

Another powerful story of change and improvement.
Karee Mines

Changing Mines in South Africa

If you want to help extend the global reach of de Bono thinking tools, you need not limit yourself to the usual north, south, east, and west compass points. Susan Mackie and her colleagues carried them down one-kilometer underground in the platinum mines of South Africa's Northwest Province.

Since 1996, Mackie has worked with Lonplats (Lonhro) mining company's staff in a massive, ongoing training and research effort to improve safety, productivity, and human relations for Lonplat's 16,000 employees. Mackie spent several months in the mineshafts gaining workers' trust and learning about their work to build an environment for teaching the thinking tools. Adult Basic Education, financial life skills and technical training complete this comprehensive plan.

The company's "passion" is to become world class in every respect," states HR director Tony Frost, "and that can happen only if every team has the opportunity to be the very best they can be." "We want to develop a culture of learning within our organization," says Greg Colin, Human Resources Divisional Manager.

Lonplats underscored that commitment by creating a residential training facility on a company-owned game reserve. Obstacles to excellence were identified in the company and among its employees, including motivation and morale issues, absenteeism, need for more training, miscommunication and mistrust, and safety concerns. "The legacy of apartheid, which resulted in a huge backlog in the development and education of the people of South Africa, created many of these problems," according to a paper presented by Mackie and Lonmin's Hannes van Rensburg and Thys de Beer at the 1999 International Conference on Thinking, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Many of the miners lack literacy skills. The twelve different South African languages spoken by mine employees add to communication and team-building difficulties. Literacy and learning skills, team empowerment, problem solving, conflict resolution, and communication skills rank high on the training menu. Monumental challenges call for daring measures. Lonplats has taken the risk of pulling entire teams out of production for 15 training days over a three- to six- month period. At the training facility, teams learn the DATT thinking tools and engage in experiential learning to practice the tools and improve, both individually and as teams. Trainers follow up by going underground with the teams to reinforce practical application.

The risk seems to have paid off. Absenteeism has dropped for trained workers, and morale has improved. Dramatic evidence comes from one section at Karee Mine, where worker grievances dropped from seven per day to four per month after workers learned to use de Bono thinking tools.

Production in cubic meters blasted per trained worker per month has increased by an average of 14%. Productivity of teams that have been through the training program versus untrained teams has increased by more than 20%. Supervisors report that productivity lost to training time has been recouped within a month following training.

"In the worst case scenario," reports Colin, "there is only a 5% improvement on centares per man [But] one of the greatest benefits of the program is the increase in confidence and self-esteem of the employees. They see how they fit into the bigger

picture and begin to understand fully their importance to the mine. Our absenteeism has also dropped substantially as a result of the [training] program." Antonio Salvador Bila, a miner at Eastern Plantinum Limited, offers his perspective on the reasons for these remarkable results:

"The shaft [previously] functioned in [a] style of conflict, resulting in unnecessary production losses. . . Therefore, we never received bonuses, causing conflict between workers and miners and shift supervisors. "With thinking tools we develop a vision as a team to . . . reach monthly targets. Dr. de Bono plays a great role. The tools can be applied daily. We learned that there were many traps in our thinking. We used to only think about ourselves, we were narrow and unclear. Now we have applied the solutions to the traps- think clearly, don't rush, give thinking time, be clear and precise. We use the tools APC, OPV, FIP, and PMI in solving problems in daily production."

Congratulations, admiration, and thanks go to Lonplats, Susan Mackie and all the thinking skills trainers at Lonplats. All direct quotes and information in this article and the two accompanying focus pieces are taken from the following papers provided by Mackie. "Lonhro Thinks Its Way to Great Productivity and World Class Standards", a press release issued by Michele Vermaak, Simeka TWS Communications, for Lonhro Platinum Division, 1998.

"Thinking for Real: The Power of Organized Thinking in Industry", address to the 8th International Conference on Thinking, July 4-9, 1999, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, by Hannes van Rensburg, Human Resources Manager, and Thys de Beer, Training Manager, Western Platinum, Karee Mine, Lonmin, and Susan Mackie, The Edward de Bono Foundation for Real Thinking.