COMMUNICATING TRANSFORMATION, BLACK ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT, AND SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN BUSINESS

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the strategic responses of South African companies that have been challenged with corporate transformation due to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). In this study we investigate the approach used by BEE compliant businesses in formulating and implementing communication strategies to ensure an informed workforce.

This paper reports on findings which reveal that communication strategies have been put in place since the implementation of BEE and highlights that there is a moral obligation for the company to ensure that employees are made aware of their rights. Respondents agreed that the initial BEE implementation stages involved numerous misconceptions by staff, which placed a barrier on the effective implementation of BEE in the workplace.

Keywords: Black Economic Empowerment, Transformation, Strategic Communication, Social Change

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Introduction

After the African National Congress came into power in 1994, one of their first mandates was to redress the inequalities created by apartheid in the political, social and economic sphere (Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], 2003). Many enterprises began emerging with the abolishment of discriminatory laws and the voluntary transfer of equity to black individuals or groups (Engdahl & Hauki, 2001). This necessitated the setting up of a comprehensive black economic empowerment (BEE) framework, after the 1998 stock market crash (DTI, 2003) and re-aligning business with national priorities such as the Reconstruction and Development and Black Economic Empowerment Programmes.

BEE was intended to transform the economy to be representative of the demographic make-up of the country. The main objective of the policy was to transfer economic power from the previously advantaged, mainly white people, to the previously disadvantaged, mainly black people. The concept of the policy itself is important to South Africa's redistribution of wealth. (Selaelo, 2007).

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), or the narrow-based approach, came into existence in 1994, when South Africa elected its first democratic government. This was followed by the establishment of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Commission in 1999 and the subsequent strategies and policies to increase black ownership of businesses and to accelerate black representation in management (Booysen, 2007). While in 1990 black people occupied 3% of the corporate management positions, in 1995 they owned only 1% of the total market value of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (Cargill, 1999).

The government of South Africa implemented Broad Bbased Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) as a nation building strategy. The act intends to empower 'all blacks' listed as Africans, Coloureds and Indians. The strategy is based on the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act No. 53 of 2003 in conjunction with its Associated Charters, the Codes of Good Practice and various Scorecards (Grobler, 2006).

Although BBBEE is not affirmative action as such, employment equity forms part of it (Republic of South Africa, 2007a). BEE was introduced not only to redress the imbalances of the past, but also to

implement a growth strategy aimed at realising the country's full economic potential, increasing the skills levels, creating more jobs, and reducing poverty in a short period of time without redistribution of existing wealth (Republic of South Africa, 2007b).

Such change in the South African Corporate Sector necessitated that corporations revaluate their business strategy. This dictated that managers in a transforming economy needed to significantly alter organisational strategies to meet the required guidelines. Several changes were effected to the internal environment to meet new targets. However it became evident that the ability to communicate change internally and externally became a difficult task for the corporate communications division. Building reputation during a change period was not as difficult as communicating the reorganisation of the company and ensuring that everyone remained focussed on the company's goals. This application has shown that corporate communications teams are now facing new and complex business and communication challenges in an unpredictable environment.

Transforming the Private Sector

Because the legacy of apartheid prohibited black workers access to trades and skills, this resulted in an underskilled workforce (Horwitz, Browning, Jain and Steenkamp, 2002). Further to this, the establishment of a democratic society and political changes in the business environment in South Africa were prompted.

Socioeconomic transformation aimed at elevating the educational and economic position of black people formed the major thrust of the South African government's original policies, such as the Employment Equity Act 1998, Skills Development Act 1998, Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 2000, and Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000. The BEE Act of 2003 referred to elements of human resource development, employment equity, enterprise development, preferential procurement, as well as investment, ownership, and control of enterprises, as areas requiring organizational attention (BEECom 2001).

A highpoint of transformation is that the Private Sector in South Africa has committed itself to supporting and fast-tracking transformational developments. Companies have recognised the need for the implementation of a BEE strategy as an essential mechanism to meet the objectives as set out in the BEE Act, vis a vis, the achievement of sustainable and inclusive economic development, social stability and labour-absorbing economic growth (Ramaphosa, 2002, as cited by Bawa, 2005).

The King Report on Corporate Governance controls the South African Corporate Sector. In terms of the core principles of the King III report, social injustice has to be eradicated. Further, social transformation and redress is important and needs to be integrated within the broader transition to sustainability (Pwc, 2011). King III therefore directs companies to "proactively manage the relationship with its stakeholders" and strive to achieve the correct balance between its various stakeholder groupings, in order to advance the interests of the company (Olson, 2010, p. 222-3). Such change has enforced the corporate sector to take into account the interests of previously disadvantaged South Africans and as far as government policy is concerned the BEE Act promotes economic transformation to enable meaningful participation of black people in the economy and to achieve a substantial change in the racial composition of ownership and management structures (Venter, Levy, Conradie and Holtzhausen, 2009). The Act forces the corporate sector to recognise the reality of the country within which they operate, and to use legislation effectively to control their corporate integrity.

According to Arya, Bassi and Phiyega (2008) South Africa represents a unique context to examine the strategies of domestic firms in an emerging economy for three reasons. Firstly, since the 1994 democratic elections, fundamental institutional changes were introduced in South Africa. Secondly, this upheaval brought social issues to the forefront in an economy characterized by social and racial inequalities resulting from over four decades of the apartheid regime, augmenting institutional pressures for businesses to adopt comprehensive socially responsive strategies. Thirdly, the lack of finalization of regulatory transformation frameworks led several industries in this economy to adopt transformation charters or voluntary codes of conduct to self-regulate their social conduct and contribute to transformation in the country.

This paper assesses communication initiatives in a transformed society and explores social challenges experienced by the corporate sector. This paper is organised as follows, the next section presents an overview of BEE in South Africa. Subsequent sections focus on transformation in the private sector and identify challenges and successes in strategy implementation.

The BEE Setting in South Africa

BEE according to the South African Department of Trade and Industry (DTI: 2007) is defined BEE as:

an integrated and coherent socio-economic process that directly contributes to the economic transformation of South Africa and brings about significant increases in the number of black people that manage, own and control the country's economy, as well as significant decreases in income inequalities.

A central objective of BEE is to promote the redistribution of wealth in South Africa by attempting to transform the ownership of companies within the constraints of a free market system (Ritchken, 2004).

BEE Verification Agencies and the scorecard

Verification Agencies are accredited representatives of the true BEE policy. These agencies serve as watchdogs to monitor corporate South African businesses that claim to be BEE compliant. To control and measure these processes, a scorecard system is utilised. Such agencies have emerged as watchdogs to measure, verify and certify the BEE status of companies objectively and independently. BEE codes have many direct and indirect fronting risk indicators that need to be independently checked or verified and therefore verification agencies are vital for the proper implementation and control of the BEE processes in South Africa (Siko, 2008: 62).

Many elements in the BEE charters allow points to be scored for gender representation. Points can be earned under the preferential procurement section if the company does business with black women-owned enterprises. On the other hand strong female representation can place a company strongly up the curve in the BEE Charters, especially if these women are at senior levels within the company. Greater gender diversity among corporate leaders is becoming a strategic imperative rather than a legislative requirement; however there is still only minority representation of women in decision making roles (Harris, 2010: 23).

In order to calculate a company's BEE status, a 'scorecard' has been developed to quantify these seven elements. Each one is allocated a weighting out of 100. Ownership counts 20 points, management control 10 points, employment equity 10 points, skills development 20 points, preferential procurement 20 points, enterprise development 10 points and the residual elements 10 points. The score for the ownership element is influenced by the voting rights of blacks in a company and their degree of economic interest. Further and as discussed above, points are awarded for voting rights and economic interest of black women. The total score for the BEE ownership element is calculated by adding up all the ownership weighting points and cannot exceed 20 points (Sartorius & Botha, 2008).

Implementing a successful BEE programme has become an unavoidable imperative for many South African companies if they wish to maintain long-term profitability and retain their customer base (BusinessMap, 2005). Communicating change and implementation calls for a well-structured communication strategy in order to secure buy-in from employees.

Strategic communication and transformation

Buck, Filatochev, Demina and Wright (2003) indicate that managers in an emerging economy have to significantly transform organisational strategies to meet the new guidelines set out by a dramatically altered institutional environment.

Strategy in this context and as viewed by the management philosopher Drucker is an indication of the organisation's positioning for the future, the 'what' rather than the 'how'. It is more important to do the right thing (improving effectiveness) than to do things right (improving efficiency) (Steyn, 2004). A strategy is seen by Grunig and Repper (1992) as an approach, design, scheme or system that directs the course of action in a specific situation it is the means to achieve the ends. The strategic direction in any company is the thinking and the logic behind the actions.

An organisation undergoing transformation relies on its ability to attract enough individuals to co-operate in mutually beneficial exchange. The focus is on desired relationships, symbolic actions and communication.

A communication strategy is a pattern in the communication function's important decisions and actions regarding relationships with strategic stakeholders. It is regarded as emergent rather than deliberate strategy since communication goals are not defined at the beginning of the strategy, but emerges through the process of identifying key strategic issues and their implications for the stakeholders. As an emergent strategy, it is continuously adapting to stakeholder needs (Steyn, 2004). A good illustration of this is the case of ABSA in communicating transformation interventions to their stakeholders. A number of initiatives were launched to communicate the details of transformation interventions with ABSA executives and employees. The communication strategy was multi-pronged and used a mix of the ABSA channel (TV broadcasts to all 34,000 employees in the Group), the ABSA in-house magazine (*ABACUS*), and sessions conducted by Group BEE. A sample article reflecting transformation related communication strategy appeared in the ABSA in-house magazine. External communications included use of the media, industry review surveys, and presentations at external industry conferences. Furthermore, the ABSA procurement division developed a series of training programs for its suppliers to promote understanding of the importance of and the need to implement black economic empowerment initiatives within their own organizations as this would have a direct bearing on ABSA Group's ability to meet performance targets on the procurement perspective (Arya, Bassi and Phiyega, 2008).

South Africa's transformation challenges can only be addressed within the context of a growing economy. However, economic growth, whilst being a necessary condition to raise the living standards of the people, is unlikely to reduce the racial and income inequalities of society (Khumalo, 2008: 9). For transformation to be effective and sustainable, a holistic and balanced approach needs to be taken.

BEE cannot be the sole consideration in the decision making process of companies, but it should be one of the most important factors. Therefore, effective communication is required for good human relations and a successful business (Thomson, 2007).

The BBC, being the "black voice", was recognised as a communicator in the workplace. The BBC as a representative of black staff, experienced challenges and communicated messages on behalf of staff. This bears testimony that there was a lack of communication in the form of "the black voice" from employers, hence the efforts of the BBC to enact this role.

One of the essential elements in the introduction of BEE in the workplace was to ensure that the corporate sector was prepared for change. Therefore the most important step was to ensure that an organizational assessment was carried out, this entailed conducting a change readiness review to ascertain whether the organization was ready to embark on such a journey.

Makakane (2008: 22) is of the view that there is a misconception that once a balanced scorecard is built and implemented, there will be automatic transformation and buy-in. Therefore, for the scorecard to be successful and for the change process to occur, the scorecard must be embedded in the management system. Although the concept of "change" is easily targeted as an excuse for communication challenges within the organization, there are many other communication barriers that surface.

Communication challenges are evident in the South African corporate sector due to the diversity of the various race groups. With the introduction of the BEE policy, evidence of challenges has surfaced among employees, employers, stakeholders and other representatives.

Such changes have stemmed from the lack of proper communication *via* internal and external channels, particularly the use of the media as a powerful medium of communication. The lack of education and training amongst employees shows evidence that employees are not being consulted with before preparing and implementing BEE plans. Further challenges such as misunderstanding and racism shows evidence that there is a lack of the 'Black voice' in the boardroom. This evidently means that there is a lack of Black management positions in decision making levels in the corporate sector.

In order to get staff buy-in, the quality of information flowing to them, regarding BEE deals, is vital. In modern times, BEE requires employee communication to be more transparent and frequent so that employees know what is happening.

Corporate South Africa is increasingly prioritizing communication efforts. They are working on ensuring that staff are adequately informed and that open channels of communication exist, this yields a more efficient and productive organisation. The

discussion that follows complements this process (Vuyo, 2008).

Methodology

A survey of BEE compliant businesses in KwaZulu Natal from the Empowerdex list (the first and largest verification agency to be accredited) was selected to collect data. This empirical study tested the approach used by BEE compliant businesses in formulating and implementing communication strategies to ensure an informed workforce. A non-probability sampling technique of judgmental sampling was utilized in the selection of the population, based on the judgment of the researcher. Judgmental sampling is a form of convenience sampling in which the selected population elements are based on the judgment of the researcher (Malhotra, 1996: 359- 380). Thus, judgment was exercised in determining the size of the business; the level of BEE ratings; and the location of the business.

Determining the most adequate size of a sample is crucial. Bless and Smith (1995: 96) highlight that a large sample is more representative but very costly. On the other hand, a small sample is much less accurate but more convenient. A sample of seven BEE compliant companies was included from sectors such as retail, property, financial, industrial and agricultural. Top management and communication managers were selected as respondents

Results

The study assessed the approach used by BEE compliant businesses in formulating and implementing communication strategies. The following themes emerged and were investigated:

Theme One: Internal employee reaction to BEE implementation; Theme Two: Communication about compliancy internally and externally; Theme Three: Communication strategies focused on BEE; Theme Four: Mediums and barriers of communication; and Theme five: Top management's involvement in the process.

In the discussion that follows, results are drawn from the analysed data to illustrate and support the discussion.

Theme One: Internal/employee reaction to BEE implementation

While two companies revealed that their employees reacted well to the changes of BEE implementation, three other companies indicated a negative response. They experienced retaliation from a minor group of employees, which predominantly consisted of white employees, due to the communication barriers/factors that existed among the various race groups at both a professional and societal level. Two companies explained that the majority of their employees were

accepting of the BEE policy and its changes and benefits. It is evident that employees now view BEE as a holistic approach in developing South Africa.

Figure one indicates the factors that result in communication barriers.

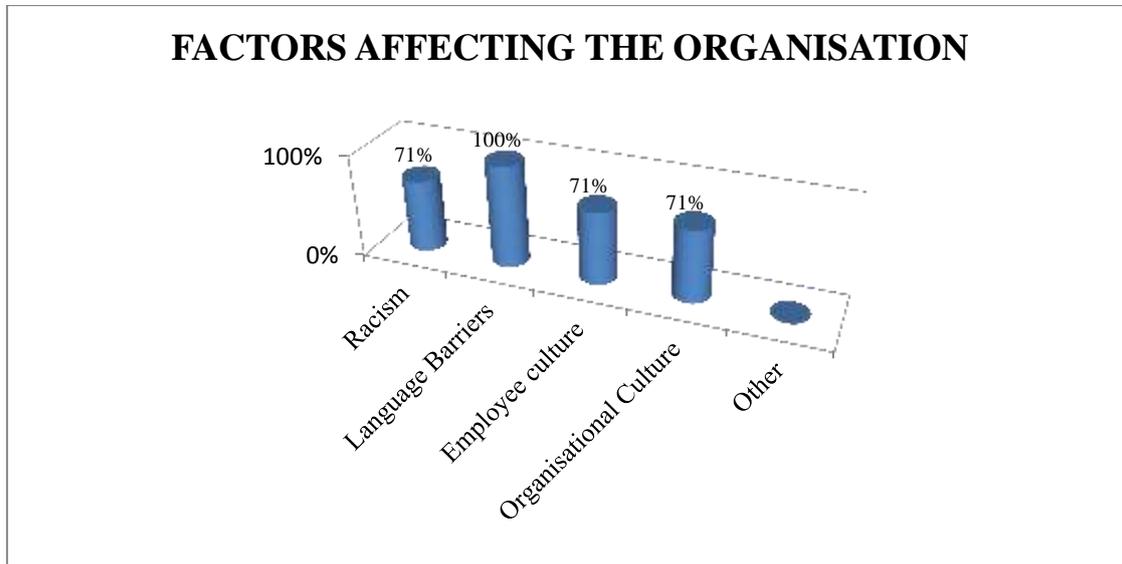**Figure 1.** Factors affecting the organizations

Figure 1 indicates that five companies were affected by racism; seven were affected by language barriers; five, by employee culture; and five by organisational culture.

The South African corporate sector has a range of values, cultures and languages. Such factors will assist organisations in selecting and tailoring their programs and policies to meet the specific needs of their employees.

Theme Two: Communication about compliancy internally and externally

All companies agree that they are frequently questioned about their BEE ratings and are of the shared opinion that clients/suppliers are keen to do business with companies who have high BEE ratings as this further enhances their own BEE ratings. Respondents further indicated that their BEE compliancy is rated with the utmost importance to their clients. Four companies are strong supporters of effective communication. All companies agreed that their BEE compliancy was communicated effectively both internally and externally. Employees were given priority to information, followed by suppliers and clients. A common pattern noted was that employees were informed by heads of departments or regional managers, in meetings about the company's BEE compliancy. An open forum was popularly used by most of the companies which allowed for all questions from employees to be answered and discussed further. Developments and progress were further communicated to clients by emails, personal letters, in house journals and newsletters.

Theme Three: Communication strategies focused on BEE

Evidence suggests that the following communication strategies were in place to communicate BEE related information to employees.

- The use of a top-down strategy, with open channels for feedback and easily accessible communication with staff;
- The use of a cyclical effect strategy, whereby information is constantly flowing between employees and employers. There is always feedback and evaluation involved in the processes of communication. There is continuous input and involvement from both employers and employees;
- The use of open communication practiced at every level. This strategy is used to ensure the information flowed from top management to the lowest levels of staff. All levels of employees are kept informed at all times in various languages via the most appropriate mediums applicable or accessible to them;
- Diversity management workshops are hosted every three months during which all levels of employees within each region/province meet to discuss various issues including BEE. This was initiated with the implementation of BEE and serves as a platform for employees to air their views and discuss any challenges. Information is also strictly confidential as one-on-one opportunities are offered to employees for sensitive discussions;

During information disseminated from employer to employee, a specific communication strategy is used based on the levels of employees who will be communicated to. Different mediums are used to communicate the same messages to different employees, e.g. those with language differences. One company indicated that it did not have a formal strategy, and utilised a basic communication strategy applicable and adjusted according to each scenario. A different strategy was implemented when updates about the BEE status, benefit to employees or shares, were communicated.

Communication filters from top management to employees only (from directors and board members to managers and employees). Findings indicate that the current communication challenges in corporate South Africa prove to be more prevalent since BEE was implemented.

Communication Media utilised in the communication of BEE

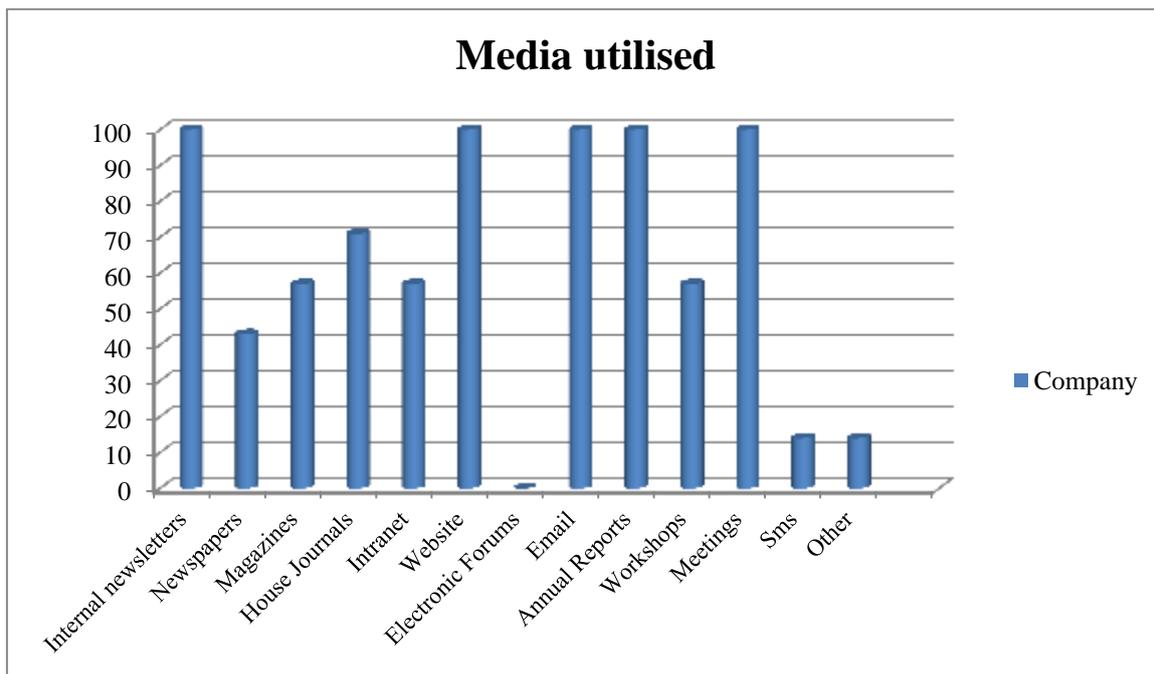**Figure 2.** Media used to ensure the flow of information

Figure 2 shows evidence that three companies strongly believe that frequent employee communication using various mediums is necessary for effective communication.

Seven companies use internal newsletters, website, email, annual reports and meetings to communicate with their employees. Three companies use the print media (newspapers); while four companies use magazines. Five companies use house journals; four companies use the intranet; four companies use workshops; and one company uses an SMS system.

Theme Four: Mediums and barriers of communication

Some respondents reported that there were evident misconceptions from staff about BEE. Although most reported minor misconceptions, they agree that there were misconceptions at the initial BEE implementation stages. This confirmed that in a transforming organisation resistance to change is expected. Communication barriers that surfaced after the implementation of the organisation's BEE policy were as follows:

One company indicated that language barriers posed a serious communication problem. Another highlighted the lack of respect and lack of understanding of colleagues, culture and the diversity in the workplace. Another company indicated that they experienced hostility between old and new employees. Although they did not encounter any major problems, it was evident that older employees felt threatened and in-secure because of the newly appointed staff. Language and cultural barriers served as another communication barrier, after BEE was implemented employees felt insecure and lacked self-confidence with the inability to communicate in English. Customer service was not as excellent as the company's management would have liked, however, offering English courses certainly assisted in developing staff confidence and improving their customer service levels. Resistance to teamwork among races, especially between long-term employed white employees and newly appointed black staff was clearly evident. It is suggestive that race groups tend

to work better with their own people, however, diversity management courses; team work efforts from management have drastically reduced such racial segregation.

Theme Five: Top Management's involvement in the process

To ensure a moral and legal obligation by the company, management have undertaken and implemented training workshops, which will assist in the efficiency of the business as well as communicate internal policies thus aligning employer and employee interest. Legal effects have become a BBBEE necessity, and the moral obligation relates to empowering employees, making them better employees by assisting in productivity and personal growth and ensuring commitment and building morale. Diversity management and skills training have become a priority and workshops have been run as solutions to eliminate barriers that exist and improve employee performance.

Conclusion

The BEE Act illustrates that social change (in this case the correction of racial imbalances and unfair practices in the corporate sector) has brought about unwarranted communication issues.

The BEE Act has further illustrated how the South African corporate sector has conformed to regulations, due to national awareness surrounding Black Economic Empowerment. Findings from this study indicate that certain practices are consistent with the literature reviewed while other practices lack a strategic communication approach and implementation of effective communication strategies.

A quality driven organisational culture can only produce effective productivity among staff if all employees work together and put the effects of apartheid behind them. A commitment from top management is a necessity to drive this process in ensuring that all employees are given proper mediums and processes for effective communication and feedback on an on-going basis.

There is little evidence to show that organisations have implemented formal communication models although partial strategies have been implemented within the corporate sector. The results of this study further indicate that, in certain cases necessary tools and mediums were implemented, catering mostly for the minimum requirements of effective communication in the workplace. Due to the sensitivity of BEE, there is much more that can be implemented by the employer to ensure effective implementation and understanding by employees.

Transforming the economy is an enormous task that cannot be tackled by government alone. With the global economy sitting on a 'knife edge', business should be doing everything possible to ensure not only its survival, but its successes too. There has to be a concerted effort by all stakeholders to ensure collective activism.

From the literature reviewed, the following trends relating to BEE are apparent. Only organizations which deal with state departments are legally required to comply with the BEE policy. Those that do not engage in business with state departments may choose to comply out of moral obligation.

Neither literature nor statistics have surfaced to quantify the success of BEE in South Africa. The implementation of BEE has brought some advantages to the workplace, for instance, direct black ownership on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange has increased. However, there is still a wide disparity in respect of management positions for black as compared to white people. There is also room for the growth of women, in particular, African women, to occupy management positions. The lack of a plan on the progress of BEE means that only a few companies have fully implemented BEE.

The challenges faced by employers included: aligning employer employee interest; building employee commitment and morale; and improving employee performance. The result in this change process necessitated a need for communication strategies to be introduced. This saw corporate South Africa increase their priority as far as communication efforts were concerned, and ensured that staff was adequately informed and that open channels of communication existed in the change process.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the empirical study.

- Although there was general acceptance of the BEE policy, some companies experienced retaliation from a minor group of employees.
- The initial BEE implementation stages involved numerous misconceptions by staff, which placed a barrier on the effective implementation of BEE in the workplace. Racism, language, organisational culture and employee culture were the most common barriers that prevailed.
- Communication strategies were seen as an essential step in the implementation of BEE within the organization. This necessitated a need for proper communication mediums to be put in place. The commitment from top management was seen as a necessity to drive the process in ensuring that all employees were sufficiently informed about the BEE process through the use of diverse mediums.

The following recommendations can be made:
- The study emphasized how cultural differences, language barriers, racism, and discrimination gave rise to challenges encountered by employers in the workplace. It is crucial for employers to have a full understanding of all

employees, their culture and languages and further to promote such support and programmes that filter this practice to each and every employee to form a fair and balanced organisational culture of the organisation.

- BEE is certain to remain a government initiative aimed at uplifting black employees in the workplace. It is therefore important for both employer and employees to be adequately communicated with and educated about the benefits of the BEE. This can be achieved through the media.

- It is imperative for organisations to closely evaluate their communication strategies, especially since there were barriers to proper implementation of BEE. Effective, honest, open communication can certainly lead to the success of BEE and the organisation's productivity at large.

- Achieving change requires working together on change communication and change management. Fulfilling this role according to McLaren (2009) will enable the corporate sector to build their change communication capability by;

  - Restructuring the communication function, integrating internal and external communication expertise into a team structure that fits within the business structure

  - Maximising the role of leaders in change communication – at the corporate centre and within business units – by creating leadership communication plans designed to support transformation plans.

  - Focusing communication investment on those who make change happen – management – and ensuring that they understand the context for change and their responsibilities

  - Building the change communication capability by sharing expertise

  - Putting in place communication channels that are rapid and flexible to the current pace of change

Understanding the need for change is the first step in creating new behaviours within an organisation, behaviours that will represent values in the future state of the organisation. When business engages in initiatives for social transformation such as BEE, they must select proper strategies that will be used in the communication process, therefore communication is paramount when trying to raise the level of understanding of an organisation. The results from this survey of BEE compliant South African companies reveal that they are in the process of developing necessary capabilities to ensure successful change in an emerging market.

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