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Conflict sours the grapes

The changing demographics of seasonal workers on grape farms give rise to conflict that threatens productivity. How should farm management respond to the challenges of diversity?

by **Jacobus Odendaal and Laetitia van Dyk**

South African workplaces have experienced numerous changes in the post-1994 era. On the macro level, labour issues have received substantial attention in an effort to arrive at more equitable employment conditions. Yet, on the micro level of individual workplaces, many problems are not addressed effectively. For example, sudden changes in the demographic composition of the labour pool have brought new challenges that seem to catch many employers off guard.

In particular, the change in the racial composition of the workforce on Western Cape farms over recent years has presented farm management with difficult challenges. Whereas farm workers have in the past been Coloured and Afrikaans-speaking, the

workforce now often consists of a majority of African, mainly isiXhosa-speaking workers. Ground-level managers and production team leaders lack the ability to communicate effectively with all workers. Instructions are misunderstood, and the situation frequently leads to serious conflict.

Farming companies seem to find it hard to maintain a positive atmosphere and to equip lower-level management to deal successfully with conflict situations that arise from non-acknowledgement and poor management of diversity.

The University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) conducted an in-depth investigation into the threatening labour conflict experienced on five export table-grape farms in the Piketberg area. This research found that most of the conflict could be explained in terms of the practical working conditions on the farms, and especially differences between the workers' ethnic backgrounds, and the lack of any formalised strategies to address these issues. The study has come up with several recommendations for improving the situation in line with practical conflict-resolution models that were found to have worked in similar situations elsewhere.

Changes in workforce profiles

Over the past 15 years, the establishment of table grape vineyards for export production has created thousands of new jobs on farms in the Piketberg region. Most of these jobs are seasonal, and the majority

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of seasonal workers are female. Initially, workers were recruited from the surrounding areas. Over time, however, the local labour supply has dwindled. Seasonal workers were imported from as far as Namaqualand and the Northern Cape Province. Increasingly, however, seasonal workers are now also sourced from townships in the greater Cape Metropole.

The past three years have seen a dramatic increase in non-Afrikaans-speaking – mostly isiXhosa-speaking – workers on farms in the area. It is clear that farm managers have not prepared themselves for the practical implications of such changes in the racial, cultural and linguistic composition of the

workforce. There is scant evidence of training programmes to equip managers with new skills. It seems as if the senior management of certain farms believe that the problems will sort themselves out with time, and adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Meanwhile conflict situations appear to be intensifying and escalating.

Conflict a threat to productivity

The operations on export table-grape farms can be divided into two distinct six-month periods.

- From April to September, most activities are maintenance-related and are handled by a relatively small group of **permanent workers**, predominantly Afrikaans-speaking men.
- From middle September, the **seasonal workers** arrive and the labour force increases tenfold. To complicate matters, about a third of them have no previous experience of grape farms. Moreover, fewer than half find themselves on the

same farm from one season to the next.

It is estimated that 55% of the seasonal labour force is isiXhosa-speaking, and to a lesser extent Tswana- and Sotho-speaking. Communication with this section of the farm workers has become a major obstacle and a source of frustration for team leaders and managers.

In recent seasons there has also been a shortage of labour, with farms having to compete among each other to get workers. Workers easily migrate from farm to farm in search of better conditions or a few rand more. The result is that the labour turnover may be as high as 85%. In the case of a

particular farm in the area, it was reported that to maintain a labour force of 440 people, 800 appointments had to be made during the season.

The ongoing need to skill new workers implies costs and also puts team leaders under tremendous pressure to maintain the required production quality. But the most worrying manifestation is the high levels of conflict, usually between team leaders and seasonal workers. This poses a serious threat to productivity. Salaries and wages alone make up 40% of other escalating input costs, a trend which is outpacing the income from exports and putting profit margins under pressure. Lost time because of conflict cannot be afforded much longer.

The urgency of the situation motivated this research project. Managers on the farms in question are confronted on a daily basis with conflict at different levels of the organisation. Precious time and resources are wasted to deal with the *effects* of conflict, but it has become evident that the *causes* of conflict are seldom understood and addressed. It is feared that the resulting persistence of conflict can develop into a deep-rooted culture where conflict and unrest are accepted as a way of life.

The research aimed to answer a number of pertinent questions:

- What are the underlying factors that fuel conflict on these farms?
- To what extent can the conflict be attributed to management styles, and to what extent to external influences?
- What are the possibilities of developing conflict-management strategies that can deal with the problems constructively and turn the deteriorating situation around?

Exploring the nature of conflict on the farms

Worker teams. The study found that verbal conflict and emotional outbursts are common in most teams. To a lesser extent, there have also been instances of physical violence among team members. Most of the conflict occurs between team leaders and the team members.

Theory rooted in practice

The research followed a grounded-theory approach. This technique is a qualitative method whereby the researcher generates theories about a phenomenon by gathering first-hand data through observation and participation. The approach does not start with a preconceived theory, but rather sets out to develop new conceptual models and theories based on consistent patterns found in practice. Seven focus groups were organised on five farms and interview sessions were conducted to gather sufficient data.

The language differences between Afrikaans-speaking team leaders and isiXhosa-speaking team members were reported as leading to differences in interpretation of team discipline and time schedules. Because the 2007-2008 season was characterised by a shortage of workers, farms were inclined readily to meet worker demands about hourly rates, overtime and accommodation arrangements. Often, in order to meet production deadlines, certain concessions were made in exchange for more overtime. But this bartering frequently gave rise to more misunderstandings. The language difficulties and the already delicate situation of mistrust led to constant disruptions and the need to renegotiate with the whole group. During negotiations no work takes place, which results in more work time being lost.

The study further found that worker committees are inadequately organised and, in particular, lack leaders that can negotiate assertively on behalf of the group.

Besides open forms of conflict, workers also protest in the form of staying away or moving to the next farm. This is often the result when disciplinary action is taken against workers.

Causes of conflict. *Poor communication* was cited as the main cause of conflict. Work instructions are not carried out satisfactorily, resulting in severe frustration on the part of team leaders and supervisors.

Several factors contribute to the explosive situation created by the communication problems. Team leaders are blamed for emotional outbursts and the use of abusive language. Because they are unable to communicate in isiXhosa, communication mostly takes place in broken English. From time to time they use team members as interpreters to help get messages across, but these are reactive measures that only bring about limited improvement.

Conflict is also attributed to *differences in personalities and value systems*. There are clear differences in levels of work ethic and self-discipline between team leaders and workers, and between workers from different backgrounds. Because these differences are neither understood nor respected, they merely serve to fuel conflict situations further.

Moreover, *non-Afrikaans-speaking work teams tend to be poorly organised* as far as own leaders and communication structures with farm management are concerned. Most of the communication between them and management is reactive, and takes place

after problems have cropped up. Non-Afrikaans-speaking workers feel excluded from having any say at higher levels. Because they lack own leadership, different bargaining situations are dominated by different people, who usually fail to resolve the situation. That leads to conflict and mistrust also between members of a group. Lack of any loyalty towards their jobs and their employers is the inevitable outcome.

Dealing with conflict. On farms where team leaders had been trained in management skills, they were found to be better equipped to handle conflict situations. However, the language barriers almost nullify these advantages in dealing with

non-Afrikaans-speaking workers. The inability to convey instructions clearly to new and inexperienced workers causes frustration, and even stress and anxiety, among team leaders.

Support from senior management. It was found that higher levels of management underestimate the escalating challenges faced by team leaders and invest little in training or re-training. In the few cases where they receive more higher-level support, conflict situations are more easily dealt with. But this kind of support is mostly lacking. Conflict is rife and team leaders are increasingly exposed to unhealthy levels of stress.

Workplace conflict: an overview

Modern theories on conflict accept that conflict and antagonism are natural phenomena that are inevitably part of the workplace and that should be managed constructively. Earlier views emphasised conflict mainly as a disruption that should be avoided.

Pluralistic views of conflict management acknowledge the existence of diverse interest groups in the workplace that may be in conflict with each other from time to time. It is important to cultivate a shared interest among diverse groups which has a vision of business viability and survival as central component and binding factor. Besides management authority, other forms of representation such as unions or worker committees should be recognised as legitimate guardians of workers' interests.

In attempting to manage conflict, management should accept that it can neither be avoided nor entirely defused. It will often smoulder below the surface owing to different perceptions of the situation. This does not mean that there is no conflict. Yet, experience has taught that conflict can, and should, be managed. Too often, when a group's perceptions of a situation are allowed to develop unattended, people's own viewpoints are reinforced by hearing only similar grudges. This eventually leads to conflict erupting into open protest.

Interest-based negotiations have become a recognised technique for accomplishing more lasting results. It is primarily directed at strengthening the relationship and mutual trust between parties. This is in contrast to **position-based bargaining**, which attempts to strengthen the position of the one party at the expense of others and often leads to frustration, unreasonable demands and emotional battles.

The following principles that are vital in creating a climate for interest-based negotiations and conflict resolution would also apply to the conflict-ridden situation on the farms investigated in the USB study:

- Identify and understand the interests of parties in the situation.
- Establish the alternatives to negotiated agreements on different issues.
- Collaborate in developing workable options that can be explored.
- Establish objective norms and values for negotiation and agreed measures against which solutions can be evaluated.
- Secure the commitment of all parties to a solution and to the practical implementation of decisions.
- Monitor the results of implemented decisions.
- Ensure that clear communication, active listening and control of emotions are promoted and practised consistently.
- Work actively at the quality of relationships and the cultivation of respect and dignity.

The major challenges caused by the language shift of the worker pool have so far not been met by a proper response from farm management. On only one of the farms that were investigated was there a meaningful attempt to provide Afrikaans team leaders with basic proficiency in isiXhosa and to equip isiXhosa team leaders with basic management skills. These efforts have already produced visible improvements in terms of reduced conflict and increased productivity.

■ Fertile soil for conflict

It is clear from all the evidence that the situation needs attention. Team leaders, for example, expressed the urgent need for sufficient proficiency in isiXhosa. They also feel they lack general communication, negotiation and conflict-management skills. Analysis of the evidence led to the following conclusions:

- The occurrence of conflict is strongly related to the actions of management and the inadequate capabilities in first-level management ranks. In the few cases observed where team leaders were better equipped as leaders and communicators,

ently part of human relations and should be dealt with. In the case of the farms investigated in the USB research, the need for effective conflict management is even more acute because of the sudden intensification thereof brought about by major changes in the composition of the labour pool.

Mechanisms for cooperation and conflict resolution should be institutionalised on each farm. The study has developed a number of recommendations for creating a healthy climate for conflict resolution and empowering ground-level managers effectively to form part of the solutions.

Acknowledge and manage diversity in the workplace. To acknowledge diversity, and then manage it successfully, may be the biggest challenge for any business. The farms concerned need a dedicated management plan in this regard, which should include the following:

- Develop a sound knowledge of other cultures and language competency in, for example, isiXhosa among first-level and middle managers.
- Create mutual sensitivity and tolerance for

security, longer-term contracts and unemployment and retirement fund benefits.

In this regard, cooperation between the grape farms and with farms with different seasonal work patterns, like citrus farms, can almost offer workers twelve-month employment opportunities.

Improvement of accommodation for seasonal workers will also help to promote a more positive attitude and loyalty.

Develop the competencies and self-image of team leaders. Improving the management skills of team leaders is not enough. Personal and social development only takes place when people have a positive self-image. For this reason, team leaders' training should include the development of their self-esteem and assertiveness, as well as conflict-handling and basic conversational skills in the other workplace languages, which will help to improve attitudes among the different cultures.

Create mechanisms for communication between workers and management. As in the case of permanent workers, seasonal workers should have workers' committees, which should be established at the start of the season. Such committees should have ongoing contact with management to make sure that sources of conflict can be identified and defused at an early stage. Committees would also help to satisfy the need that has been expressed for workers to have a say at higher levels in the organisation.

It was Solomon who warned of the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, referring to the seemingly minor threats that can sometimes cause the greatest damage. This study emphasises the importance of acknowledging and dealing with the various challenges posed by diversity in the workplace. Companies that are proactive in this regard could avoid the kind of disruptive and costly conflict that has plagued the farms investigated in the research. ■

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- Language and cultural diversity is largely ignored as a variable by farm management.
- The management styles are typically autocratic in attempting to resolve conflict situations. In the past, it was possible to resolve conflict by termination of service. But there is a growing shortage of seasonal workers and, at the same time, they are increasingly aware of their rights and wage potential as workers. The lack of more progressive management and conflict-handling styles at the different management levels is clearly reflected in the productivity levels of these farms.
- Insufficient communication channels and the lack of mechanisms for workers of different groups to express themselves at higher management levels contribute to the persistence of conflict in the workplace.

■ How to cultivate better workplace relations

Conflict on farms, and in other similar operations, cannot be wished away. It is inher-

each others' differences among workers of different cultural backgrounds.

- Identify leaders from the ranks of language groups other than Afrikaans and train them in basic management and team-leader skills.
- Establish worker committees and communication channels for each language group.

Create a positive organisational culture and value system. It is vital to invest substantial time and effort in the establishment and maintenance of a positive working environment and culture. Values that promote mutual respect and acknowledgement of the values and dignity of others must be cultivated among the workforce as a whole.

The default attitude of management towards seasonal workers has to change so that it becomes possible to build a degree of workplace loyalty among these workers as well. The high turnover of workers during the season causes a substantial and ongoing draining of skills. To avoid this, farm operations will have to consider better forms of job



This research was presented to the USB as an MBA research project by Jacobus Odendaal (odendaaljn@intekom.co.za) in March 2008.

The study, titled *Konflik in die werksplek: Gevallestudie met verwysing na vyf tafeldruifuitvoerplase in die Benede-Bergrivier*, was supervised by Prof Laetitia van Dyk.