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## **LOOK BEYOND THE POSITION IN YOUR LABOUR RELATIONS, OR “It is not good enough to be right!”**

Around the country employers and employees are currently concluding wage negotiations as the first big set of wage reviews 2006 comes round in March / April.

We recently had occasion to deal with a strike, purportedly over wages, that was initiated over the final demand from the Union of a 52% increase across the board. So much for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work...

Interacting with employees over their perspectives and demands forms an intricate part of every company's relationship with their employees, and many important signals are passed around during these moments.

In the case above, it was not difficult to surmise the strike was pre-arranged, and the wage issue merely a smoke-screen. For months before the wage round, there had been noises about the relationship between the employees and their supervisors. Management figured this was in an attempt to make the company more receptive to a good increase. But the relationship was the issue, not the wages.

In the end, the resolution to the dispute was to revisit the disciplinary code and provide protections to the employees over the attitude and behaviours of their supervisors. A 7.5% increase did the trick, once the real stuff was defined.

Perceptions may not be justified or defensible, but for the employees feeling those things, they are real. **It is not good enough to be right when dealing with people**; they must perceive that their needs have at least been acknowledged and addressed.

A good manager will always try to understand what will resolve the problem by looking beyond the position to the need.

Recently a company put a grading system into place at the insistence of the Union, only thereafter to face a CCMA case on wages! A fully inclusive committee (Union too!) agreed on the grades. Management positioned entry level wages for each grade, resulting in increases for a few employees whose grades had been affected. But the employees were not interested in the grading, only in their perception that management were suppressing their wages. Action taken, problem not solved!

What is the message?

Do not sweep even the most inane complaint under the carpet. While many of these moments are subversive, there will come a time when a big fish leaps and if management have become complacent this will be missed.

Recognise that not even the most irresponsible employee really wants to be in dispute with his Company. A strike action will bite the employee as much, if not more than the employer. When the situation boils over to this extent, it is safe to assume the employees have a bigger point to make.

Most importantly, be the matter over wages or perceived racism, over grading or imparity, take the trouble to understand WHY an issue has been raised, and from WHERE the issue has emerged. Take action to address the real issue, not the demand.

480 words (body)

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