

RBOs

challenges for IMMSA



The desire to develop co-operation at the shopfloor as a way of extending democracy and improving productivity levels is one of the main objectives of the new LRA. This represents a major ideological shift in the industrial relations arena. While the notions of co-operation and the benefits thereof are espoused at many conferences and seminars, the practical implementation is somewhat more elusive.

Relationship Building by Objectives (RBO) initiatives show themselves as another means of developing a constructive relationship between management and labour. Its use is largely confined to exceptionally deteriorating and antagonistic relationships with the general aim being to establish a new means of dealing with conflict (Shalda Bobat, unpublished paper, 1996 University of Natal).

Although originally designed as a two party process, since the beginning of the 1990s IMSSA has been increasingly requested to facilitate processes which involve more than two parties.

The RBO exercise draws on a pluralist labour relations theory which acknowledges the power and independent role of trade unions, recognises that conflict is inherent in work organisation and accepts collective bargaining as the most effective mechanism for regulating this conflict. Further, it is based on the principles of freedom of association and on the right to collective bargaining.

Since IMSSA pioneered the field of management and labour relationship

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building in South Africa in 1989, there has been a growing demand for IMSSA relationship building exercises.

The growing popularity of the RBO process is the result of increased awareness of the process, but it also reflects the need amongst management and the unions to find more constructive approaches to conflict. This trend is likely to be further stimulated by the new Act and as parties grapple with more complex challenges at the shopfloor.

What is an RBO?

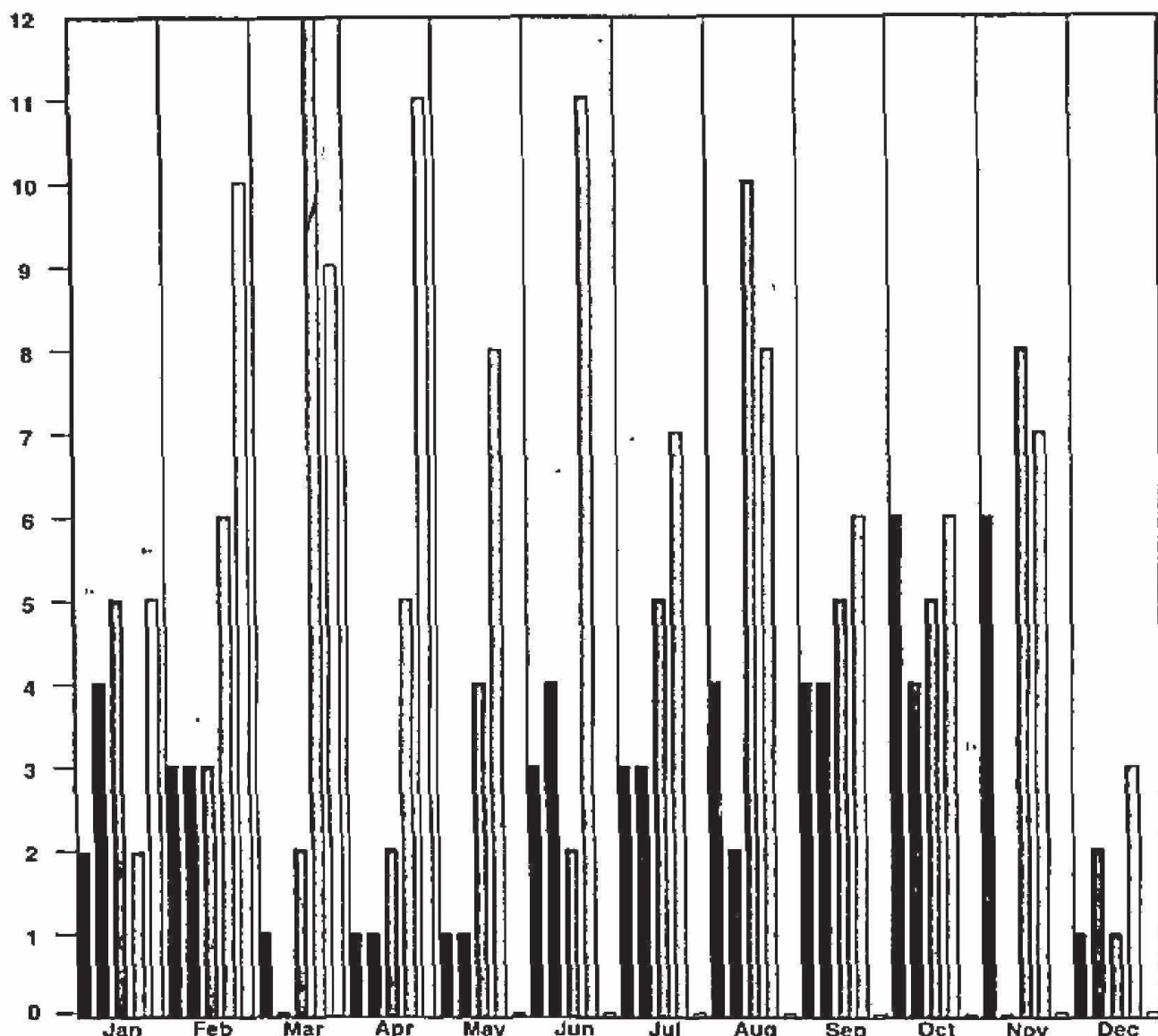
Typically, an RBO process involves the use of between one and five facilitators. The teams of facilitators have to be carefully constructed, giving consideration to experience, race, gender and language factors, so that the most effective complement can be achieved.

It involves a range of participants, from shopstewards and organisers, to senior management and supervisors. It is important that all stakeholders must agree and want the process and that commitment is expressed for the process at a senior level in all stakeholder organisations.

Timing is all important. Parties should not contemplate embarking on an RBO during the currency of a major dispute or during

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substantive negotiations because the desire to focus attention entirely on those issues may prove irresistible and defeat the purpose of the exercise.

Process

The process consists of different stages:

□ **The pre-RBO stage**

Separate presentations are usually made to parties on the nature and key

elements of the process. The practical details and logistics are also finalised here.

□ **The objective phase**

Either jointly, or in a separate caucus, stakeholders discuss their expectations of the process, ventilate their main frustrations and set key objectives. Once determined, these outcomes are prioritised through dialogue and facilitation/mediation and consolidated

RBI National Statistics: 1993-1997

	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1993	2	3	1	1	1	3	3	4	4	6	6	1	35
1994	4	3	0	1	1	4	3	2	4	4	0	2	28
1995	5	3	2	2	4	2	5	10	5	5	8	1	52
1996	2	6	12	5	8	11	7	8	6	6	7	3	81
1997	5	10	11	35									

into themes. Once joint objectives have been agreed on, the parties develop a plan based on these objectives. The themes into which the objectives set by the parties are grouped are commonly: consultation, communication, negotiation, training, social responsibility, discrimination, procedures (including grievance, discipline, selection, promotion) and housing. Issues of a substantive nature, that is, matters which would normally be dealt with in the annual wage bargaining round, are excluded from the RBO agenda (Felicity Steadman, paper read at the IMSSA Annual Conference, 1992).

- **The action planning phase**
Detailed action plans are drawn with timelines for completion and an identification of resources and personnel required to implement the plans. It is important to note that during this stage, responsibility is given to members of management and labour to set the process in motion.
- **Follow-up and implementing phase**
The plans are implemented and follow-up takes place, usually six months to a year later.

Criticisms

While the RBO process has gained in popularity, a number of concerns have been raised by some of our clients. The main concern is time. In some cases the company and the union do not have the time to get through a process in one go. The process is also sometimes not flexible enough to cater for different relationship needs. Costs are also a problem sometimes, especially when a number of facilitators are needed. Sometimes difficulties are experienced with implementation and follow up.

Closer monitoring is required, but this cannot replace the parties' commitment to the objectives and implementation schedule.

One of the most important weaknesses about the process is that there is the danger that the RBO could alienate constituencies from representatives involved in the process. The process as it stands, and as it is currently applied, does not make provision for mandate-giving and getting before, during or after the process.

Facilitation service

IMSSA is currently developing plans to transform its RBO service into a more flexible facilitation service that can deal with the weaknesses as well as cater for adaptability and variability. Such a service will provide a rapid response to almost any facilitation need in the employment relationship. Highly aggravated relationships, relationships that require a little fine tuning, transformation processes, employee participation processes and other needs will all be met through such a service.

Through this service IMSSA will provide intervenors (also known as panellists) who have been trained in advance process skills including communication, group dynamics, and problem solving skills. IMSSA panellists will be experienced mediators who have sound knowledge of the industries in which they operate.

This service will be available to companies and unions, development organisations, parastatals, educational institutions, government departments and bargaining councils. Government has already made use of this service. IMSSA intervenors have played a major role in transformation processes and facilitating public participation in policymaking.

The key IMSSA principles of mutual acceptance and independence will be combined with affordability and flexibility to ensure the success of this programme.

Please contact any of the IMSSA offices if you have any queries about the RBO service.



INDEPENDENT MEDIATION SERVICE OF SOUTH AFRICA

EDUCATION AND TRAINING SERVICES

IMSSA LABOUR TRAINING COURSES INCLUDE

- ☞ Arbitration skills training (4 days)
- ☞ Negotiation and dispute resolution skills training (3 days)
(Introductory, intermediate and advanced levels)
- ☞ Labour Relations Act training (2 days)
- ☞ Understanding employee participation and workplace forums (2 days)
- ☞ Business finance and information disclosure

The structure of these events is:

- ☞ In-house training *(minimum of 14 participants per course)*
- ☞ Scheduled courses where individuals and small groups attend courses *(dates available on request)*

Training of trade union organisers and shop stewards is subsidised by a grant from the Department of Labour.

PUBLICATIONS

- ☞ The *IMSSA Review*, a quarterly publication that gives readers a greater and more varied insight into the field of alternative dispute resolution.
- ☞ The *IMSSA Digest of Arbitration Awards* contains summaries of IMSSA arbitration awards.

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