

Strike fever - It was the 2012 gold rush

 By [Gavin Moffat](#)

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We speak with different voices. We hear with different ears. Our intentions play a great part in our communication, and the words and tone we use are an integral part of the subtle, underlying structure of our information exchange.

This is so much a part of our daily lives and is often neglected or forgotten. It should be a focus for you if you work in the marketing and public relations field, actually for anyone that communicates with another human being. The subtle changes that can be inferred by the merest change in a word chosen are often overlooked or ignored.

The language that we speak with, whom we are talking to and where the communication lands was thrown into stark relief in the closing months of 2012 as South Africa became a nation in the grip of strike fever. It felt to me like the gold rush of 2012, as everyone sped toward the vein (metaphorically the gold or pumping blood vein of SA) and rushed to strike gold with new wage deals.

Language from the top down

Let's look at it from the top down. The CEO's of mining company's speak a particular language. It is one of investors, shareholders, returns, viability, marginal, profitability, costs, contribution to the economy, and a bunch of additional terms and phrases that are revealing as to their actual communication intention.

What felt like the notable exception was Mark Cutafani, CEO of AngloGold Ashanti (and soon to be CEO of Anglo American) in an interview with John Robbie on 702. Either he has been exceptionally well media trained and knew just what to say, or he is a genuine guy.

He came across as being sincere and interested in the well being of his miners. He has a deep understanding of the dangers and challenges that they face at the mines and seemed to be focused on a workable solution for all. His language was all about the wellbeing of the workers, the viability of the mines, decline in profitability of marginal mines and potential resulting job losses etc. His language seemed to be common-man speak and perfect for a mass-broadcasting medium. Aimed at gaining support from the general public and showing compassion and reasonableness.

Most CEOs within the mining fraternity talked from a different place and therefore with a different intention and language. They seemed to be talking tough and aiming their conversation at the ears of the unions and the shareholder/investor community. That meant few references to the strikers as humans and more often than not references to the loss of productivity in terms of man hours, billions of Rands, damage to the country's fiscus, revenue declines, long term job loss impact and so on. The tough talk for the unions had been to set a scene of the stance they would be taking during

negotiations. They are of course treading a fine line as none of them wished for another Marikana incident.

The union's take on things

The unions are, well, like unions. Militant, stalwart, unwavering and employ rhetoric as their primary tool. The words used always place blame at someone's door. There is a great deal of condemnation, regret, out of control, responsibility, inability, shouldering blame and so on. These words and phrases cannot be used on such a regular basis if you do not genuinely believe in them and live them each and every day. Unless you, like the aforementioned Mark Cutafani, have been really well media trained and/or indoctrinated.

[A statement from the National Union of Mineworkers](#) "We condemn these divide-and-rule tactics by the company as they seek to set the workers up against each other and may lead into a violent situation." 24 October 2012 shows a classic attempt to tell people that continuing on the current path (which has been warned against by the union) will result in consequences over which they have no control.

[COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said](#) "The people who must shoulder all the blame for these wildcat strikes are the mine bosses," 2 October 2012. The language of the union is most often one of creating the high ground and then doing their best to retain occupation.

Many sides to a story

The experience of immersing myself in this language of the moment has shown that there are many sides to a story and also many ways to tell the same story incorporating my truth, your truth and that of a third party that was not even present at the time. Most often the language indicates, just below the surface, what the communicator really means and in the quote below, from NUM's health and safety chair Peter Bailey who, while saying what he was saying, was actually confirming that they had indeed lost control "I do not think we have lost control of the situation at the mines. The violence and intimidation has left our members feeling unsafe and not going to work."

So all in all, the use of language provides us with an intriguing insight and both the language used, and the insight gleaned, really should receive a little more attention than it does. What are the risks if we don't? Another Marikana?

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