedures assume standard conditions. Conditions underground in a deep-level mine are seldom, if ever, standard. What is needed is a set of basic skills applied to a range of situations that change---just like a successful sports team.

Regarding organizational culture, I agree that the old culture of top-down authoritarianism was neither healthy nor effective and that teamwork and mutual respect were vital. I thought that I had tried over a period of 5 years to change the organizational culture from the old to a new one. I do not believe I even scratched the surface in my attempts, despite having a great deal of positional power. Culture change requires top-down drive but it also requires acceptance, belief and ability at all levels. The story in the book of the different results obtained by two different shift bosses is a telling one. Individuals do make differences and some styles are difficult, if not impossible to change. I have had personal experience of this.

It was illuminating for me in the book that despite all the talk of cost pressure, the one shift boss was always able to get the required timber and other supplies on time. So, is there a shortage of money or of organization? There is much emphasis placed on shortage of tools and equipment because of cost pressure. In my day, cost pressure was felt more at top and senior management level: If you got your production safely you were fine and costs were secondary.

Self-directed Work Teams [SDWT] is an old idea and one that in itself indicates how long it takes to change culture. Nevertheless it is still a good idea and the chapter on SDWT was a good one. It is a pity, however, that in the training course the issue of 'planisa' and the condonement of departure from standards was not tackled.

In conclusion the book discussed many valid issues, the most important being the identified need to depart from standards in order to achieve organizational and personal goals. The same applies in any team sport. Having identified the issues the author spends very little time proposing solutions. There were many references to management being at fault but they were too generalized to be of much help. However, the concluding chapter pulls together key issues raised in the book and does propose some solutions and indeed that there are many valid issues.

J. McLuskie