



Postgraduate Diploma in Management

Marikana: justice not served

BLLR 521 Labour Relations: Individual Assignment

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Date of submission: 29 March 2021

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Marikana: justice not served

1 Introduction

South Africa is a nation that has been riddled with political tension and instability for many centuries, and as such, conflict is not a foreign concept to South Africans. From the occupation and colonisation of the Cape by the British in 1795, to the forming of the National Party in 1914, the perpetuation of racial and cultural segregation culminating in the apartheid regime, anti-apartheid activism, and finally, the election of the first democratic South African government in 1994 (Britannica, 2021), South Africa has been subjected to many power struggles. While the events central to these struggles and resultant tension took place in the larger political landscape of South Africa over many years, their effects filtered down to much of the South African workforce and remains a significant influence in the majority of South African employment relations today.

One such event resulting from South Africa's political instability and socioeconomic inequality was the massacre of mine workers by police at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine on 16 August 2012. Mine workers had been striking from the mine for the previous five days, disputing the fairness of their wages (Alexander *et al.*, 2013; Tolsi, 2013). According to interviews that took place after the event, the mine workers' intention had been to initiate an open, peaceful dialogue directly with mine management on the matter (Alexander *et al.*, 2013). However, poor communication and handling by mine management, coupled with a lack of support and even aggression from their National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) exacerbated this rising tensions. Following an unwarranted and brutal police attack on 16 August 2012, 34 mine workers were killed and at least 78 injured (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2012). The massacre that took place at Marikana is a prime example of the breakdown of employment relations, poor conflict handling and skewed application of justice. These aspects will be discussed further in this assignment.

2 The role of conflict and power in employment relations

As the events leading up to the Marikana massacre have demonstrated, conflict in employment relations and management thereof can significantly influence both the individual worker, the organisation and their relationships. Defining conflict in the context

of employment relations can prove to be difficult, as conflict is highly variable in its defining characteristics and occurs relatively often. LeBlanc *et al.* (as cited in Gilin Oore *et al.*, 2015) offer the following as a comprehensive definition of organisational conflict:

A state of social discord characterised by negative affect (e.g., frustration, anger, and anxiety) and the perception of interpersonal dissonance. People at work are in a state of conflict when one or more parties perceive that an ongoing or unresolved dispute poses a threat to any core human state (e.g., one's interests, identity, security, or sense of inclusion).

It may seem reasonable to assume that conflict within an organisation and its employees is always negative, however, research suggests that it can play both a negative and positive role. Conflict may result in higher absenteeism and work dissatisfaction, but can also offer a platform for problem-solving, human connection, and character development (Gilin Oore *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, conflict can be the catalyst to development and positive change within an organisation (Nel *et al.*, 2016). Conflict is often linked to the power dynamics within employment relations in an organisation and its stakeholders. Power is relational in this context, as it is concerned with two or more parties and how they influence each other's actions and decisions during organisational activities (Nel *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, Lewin (2001) states that industrial relations sees conflict in the employment relationship as considerable and ongoing, because employers hold a power advantage over their employees. For this reason, intermediary parties such trade unions are required to correct the power imbalance (Lewin, 2001).

When considering the above in the context of the events leading to the Marikana massacre in August 2012, it is clear that power dynamics between the organisational leadership and employees, conflict and subsequent handling thereof were at the heart of this tragic event. The conflict centred around a dispute on the fairness of wages in proportion to overall profit earned by the company (Alexander, 2014). The mine workers felt unfairly treated and marginalised by authority figures in the organisation, exacerbating their strike action. The intermediary parties, such as NUM, failed to correct the power imbalance between the organisation's authority (i.e. mine management) and the employees, which may have further contributed to the course of events leading to the Marikana massacre.

The nature of the role that conflict and power play in employment relations is largely determined by how predominantly justice is employed and perceived throughout an organisation's activities and decisions. Organisational justice is thought to encompass three forms of justice, namely distributive justice, procedural justice and interpersonal justice (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Nel *et al.*, 2016).

3 Distributive justice

In the context of employment relations, the term 'distributive justice' has been used to refer to how employees perceive fairness in the organisational outcomes that they receive (Kim *et al.*, 2015). Adams (cited by Tessema *et al.*, 2014) postulated that employees determine how fairly they have been treated by comparing their input (e.g. effort, time) to outcome (e.g. remuneration, promotions) ratios to the same input-outcome ratios of their co-workers.

Research has demonstrated that the lack of distributive justice can result in employees demonstrating negative organisational behaviour (Pan *et al.*, 2018). According to Baron and Pfeffer (as cited by Nel *et al.*, 2016), when a group of employees feel that they are experiencing distributive injustice from their organisation, they may decide to take collectively take action to remedy the perceived injustice. The negotiations and events culminating in the Marikana massacre clearly demonstrate the negative effects of distributive injustice. Considering the nature of their work, which included working 12-hour shifts in dangerous conditions and at high risk of injury or illness (Adelman, 2015; Alexander, 2013) (i.e. input), the mine workers felt that they were not remunerated fairly (i.e. outcomes). The Marikana mine workers were able to draw a comparison between their input-outcome ratio to that of their counterparts at another mine, Impala Platinum, where the workers had achieved an unprecedented wage negotiation in January 2012 (Chinguno, 2013). However, the Marikana massacre was not only founded on perceived injustice of outcomes, but also perceived injustice of processes, which will be discussed below.

4 Procedural justice

While procedural justice is also concerned with perceived fairness by employees, it speaks to perceived fairness in the process of employment relations and not just in the

outcomes (Yale Law School, 2021). Procedural justice could further be defined as “employees’ perceived fairness of the processes by which outcomes are allocated” (Kim *et al.*, 2015). When considering procedural justice, fairness is determined by how certain criteria, including accuracy, ethicality and bias suppression among others, are fulfilled by the organisation’s processes (Nel *et al.*, 2016; Pan *et al.*, 2018). Procedural justice is especially important, because it can have “a significant impact on employees’ cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions towards the organization” (Pan *et al.*, 2018). Some researchers have noted that procedural and distributive justice are often linked and both affect the overall perception of justice (Folger, as cited by Nel *et al.*, 2016). This stands to reason, as one would expect that in order for a fair outcome or decision to be reached, a fair process of procedure should be used.

The tensions leading to the Marikana massacre were only further exacerbated by procedural injustice on the part of the Lonmin Marikana mine management. They demonstrated procedural injustice towards to mine workers by adjusting shift allowance for rock drill operators (RDOs) in differing amounts, according to whether the workers were based at the Karee, Eastern or Western shafts (Chinguno, 2013). Management based this decision on the mode of production, however, the mine workers likely felt that their roles were comparable, and as such, a fair process should have been employed in determining the shift allowance. One could argue that this decision also demonstrates the interlink between distributive and procedural injustice in the context of the Marikana massacre. In this situation, a fair outcome (i.e. salary or allowance increase) for a similar position across different mining shafts was not achieved (distributive injustice), because a fair process determining a fair outcome for overall inputs by these mine workers was lacking (procedural injustice). However, how this decision was communicated to the mine workers would also affect their perception of distributive and procedural fairness. This highlights a third form of justice, namely interpersonal justice, to be considered.

5 Interpersonal justice

Interpersonal justice, also referred to as interactional justice, is concerned with how outcomes are communicated to workers on an interpersonal level (Nel *et al.*, 2016). According to Kim *et al.* (2015), interactional justice refers to “employees’ perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment they receive from authority figures.” Interpersonal justice furthermore encompasses both interpersonal treatment (e.g. respect, courtesy)

and use of adequate explanations for decisions made (Greenberg, as cited by Nel *et al.*, 2016). Researchers have demonstrated that if employees have a perception of being treated fairly and with respect, they are more likely to engage in positive exchange relationships with management and positive work behaviours (Fouquereau *et al.*, 2020). Nel *et al.* (2016) further note that employees are more likely to accept a decision as being just if they have been treated with respect and dignity, and the justification for decisions taken by decision makers is provided.

It could be argued that there was a lack of interpersonal or interactional justice when considering the context of the events leading up to the Marikana massacre. An account documented by Alexander *et al.* (2013) reveals that the mine workers were kept waiting for three hours to speak to mine management with regards to their wage dissatisfaction, only to be turned away and told to channel their demands via the NUM trade union. Tyler (as cited by Nel *et al.*, 2016) notes that standing is a key component of interpersonal justice, in that rude or disrespectful treatment by authority will make the individuals aware that they are seen as having low standing. Against a background of racial and socioeconomic disparities in South Africa, being viewed as having a low standing socially could aggravate an individual, and even more so in such a tense situation. This may have reinforced the vehemence with which the mine workers approached the strike. Alexander *et al.* (2013) noted that when the mine workers were rebuffed by mine management in this way, they enlisted more workers into joining the strike. These authors furthermore state that if mine management had met with the protesting mine workers at that stage, the tragedy of the massacre may have been averted (Alexander *et al.*, 2013).

6 Conclusion

The events culminating in the tragic massacre at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine on 16 August 2012 were sadly avoidable, had the employment relations been handled in a more just manner. The strike action, police attack and resultant casualties occurred as a result of skewed power dynamics in the employee relationship at Marikana, a lack of mediation from their trade unions, poor conflict handling on the part of mine management and injustice in all three aspects of organisational justice discussed above. These learnings can be used to improve employment relations between these role players and prevent such events from recurring in the future.

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