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The Opportunity
Companies should seriously consider involving the Union in the change process, even if it may ultimately lead to downsizing. Successful change programmes usually result in process and productivity improvements, leading to employee satisfaction. Companies should aim to create a new systemic mode of Union participation and build understanding by genuine engagement. The company should think about innovative models and structures so that the future workforce would be a better balance of stakeholder interests, including the employees. Smart win-win management actually can use the Union as a lever to push management into better practice thereby raising the morale of the workforce and productivity. In the new paradigm, Union participation in Management decision-making could be seen as a necessary expansion of the collective bargaining process.

Context
There are inherent risks involved in attempting to invite the Union as an equal partner in work change programmes. Firstly, the Union may view any attempt at improved work processes as a downsizing exercise, which will lead to Union / Management conflict. Change requires holistic understanding and radical transformation in the roles of managers, employees and union leaders, and given the historically entrenched positions, such transformation could be viewed as idealistic and unsustainable. The achievement of this ideal, would require significant re-education for union leaders and workers to understand and internalise the rationale for business. Correspondingly, Managers would need to understand the Union’s role as both a service organisation and a democratic movement for social justice. Union members will have to understand that change will necessarily mean changing managerial processes which will impact members’ jobs. In any change situation where the Union is invited to be a partner, they would only participate if they perceive that management respects the Union’s role and the institution of collective bargaining. Unions and union officials will be guided by how they view inherent management values relating to respect for individuals, standards of integrity, fair pay, and teamwork. The Union may also view quality of work life and productivity as two diametrically opposed ideals. However, these can be achieved simultaneously, if workers are treated with respect and encouraged to share their ideas.

Process and Structure
Before deciding upon a final approach for the organisation transformation exercise, the Company’s Board and Executives need to seriously consider the options. What are the relative risks of a unilateral approach versus a participative approach? The Company will firstly have to engage in genuine dialogue with members of the Union Executive and local Union officers to ascertain their views on any work change programme. First level managers who face both workers and upper management, could give an objective view of problems of work and the possibility of success of either option. The Company, with the Union’s participation, may even wish to survey workers on the work environment and work related issues. We recommend that a Union / Management Committee be established with a specific charter and mandate, and a clear identification of the programme in mind.

The solution has to be systemic. Seventy five percent (75%) of change programmes fail as a result of piecemeal approaches, and because management chooses to exclude workers, and by extension the Union, in the planning and implementation of the programme. Successful implementation requires a more flexible Union and a more participative Management, heralding a transformation in Union / Management relationships, and a redefinition of the roles of managers and union leaders and attitudes at the workplace. The change programme has to be defined, not only in terms of financial and technical aspects, but also the social and cultural aspects, including shared values, management style, measurements, incentives, as well as organisation structures. The solution should encompass all levels – strategic, operating and frontline.

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The Context

The Ministry of Labour Small Micro-Enterprise Development lists eighty-eight (88) registered trade unions in Trinidad & Tobago. Of these, fifteen (15) unions each represent five hundred or more employees primarily in the finance, manufacturing, energy, public service and transportation sectors. Approximately twenty percent (20%) of this country’s workforce are currently unionized, with the majority of these in sectors that are critical to the economy. Disruption, as a result of industrial action to any critical sector or organization, can cause significant damage to the economy, as evidenced by the strike action at Petrotrin three (3) years ago.

Unfortunately, the Trinidad & Tobago industrial relations climate is still characterized by confrontational and adversarial bargaining. At the national level, attempts at creating dialogue and building trust through tripartite structures, and amendments to the Industrial Relations Act and related legislation, have met with limited success and in some cases, outright rejection by the vested parties.

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