Automotive companies have always created news especially when conflicts have risen between management and workers. For example, the news of non production at Hyundai Motors' Sriperumbudur factory due to a recurring labour unrest in 2009, a conflict between workers and management of Pricol, an auto components manufacturing company at its Periyanaickenpalayam unit in 2009, and some months back General Motors India faced a labour unrest at its mother plant in Halol. The striking workers had formed a new union under INTUC and alleged that they were subjected to surplus workload, faced health hazards and the organization dishonoured the PF Act, gratuity norms and rules of Industrial Safety and Health Act. General Motors, although, had kept its stand of not violating any employment contract or safety aspects. Whether it is about worker's compliance, safety, quality, benefits or cost control, achieving customer targets, working on new products, etc it all percolated down to inefficient communication between senior management and workers. For instance, in a medium sized auto company the managing director instead of releasing staffs/workers salaries he went ahead and put the funds in a new project which nobody knew about, and he didn't bother communicating this to the staff and workers. When this information somehow leaked workers were furious first about that their salaries would be delayed, and second that they didn't know what they were supposed to work on next as no details of the project were conveyed to them until one day prior to commencing work, which made work very difficult to accomplish. Also, the timelines were too short.

Communication is the foundation of any organization... more so at worker level, since they are the ones who transform the vision of comfortable and luxurious gadgets into reality.

By Arva Shikari
for a big project to take off, safety and quality standards were not met, and there was a shortage of spare parts. The workshop manager was unable to communicate workers' voice to the management and workers were too scared to speak up as the managing director was too egoistic and temperamental in nature. However, there was retaliation from workers. Due to salary delays the workers would abuse and threaten the accounts department and would report late to work or some remained absent. At times, some workers with the help of security would keep a proxy for their incoming times. All this affected the new project and overall work which ultimately lead management to fire-fighting, workers resigning, loss of project, and last minute cost controls in terms of reducing work space - all at the same time. And this was happening in just the last decade. Previously, communication with shop floor level workers was completely a top down one (management to workers) i.e. one way communication. If any worker dared to speak was shut up in some way or the other or even could lose his job for speaking up. Taking advantage of such situations sometimes were union leaders with vested interests that worsened the communication between the two most crucial parts of auto companies. Also, workers were less aware of the going-ons and most were uneducated. Thus, there was "A reluctance to build an atmosphere of transparency and openness which resulted in communication gap between the management and the workmen. Due to this conflict situations were very common, which fuelled industrial unrest from time to time," adds G.S. Uppal, the head-IR, CS & admin of Tata Motors Ltd.

Nevertheless, the rapid progress of the shop floor has passed through an evolutionary process. Today's workers are more educated and aware as compared to some years back. It is much easier to communicate with modern day workers and has become a two way process. "Also, the employees 'need to know' is met equally with the management's 'willingness to share'. This has brought about a key change in communication with workmen and a creation of a transparent work culture. The management not only wants to talk to them for their involvement in initiatives, but, also wants to know their views on improvement in quality, productivity, and cost reduction. The participative management, training and open communications with shop floor employees plays a vital role in creating and maintaining a transparent work culture. Even the
involvement of shop-floor employees in routine activities has increased the belongingness amongst them," says Uppal. Therefore, today communication has become a base for worker engagement practices - the basic pillars being openness, trust, transparency and teamwork.

Communication bottlenecks
The changes in ways of communication have increased worker engagement, but, with more globalization senior management has become busy and focused on customers sideling regular communication with shop floor levels. For example, a leading automotive parts manufacturer had an enormous increase in demand from its biggest customer who accounted for about a quarter of the manufacturer's volumes on a specialist cylinder part - but, faced inefficiencies due to communication bottlenecks. The senior management recognized that in order to boost its output volumes to the desired extent, the company needed to augment its efficiency and for that it required to coordinate activities much more effectively across levels especially on the shop floor. The senior management implemented an effective communication system that enhanced daily level communications between shop floor workers and management and helped in eradicating firefighting and established anticipation as the operational rule.

To have an open culture on the shop floor especially in times of crisis (like large volume of work) asking workers their views, discussing the technicalities, and involving them in negotiations secures the management in making rushed decisions and aids in getting work done faster. For example, Maruti Suzuki sometime back faced an exceptional demand of its cars and a limited capacity to produce them at its plants discovered a unique problem solver - its 7,500 employees. In today's customer focused arena, "Tata Motors has taken extra efforts to make its shop floor level management/workers aware of the customer expectations and requirements. Customer centric factors like JD power ratings are a key component of even workmen incentive schemes and they understand that customer is their final pay master. Hence we do not face communication bottlenecks in this regard," affirms Uppal.

Other communication bottlenecks occur when workers lack computer access or are not savvy with it or may not know how to use internet as most perform physical jobs and don't have desks or computers. Thus, questions about benefits or how to fill forms and the likes come up quite often or while communicating a new policy to workers across geographies do pose problems.

Furthermore, a plant might have two or three shifts, thus, workers work at different times of a day. An auto manufacturing company ran three shifts, and communicating with all three was a huge issue. The third

COVER STORY

Automation of shop floor communication

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars set up a DECT IP communication system as a part of its wider communications systems at the company's Goodwood plant in Sussex. Rolls Royce got more than 400 handsets including IP54 and ATEX/IS rated units for utilization on the production line and in harmful parts like the paint shop where flammable fumes are regularly present. The handsets allow workers to make or receive internal and external calls and offer all standard telephony functionality comprising of internal call identification, automatic call answering, vibrate and tone alert, telephone book, auto login and redial. This system enhanced communications and facilitated managers to be efficient by being with their teams rather than operate from their offices. They get contacted fast to resolve any issues in the quickest feasible time despite the area. Over 40 base stations are fixed forming a DECT mesh network across the Goodwood site. Positioned on walls and ceilings in the offices, around the production line and in main sections outside, the mesh network ensures efficient handover of calls as users move around the plant. The system gelled well with the existing building management system to distribute immediate alerts of production line problems and other events needing urgent attention of managers and maintenance teams on the shop floor.
shift usually felt like the forgotten child. And most of the times they relied on supervisors to get across messages to and from management to workers and vice versa. Of course, this took up a lot of focus and hours to communicate effectively. Some companies post notices on bulletin boards or keep notices in with pay checks or send mass SMSes depending upon the type of message that needs to be conveyed.

Communicating in a manufacturing environment is sometimes complicated as language also puts barriers. For example, in India there are many languages. If a North Indian supervisor or manager joins an auto manufacturing plant in Maharashtra, it would be difficult for him to communicate as most workers may be attuned to Marathi language. In fact, verbal communication in any language is difficult on shop floor as there are loud noises on the floor which could be a barrier to communication like some equipment operate at 95 decibels, and people are wearing hearing protections. In that case, machines have to be stopped to get the message across effectively. Toyota has simple internal communications. It’s an unwritten rule at Toyota that employees keep language simple when communicating with each other. While making presentations, they sum up background data, objectives, analysis, action plans, and expected results on a single sheet of paper.

No doubt today most workers are educated, but, less educated than their office counterparts, like a manager will hold an MBA degree, but, a worker may have a simple diploma in mechanical or automotive engineering, so HR/IR professionals have to tailor their messages accordingly. For example, an HR/IR manager while speaking to line workers about family and medical plans eligibility may have to utilize less legal terms than while talking with executives.

**Communication strategies to eliminate barriers**

Coaching at every level, from senior management to the shop floor is one way of eliminating communication bottlenecks. To optimize communication supporting ideas and interests from shop floor workers gets the commitment of everyone involved even from defiant operators. One auto company to encourage effective communication introduced an initiative where workers were encouraged to come up with their ideas and suggestions on how to control costs and this could be done anonymously. This approach was welcomed by the workers. Even Maruti Suzuki has recently started to get suggestions from employees on improving quality, reducing costs, ways to speed up operations, improve efficiencies of robots and streamline supplies.
etc. as a company's annual exercise. There were 60,000 suggestions logged recently and most were from shop floor workers. In fact, the suggestions were on how Maruti can make more cars without expanding its capacity (in relation to the above mentioned problem of Maruti). This sent a message across to workers that their voice is equally important for the company's progress. On the other hand, Toyota Motors emphasizes on teamwork as a guiding principle since its inception. When a problem occurs, every member of the team is accountable and has the authority and responsibility to find a solution. The practice began on the factory floor and has spread throughout the company.

An effective communication program plays an important role in changing behaviours and monitoring progress in increasing work capacity, enhancing line yields across the entire shop floor and revitalizing working culture. Tata Motors has a structured communication system and the routine shop floor issues are resolved through the joint forums of employees and management. Describing further, Uppal says, "At the shop floor level we have self directed teams (SDT) of workmen who work on safety, quality, delivery, cost, moral and environment (SQDCME) parameters and are fully empowered to take decisions on routine issues of their respective areas. In many areas these teams are working very effectively and there is no need for supervision. However, to resolve issues in shops we have joint shop council (JSC) and at division levels we have joint division councils (JDC). If issues raised in JSC are not resolved it goes to JDC for resolution. At the highest level i.e. plant level we have joint management council (JMC), in which senior management team including plant head and union office bearers are members. The issues remaining unresolved in JDC are finally resolved in the JMC. The trend of issues raised and resolved through these joint forums are 98% successful, which shows the effective working of the joint forums."

Further, says Uppal, "These forums also act as an effective communication channel with the shop floor employees. The decisions taken by management team in its apex business counsel (ABC) are communicated through JMC and goes down to SDT level. Similarly, issues at SDT level go to the ABC through JMC. The targets taken up in balance score card (BSC) at business unit, plant, factory, centre of excellence level are communicated to the SDT levels through these forums. These forums are an effective way of two way communication and alignment between shop floor employees and management."

Additionally, shop floor communication with senior leadership at Tata Motors happens in two forms. One is the town hall meeting with the managing director and CEO conducted once a year for 120 minutes where review of last year's performance, future targets, market scenario, and new challenges are discussed. Secondly, meetings with plant head and factory process owners are done quarterly for 90 minutes each time where performance of PIs & VPLP, market scenario, employee involvement, productivity, and safety are talked about. Besides all these channels, "We have several in-house journals that are circulated to all employees," informs Uppal.

In another auto company, management leaders started holding shop floor meetings to increase face-to-face communication with workers. With the customer contract less than a year away, shop floor meetings were one of the best methods to distribute information, and receive feedback and input, as well. Also, two-way communication is the most important factor to successful negotiations where it makes certain that workers can voice their concerns and problems can be identified. Shop floor meetings aid in increasing management's visibility and give workers an opportunity to speak to management and work becomes more participative.

At Ford Motors shop floor level associates still look forward to notice boards for daily communication.
However, today they have better access to web-based communications and thanks to telecom growth they are well connected to their colleagues within and other companies, mailing groups and bulk SMS options are widely used. At Ford India, "We extensively use web based communication by way of Ford Communication Network (FCN) News, build excitement about product promotions amongst employees through 'driving ford', and circulate periodic in-house magazine '@Ford' to keep everyone abreast of the happenings in the country, Asia Pacific and Africa region and FMC globally," says Pandiyan Vairamani, the vice president, HR of Ford India. Furthermore, the company has never lost sight of the basics of communication. "Daily communication at the start of the shift for employees in their team meeting at the shop floor is an effective way of updating employees on safety information, production plan, and other related information. Departmental meetings are planned for important cascades and roll out of new initiatives. A town-hall meeting a.k.a. all employees meeting is a regular feature every quarter covering shop floor employees across shifts in three to four batches. This meeting covers a wide variety of topics right from business updates from managing director, followed by marketing and manufacturing updates from the respective functional heads. It also serves as an effective platform for rewards and recognition of deserving employees and teams with thundering applause from their colleagues," explains Vairamani.

In addition, its celebration time for Ford plant employees when it comes to unveiling of a new car, various competitions and fun-filled events build excitement for employees like the theme 'Tell Figo Sell Figo - Sky is the Limit'. "The new car's launch in India recently had thousands of plant employees witnessing the reveal during an exciting event held on Maraimalai Nagar plant lawn and our employees got an exclusive preview of the sleek four-door model," avers Vairamani.

Only a two-way communication would mean that there is a seamless communication between shop floor associates and their supervision. Ford practices an open door policy and employees freely express their opinions to their supervisors. The process is made more robust by way of organizing skip level meetings that help the leadership team to closely interact with shop floor associates. By skipping levels and taking direct feedback from them enables management in understanding the pulse on the floor. For example, at times the president and managing director Michael Boneham speaks and interacts with workers on the shop floor like with the blanking and stamping line. This is "President on The Shop Floor" program which Boneham feels is a fantastic opportunity to get a close look at daily operations and learn more about quality and safety processes and to get to know the people who carry these out every day. Vairamani says, "Management safety walk reinforces our commitment to safety and helps the leadership team to review safety practices on the shop floor and improve the work environment." Ford India also has a vibrant Natural Work Groups (NWG) comprising of employees meet for one hour periodically where issues are discussed in the production line and process improvements.
cost saving measures etc.

Even in Toyota plants, executives convey and get information by being on the shop floor in person. For example, the head of the Takaoka and Tsutsumi plants is on the factory floor daily and joins workers for drinks in the evening sometimes as frequently as four times a week. In fact, the characteristics of Toyota executives comprise of readiness to listen and learn from others, fervour for continuously making enhancements, ease with working in teams, knack of taking action promptly to resolve a matter, interest in coaching employees, and modesty which all help in building a sturdy communication system in the organization.

Effective communication enhances quality of work life

Tata Motors has structured communication strategies like SDT and joint forums which are effective tools to communicate and align the shop floor employees with corporate vision, mission and strategy where management targets are shared with SDTs and the agenda of the meeting is structured to achieve those targets. Since the company has always believed in proactive industrial relations, it uses human touch base communication channels, too, to further enhance the quality of work life for workers by going to the workers and try and understand their problems and grievances at the inception stage itself. "This helps in addressing issues before they blossom and create a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. An example of this would be one-to-one counseling which we do with workmen who either have chronic absenteeism or performance issues. Here we try to understand the reasons for their low performance or absenteeism and provide them the necessary assistance to help get their careers back on track," pledges Uppal.

In addition, Tata motors also conducts training programs on interpersonal skills, world wonder of communication, listening skills, and presentation skills for shop floor workers/line managers to enhance their communication skills.

To make shop floor communication more effective and improve the quality of work life Vairamani says, "Groups participate in department, plant wide competitions on Kaizens and the winners get to participate in state level, national and international competitions. The winners look forward to participate with their family members in an annual dinner event with senior management. There is opportunity for others as well to take pride and showcase to their families the wonderful work environment they enjoy at Ford by way of family visits organized at periodic intervals."

In fact, a Lean Behaviour Survey to assess the employee feedback on overall people and process management at Ford’s shop floor has shown a positive increasing trend over the past years. This shows its continuous efforts in fostering a culture of openness, development orientation and people focus among its workforce.

To avoid the winds of change from blowing down the organization, Toyota Motors ties together its founders' values - ‘up-and-in' people management, and open communication. Toyota promotes a multifaceted web of social networks as it wants everyone to know everything. The corporation creates horizontal links among employees across functional and geographic boundaries, grouping them by specializations and year of entry; develops vertical relationships across hierarchies through teaching relationships and mentoring; and cultivates informal ties by inviting employees to join clubs based on birthplaces, sports interests, hobbies, etc. Also, the company hardly ever removes underperformers, instead focuses on advancing their skills and capabilities.