



The workplace challenge

lessons learned

Nedlac initiated the Workplace Challenge Project (WCP) to assist industry in meeting the challenge of a continuously changing environment. The WCP encourages workers and managers to work together to improve the way in which South African industry delivers products and services to the market.

The experiences of pilot companies participating in the WCP provide valuable guidance for companies planning to implement change. Following these guidelines will help companies avoid slipping back into old habits and continuously assess the impact of new processes. This article explains what the pilot companies found to be the most suitable conditions for implementing workplace change, and the most useful tools for steering implementation of workplace change.

Conditions for implementation

Build legitimate structures

The pilot companies discovered that change is an unsettling process. Building structures that represent stakeholders' interests help companies deal with this.

All people involved in changing the workplace (including shopstewards / worker representatives, human resource managers, supervisors and production managers) should be represented on the structures. Pilot companies found that involving all these groups ensured that

stakeholders found the change process less threatening and implementation was easier, because those implementing the change were already involved.

Create support for champions

Changing a company requires 'champions' - with a lot of energy and commitment.

To create support for 'champions' companies must ensure that:

- workers' supervisors are aware of their responsibilities and release them to attend WCP meetings.;
- senior management and union officials are continually updated on developments in the project;
- information for implementing the change process is available and easily understandable.

Pilot companies found that if this support was not provided, change was slowed as stakeholders could not always attend meetings and did not have the knowledge required to make effective decisions.

Create visible support

Senior management and labour representatives must show support for the project to ensure that the commitment to finding methods of improving performance is kept high.

Dealing with history

Apartheid has severely damaged relationships in factories throughout the



country. These damaged relationships have created the conditions for conflict and mistrust between workers and managers. However, for workplace change to succeed, stakeholders need to be able to work together. Many companies in the WCP have held workshops to discuss and find solutions to these problems.

Creating a vision

Pilot companies developed a vision that steered the implementation of workplace change. They developed this vision in meetings where everyone discussed what they expected from change. Some companies found that creating a vision was made easier if each party prepared a document on what they expected from the WCP.

Pilot companies found that these visions were important in:

- creating security;
- creating enthusiasm;
- providing a 'checklist' to check progress.

Implementation tools

Identifying areas for improvement

The first step in implementing workplace change is identifying areas where the company can improve performance. An effective and easily understandable measurement system assists in identifying areas to be improved.

Whilst consultants are important in identifying areas for change, the WCP experience has shown that workers and managers also have knowledge about the areas in which improvement is necessary. Gathering this information will enable the company to decide which consultant could best meet its needs.

Consultants will then work quicker and more efficiently, thereby saving the company money.

Consultants

When using consultants in workplace change, the WCP experience has shown that companies should:

- ensure all stakeholders approve the consultant;
- give consultants information on possible change areas;
- brief consultants on areas that one or other party may object to;
- keep brief, but regular contact with consultants to get assistance as problems arise.

Keeping the process moving

The WCP has revealed a number of mechanisms that assist in keeping workplace change processes moving.

Meetings must be regular and result in action. Pilot companies found that the best way of ensuring meetings deliver action is to:

- take minutes of decisions reached;
- assign responsibility for implementing decisions;
- set deadlines for implementation;
- agree on the minutes and responsibilities before leaving the meeting;
- follow-up on implementation.

Problems will arise that slow the implementation of workplace change.

Here companies should:

- acknowledge that a conflict exists;
- identify the issues involved;
- establish a working group to deal with the problem, whilst change goes ahead;
- set a timetable for resolving the dispute;
- have regular report-backs.

WCP companies implemented measures that calculated change. These measures were linked to areas that companies wished to change. This meant that companies were continually assessing the success of the WCP process.

A more comprehensive document is available at Nedlac. Contact 482-2511.