

Small groups a powerful productivity tool

By Jan Syfert, News Editor, NPI

Small group activities can play an important role in developing and involving all the people in an organisation to make a meaningful contribution to productivity improvement, says the NPI.

The NPI recognises the power and relevance of small group activities to help rectify the relatively poor productivity performance in South Africa.

Five years ago, it enlisted the support of the Association for Small Group Activities (ASGA) in launching Project Phagamisa.

Phomolo Mokoena was appointed to co-ordinate the project. He explains that the word 'phagamisa' is used in many languages in South Africa and means to uplift or to lift up. It is used here in the context of uplifting the knowledge and understanding of work, improving the quality of work-life and consequently enhancing general living standards.

"The most important asset of any organisation is its people. They are responsible for the effective utilisation of all other factors of production. Small group activities provide the means to develop and uplift people to utilise these factors more effectively and productively."

The aim of *Project Phagamisa* is to bring about a significant, nation-wide increase in the number of small group activities and to develop the South African workforce. Everyone should be involved in the drive for improved productivity and quality.

Programmes

Small group activities comprise such programmes as project teams, process teams, kaizen teams, green area groups, quality circles and self-directed teams – all of which have been proven worldwide as very effective means of employee development and ensuring workers' involvement.

Mokoena says the idea is not to be too prescriptive as to the type of programme, as the environment and the needs of organisations differ. However, a number of prerequisites apply to all organisations:

- Management commitment should be manifested by the willingness on the part of management to give meaningful and visible support to small group activities.
- Small group activities cannot operate successfully in isolation. They should be part of an ongoing, total, systemic approach to development and improvement in an organisation.
- All stakeholders should be involved. One of the biggest and most common mistakes is the decision by management to implement, say, quality circles, and to hire consultants to train their workers. The intervening layers of management consequently do not understand, nor are they involved in the process, and they tend to feel severely threatened. "Management and the workers are now talking to each other, and where does that leave us?" As a result they often sabotage the

process. The unions are major stakeholders and have a duty to look after the interests of their members. Any attempts to bypass them would be courting disaster. Their involvement in the process from the beginning is therefore imperative, and they have proved to be valuable allies if approached correctly.

- Ongoing training is another prerequisite. It is imperative that all levels of management should be fully aware of the roles they have to play if the process is to be successful in the long term. Training is not just a one-off

exercise; it is an ongoing process. All stakeholders should be informed about their different roles, and they should be equipped with the skills and tools they require to perform their duties more efficiently.

Project Phagamisa is aimed at helping organisations to make a meaningful contribution to the productive utilisation of all resources. Contact Phomolo Mokoena for more information on *Phagamisa* and small group activities. The telephone number is (012) 314-1470 and the fax number is (012) 44-1866. His e-mail address is mokoenap@npi.co.za

Let's learn from the world

By Jan Visser, Executive Director, NPI

South African business is fortunate that it can learn from the experience of the rest of the world to overcome its inadequate knowledge of productivity, which prevents it from becoming competitive.

Typical constraints which South African business experiences are insufficient co-operation between management and workers, a lack of productive behaviour, insufficiently educated and trained workers and a lack of marketing proficiency.

Few organisations know how to measure productivity and manage for higher productivity.

Numerous international consultancies have opened offices here or established know-how arrangements with local consultants. They bring with them knowledge which has been tried and tested in their countries. It is important that South African managers avail themselves of this know-how.

South Africa's economic success depends almost entirely on how well management and workers in individual

organisations perform.

Business can only expect to compete in international markets when individuals in organisations succeed in converting resources productively into products and services of high quality at competitive prices for customers throughout the world.

The government is following the correct monetary and fiscal policies to give private organisations the ability to perform well, but this does not guarantee good performance in individual organisations.

Management and workers have an attitude of doom because of the global threat. A threat is nothing more than an opportunity in work clothes. By working together we can succeed.

The mining industry is an example where the threat of total demise forced the social partners to sit together and work out plans to head off disaster. But we should not wait until death looks us in the eyes. Proactive management, using the consulting skills available locally and from overseas, while fully involving the workforce, can and will make a difference.