

**Keynote Speech written for and presented by Mr Joseph Maqhekeni,
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at Productivity SA's National Productivity Awards 2009 dinner**

A judge was interviewing a woman regarding her pending divorce, and asked, "What are the grounds for your divorce?"

She replied, "Oh, about four acres and a nice little home in the middle of the property with a stream running by."

"No," he said, "I mean what is the foundation of this case?"

"Well, it's made of concrete, brick and mortar," she responded.

"I mean," he continued, "What are your relations like?"

"I have an aunt and uncle living here in town, and so do my husband's parents."

He said, "Do you have a real grudge?"

"No," she replied, "We have a two-car carport and have never really needed one."

"Please," he tried again, "is there any infidelity in your marriage?"

"Yes, both my son and daughter have stereo sets. We don't necessarily like the music, but the answer to your questions is yes."

"Ma'am, does your husband ever beat you up?"

"Yes," she responded, "about twice a week he gets up earlier than I do."

Finally, in frustration, the judge asked, "Lady, why do you want a divorce?"

"Oh, I don't want a divorce," she replied. "I've never wanted a divorce. My husband does. He said he can't communicate with me."

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the 2009 National Productivity Awards. I am delighted to have this opportunity to stand in front of you this evening to talk to you; and I am equally thrilled that you will be sitting here, in front of me, listening – or pretending to listen – to what I have to say. It is a very pleasing format for hearing one's own voice, and sharing one's own – normally very important and undoubtedly correct – opinion with others, because there is nothing more gratifying than a captive audience!

However, let us not be fooled into believing that the arbitrary imparting of one's beliefs or the issuing of decrees wrapped in oratory is actually communicating. It is not communicating. It is not dialogue. It is not collaboration. It is not negotiating. It is not listening and responding to another's view point. And it is not the way to move forward in any relationship that sees growth, development, respect, productive outcomes and mutual benefit as its ultimate goals.

Yet, due to the nature of our country's very particular history, this style of interaction has been the norm for too long, especially in the business arena. Throughout our history we have experienced many examples of lack in South Africa, but one of the most unacknowledged and yet most damaging, particularly in terms of our industry's productivity and efficiency, has been the lack of opportunity for communication and interaction in the workplace.

For longer than most other economies worldwide, late into the 20th century and – in some industries still carrying on today – the South African economy has been built on the backs of man, not machinery. Labour was just that, in the very sense of the word: hard work carried out manually, by the country's majority. Labour has been our hoes and our pulleys, our scaffolding and our combine harvesters, our systems and our production lines. Labour has been our country's bricks and mortar.

Despite labour's hand in creating some of the world's leading products and brands, they have had no voice. Their needs have not been heard; their suggestions have not been sought; their knowledge has not been tapped into.

But the cost of ruling by directive rather than managing through discourse has been too great for too many, not least our local firms. The paucity of real, proven and successfully integrated management/labour programmes has had a direct bearing on South Africa's current role as a bit player on the international economic stage. After all, how is any company expected to be motivated to reaching its goals with focus and drive if only a handful of the staff know what those goals are, and actually see value in them? And we will never be able to assume a more powerful global position until our industries and companies are productive, efficient and cost-effective enough to warrant more than just a supporting role.

One of the most immediate and effective methods of achieving and sustaining these highly attainable goals is through ongoing management and labour collaboration. Such negotiations are designed to provide a common and candid platform that takes cognisance of the aspirations of workers while simultaneously recognising the frustrations of management. From these interchanges relevant communication sharing channels are adopted that are conducive to creating and conducting solutions that both sides understand and fully buy into, turning staff into true stakeholders within their companies.

Do not be confused, however: open and constructive communication vehicles do not equate to compromise. Compromise means that one or all parties are not getting what they want or need, to a large degree, and this cannot be sustained successfully into the future. Open communication is a win/win situation and, by its very nature, can be sustained indefinitely. The onus lies firmly with management to kick start this win/win process. It is up to management to invite labour to share their disgruntlements and their grievances, as well as their suggestions and requests, while management do the same in return. The trick is to decide on the vehicles of communication, as well as the solutions to the issues, jointly.

one of the most popular being: 'an organisation of employees formed to *bargain* with the employer.' Digging deeper, synonyms for 'bargain' include 'haggle', 'give-away', and 'barter.' Each of these words assumes that in order for unions to negotiate with management, one or other parties must fight, forfeit, or exchange. This is not the case. A more accurate description would be 'exchange ideas,' 'discuss,' or 'confer.'

This may all sound rather 'new-age' to some, but let me assure you that understanding what motivates and engages your employees, as well as what they perceive as obstacles or unattractive working conditions, through open communication channels, has been a fully functioning and integral element of increased productivity in many highly successful companies for years, both internationally and locally. Indeed, it is the very essence behind Deloitte's *Best Company to Work For* survey, as part of the increasingly impactful *Employer of Choice* brand.

The Great Place to Work Institute, based in America, has been listening to employees and evaluating employers since 1980 to understand what makes a workplace great. They define the foundation of every great workplace as being trust between employees and management – something that only comes from open communication. The Great Place to Work Institute believes: "In a great workplace, trust manifests itself in every relationship. Managers believe

that employees want to be productive, encouraging them to participate in the business. Employees are enthusiastic and passionate about their work and the company's mission. In a high-trust environment, people cooperate and collaborate, leading to positive workplace interactions, higher profits, and greater productivity."

Our very own Productivity SA created the Workplace Challenge programme with the same goals in mind: to increase the productivity and competitiveness of South African firms and sectors through constructive labour relations, and by sharing and disseminating experiences and lessons learned, thereby improving workplace principles and practices. From Valpre to Dunlop, Nestle to Shatterproof, the Workplace Challenge programme has helped more than 200 enterprises across South Africa, with a total of more than 50,000 employees.

Productivity SA's other flagship programme, the Social Plan, is a successful collaboration between management and labour to assist companies facing immediate closure. The Social Plan emanated from discussions between the Department of Labour, Nedlac, business and organised labour to develop a framework to prevent job losses or ameliorate the effects of retrenchment on individuals and local economies in the event of large-scale retrenchments.

Tasked with avoiding job cuts, creating new opportunities and returning failing business to health and profitability, the Social Plan established Future Forums to develop the necessary strategies and turnaround solutions.

Since its inception in 2000, this Turnaround Solutions component of the Social Plan has saved more than 90 000 existing jobs and created more than 600 new positions across ten different business sectors, and its success has been due to forums between management and employees.

Creating room for conversation and interaction is not achieved in the same way for each company. As in any relationship whose lines of communication have broken down – or were never properly constructed in the first place – numerous specific and personal elements must be taken into consideration before dialogue is established and trust gained, including history, culture, language, expectations and goals of the parties involved.

But here is the beauty and very essence of communication; its expansiveness allows for endless approaches in numerous formats that can be manipulated to suit every relationship. Be it through bosparats, suggestions boxes, conferences, competitions, Q&A sessions, meet the Director evenings, or reviews, there are channels of communication that will work for every company. However, communication is only the beginning of the process. American author, environmentalist and historian Henry David Thoreau once said: "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked me what I thought - and attended to my answer."

"- and attended to my answer." Therein lies the crux of communication: responding to what has been said. Taking action in replying to the opinion that has been sought. For without such action the communication process is not simply useless, it is damaging.

What is often forgotten in the boardrooms and the meeting rooms and the conference rooms across the country is that information and knowledge should not be communicated only in one

direction. Company and industry knowledge should not flow solely downwards from management to employees. Being on the shop floor, being integrally involved in the nuts and bolts – sometimes literally – of a company, gives staff an astonishing accumulation of knowledge, making them incredibly powerful and valuable far beyond just the position they hold and the work they carry out. According to Joseph Badaracco, professor of Business Ethics at

Harvard Business School: *“Communication can't always follow the top-down model. With the fluidity of information in business today, leaders need to be masterful listeners; they need to be able to receive as well as send.”*

So, not only must companies work hard to retain such staff members in order to avoid the basic financial costs of losing competent staff and retraining replacement staff, and to improve knowledge retention, ensuring that information resides with the organisation and does not leave with exiting staff members; but they must also work hard to extract and share such knowledge amongst a wider array of staff members, across various employment levels, between management and workers, where relevant and beneficial.

It is easy to assume that it is always management who are unwilling to communicate. While, as I have said, their position requires them to customarily be responsible for opening the doors of dialogue, we must appreciate that employees are not always eager to walk through those doors and engage in such discussions.

However, it is as equally important for staff within an organisation to enter into the spirit of open communication with the true belief that both the company and themselves as individuals must benefit from the outcomes. Individuals who do not have the best interests of the company at heart cannot expect the company to be optimally sustainable. Only when the interests and goals of the employees match those of the company, and vice versa, can both parties expect ongoing success, prosperity, growth and development.

The introduction of new labour legislation over the years has had a profound impact on the South African labour market, notably in terms of the Labour Relations Act (LRA), the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and the Skills Development Act (SDA). It has given workers a far greater and more powerful voice in the workplace, but we must also be heedful in how we use our voice.

There is a Chinese proverb which says: “To listen well is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well, and is as essential to all true conversation.” More recently, and perhaps a line of communication often ignored by most, American management guru *Peter Drucker* said: “*The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said.*” Of course, Mark Twain was also quoted as saying: “*There is nothing so annoying as to have two people talking when you're busy interrupting,*” but there's always one!

My point is that employees cannot hope to have their gripes heard or their needs met if they are shouting too loudly to hear management's response. To achieve any true level of success in one's job or career, either as a body of staff or as individuals, employees must embrace the principles of communication and negotiation, and meet management under the shared purpose of mutual benefit.

Indeed, Productivity SA's most recent banner is: "To keep doing our best, we need you to do yours." This succinctly sums up the necessity of joint cooperation, equal participation and complete commitment to the cause of a win/win outcome.

We can be assured that Productivity SA has always done its very best, which is why it proudly commemorates its 40th anniversary this year. Its ability to open dialogue with government, business, organised labour, employees and other productivity organisations worldwide has made it *the* leading voice on productivity in South Africa, and on the African continent. Not only that, it is also a voice of authority on the international productivity stage.

The role that the organisation has played and the journey it has mapped out throughout four decades of tumultuous South African history has taken productivity in our country to heights that we could never have hoped to achieve without their dedicated vision and leadership. They have assisted in improving an entire nation's standard of living through enhanced industrial interaction, smoothing the way for managers and employees to collaborate effectively for the benefit of all.

Productivity SA has received messages of congratulations from some of the country's most respected business leaders, as well as from Africa's and the world's most influential productivity administrations: I would like to add mine to those here this evening.

We quite rightly call ourselves the Rainbow Nation because we are a hugely diverse, multi-coloured and cultural people that celebrate 11 official languages and even more dialects, cultures, religions, customs and appearances. We have every right to be proud of how far we have come in the last 15 years, buoyed up on the shoulders of political and cultural transparency, collaboration and support. Now it is the turn of business to enjoy the same success.

With that unique South African determination and energy channelled into workplace communication and negotiation there is no limit to the achievements we can claim for ourselves, as companies and individuals, and for our stakeholders and our families. Wealth and wellbeing for all are within our grasp. All it takes is a conversation...

Thank you.