

UNION/MANAGEMENT COOPERATION FOR SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

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.

The Challenge

The challenge unionized companies face is to move from an adversarial bargaining model to a joint planning model on workplace issues, in spite of the risks involved. Employers need to understand and respect the role and identity of the Union, while the Union needs to understand and respect the role of the employer. Philosophically, managers and union leaders have different belief systems, values and identities. Managers are future-oriented and driven by financial results, while union leaders talk of focus on past struggles and aim to maximise members' well being. Nevertheless, Management has to respect union leaders as democratically elected, legitimate representatives of the workforce, and ideally change the work culture to one in which employees are engaged to solve problems. Union / Management cooperation will call for a radical shift in management style to allow for participation and a change from adversarial bargaining. In this context, it will be ideal to involve the Union in any programme that purports to change work. On the other hand, the Union

might resist or undermine change, seeing it as a way for Management to pacify workers, and thereby weaken the Union. The Union usually views productivity as a ‘dirty’ word which means ‘speed up’. It is Management’s responsibility to shift the paradigm, so that productivity is embraced throughout the organization, and results in a win-win workplace.

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.

Caveats

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 unattainable. 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.

Role of the Consultant

The Consultant can assist in creating this workplace of the future, but must have the credibility, experience and knowledge to work as an unbiased partner to both groups. The Consultant can assist in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of Management and the Union and can help to recruit Management and Union leaders who would be involved in the change exercise. Since it may be unprecedented for Management and Unions to work together as a team, the Consultant can help set the framework and protocols and facilitate Management/Union workshops and meetings. The Consultant can help design the characteristics of an ideal future, to create a vision of what is possible and can also design interventions via questionnaires and town hall meetings, for example, to gauge how large is the gap is between the current and ideal futures, and the agreements and steps required to close these gaps.

The Consultant can provide the methodologies, models, tools, technology and the team, to be used in creating the workplace of the future. To undertake this role, the Consultant must be trusted by both parties, before he/she can adjudicate over such a process.

Conclusion

In our opinion, it would be an ill-informed decision for a unionized Company to undertake a transformation exercise without the participation of the Union. This will only lead to strife and adversity, and can be counterproductive and set the company back many years. The Company must take the lead to engage in a new paradigm which would necessarily mean changing the context of Management / Union relationships.

The choice the Company makes will be to either retain the status quo and continue to muddle along with an adversarial relationship with the Union, or take a bold and decisive chance to raise the bar and achieve cooperation to build a more enlightened organization for all stakeholders. Once put this way, the decision to attempt cooperation becomes a no-brainer.

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