

# UNION-MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

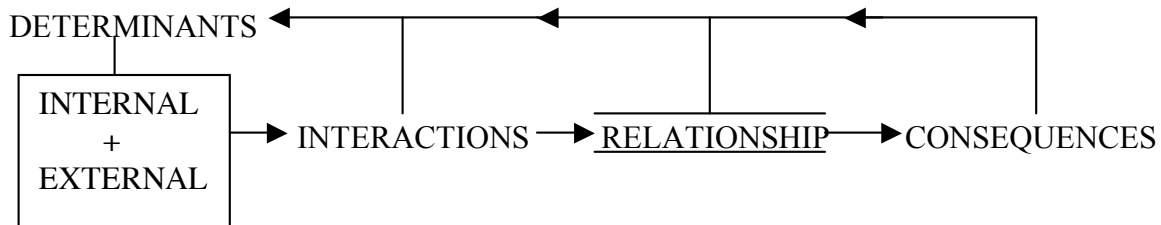
The test of a “Good” Relationship is whether we believe it provides us: a) what we want--solid substantive outcomes, b) peace of mind, and c) an ability to deal with differences. If these basic needs are being met for one or both parties, any effort to improve the relationship will likely be unnecessary or unproductive.

The key to a relationship-building effort is a sincere acknowledgement by both parties that their relationship is difficult or unproductive, and that this situation should not continue. Then, the strength of their convictions will be tested by their willingness to provide resources and leadership for a re-building effort. ‘Yes, we’d like to work on it, but our General Manager, or our Local President, will likely be unavailable’ is a sign that this is not a major priority.

Furthermore, each party in the relationship must accept that it, itself, is at least partly responsible for the poor quality of the relationship. To focus entirely on the way “they—the other party—is treating us” is a recipe for blame-letting, not relationship-building. And, the flip-side of this responsibility issue is a required acknowledgement that, if the relationship is to improve, some degree of change in their ways must be made by both parties—including “us”.

## THE “SYSTEM” OF UNION-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS:

Whatever process is used to re-build the relationship, it helps to view the “Relationship” in its context. A widely-accepted, generic view of this context is the model developed by Walton and McKersie, (1965, 1991)<sup>1</sup>. This model identifies 4 components of a labour relations system: (1) internal and external determinants, (2) arenas of formal interaction and other activities, (3) the emergent relationship, and (4) consequences.



An effort to change the RELATIONSHIP will be driven by a concern about the CONSEQUENCES, and will depend upon the ability to change the nature or type of INTERACTIONS, as well as possibly alter some (Internal) DETERMINANTS (Beliefs, Policies, etc.).

<sup>1</sup> Walton, Richard, & McKersie, Robert, A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations: An analysis of a social interaction system, McGraw-Hill, NY, 1965.

Walton, R. & McKersie, R., Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ILR Press, Ithaca, 1991.

## THE PROCESS OF RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING:

Sometimes, what the parties are prepared for and obviously need is an improvement in the quality of their interaction within various labour-management committees. The mandate of these committees may be occupational health and safety, technological change, or another form of consultation often required by legislation.

There are some robust instruments that can assist a labour-management committee to self-diagnose its areas for improvement. The involvement of external facilitation can also help a committee to identify additional shortcomings in the mechanisms and procedures of interaction, e.g. agenda-setting, chairmanship, etc. As well, facilitation can reinforce a sustained focus on the *process* of interaction (as a balance to the more prevalent pre-occupation of committee members with the content of their work).

The role of “facilitator” is different from the role of “mediator”. Essentially, a facilitator has more of a “process orientation”, as distinct from a “task orientation”. See table below for a sample comparison of these orientations.

| PROCESS   | TASK  |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Problem Verification</i> : assists parties’ clear articulation of issues, attitudes & feelings.             | 1. <i>Problem Verification</i> : by “expert” evaluation of data.  |
| 2. <i>Problem Solving</i> : develops capabilities and stimulates creativity among the parties                     | 2. <i>Problem Solving</i> : provides ideas and opinions, and helps develop solutions for or with the parties.         |
| 3. <i>Utilization of Research</i> : develops parties’ use of data, and capability to learn.                       | 3. <i>Utilization of Research</i> : makes specific recommendations.   |
| 4. <i>Relationship to Parties</i> : is personal, involved, with a longer-term connection that is system-oriented. | 4. <i>Relationship to Parties</i> : is objective and detached, with a short-term connection that is problem-oriented. |

Where the parties feel that their interaction is ineffective on a whole range of activities, namely, a “breakdown” of some sort has occurred, they may be prepared to focus specifically on the overall relationship itself. This is a more fundamental and challenging self-examination and self-improvement process.

The “Relationship-by-Objectives” (RBO) program, used in North America since 1975 is one format for this process. With “local” variations, it involves a 2-day working session: ...After reviewing survey data or possibly, an exercise to stimulate participants’ thinking,

Each Party (separately) answers:

- What should the Other Party do to improve labour-management relations?
- What should WE do to improve labour-management relations?

Then, the Parties Listen for Understanding of their respective proposals.

After which, the Parties (together) consolidate these ideas into Mutual Objectives.

Work groups (including both parties) develop Action Steps for each objective.

The Parties (together) assign Responsibilities and a Timetable for Action.

...Several months later, the Parties review the process to ensure effective follow-through.

Another successful format is a 7-step model for improving the union-management relationship (Cohen-Rosenthal & Burton, 1994):

- Define the Best possible union-management relationship
- Address the Current union-management relationship
- Identify the Barriers to moving towards the best possible relationship
- Identify each party's Interests and Unilateral Actions for improvement
- Identify Joint Interests and Joint Principles for improvement
- Establish Structures and Action Plans for improvement and communication
- Review Accomplishments and make further adjustments.

#### MOVING AWAY FROM POLARIZED CONFLICT

- ◆ Power Shift – the realization that neither side can “defeat” the other, although each is in a position to impose serious damage on the other.
- ◆ External Pressures – key external stakeholders to which the parties must listen want the “adversaries” to resolve their differences.
- ◆ Facilitation – to help the parties get through some burning issues, to assist with communication to ensure that each party is listening to the other, to serve as a respected sounding board and provide an objective “third” perspective.
- ◆ Internal Relations – each “side sorts through their own internal differences in order to approach problem-solving with a coherent voice.
- ◆ Personalities – sufficient respect exists between a few individuals on either “side” to form a basis for building a broader and higher level of trust between the parties.
- ◆ ‘Ceasefire’/’Standstill’ – creates time and some ‘non-blame’ space to resolve more fundamental problems, given that the ‘ceasefire’/’standstill’ has aspects that are important to both sides.

#### PRINCIPLES FOR SHARED LEARNING & INQUIRY

- ◆ People and organizations taking responsibility – for solving issues/problems, rather than taking positions, and blaming others for failures.

- ◆ Understanding ‘Needs’ versus ‘wants’ – each party needs to be as Open as possible about their underlying interests, so that those interests can be clearly Understood by the other party, (and thus, interests are neither suppressed nor hidden).
- ◆ Innovative Thinking – a willingness to get “out of the box”, so that alternatives are explored and assessed, maybe even tested, leading to new and different approaches to solve longstanding problems.
- ◆ Letting Go of Certainty – ability to take calculated risks and deal with the unknown dimensions of solutions that are fundamentally different from what the parties are accustomed.
- ◆ New Skills – with the help of some “coaching” and some success in problem-solving, both sides come to realize that it is possible to work together on some issues even though they don’t agree on everything, and people learn how to listen, and are sometimes capable of empathy.
- ◆ New Accountabilities – not only to one’s own interests and constituents, but also towards effective follow-through on commitments made to other parties, and to the success of other parties.
- ◆ Effective Transition – development of new solutions, new attitudes, and new skills does not occur in one wave of change, but rather in phases which combine new and old practices in ambiguous states of transition which people must anticipate and for which they must have effective support and strategies.
- ◆ Leadership – all of the above relies upon the courage of at least a few individuals to step forward and initiate new behaviour (that breaks out of the ‘straight-jacket’ of the past) and about which there must be effective communication with fellow constituents.
- ◆ Fundamental issues are addressed – although this is not necessarily where the process starts, the commitment and credibility associated with joint problem-solving depends upon a resolve to issues that are significant to both parties.
- ◆ Dual Reality – a recognized need and an enhanced ability for the parties to work together on solutions/objectives and compete at the same time.

## SUSTAINING THE PROCESS OF RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING:

Regardless of the specific format used, the key is to accomplish successful action on one or (preferably) more Mutual Objectives. Moreover, the parties' behaviour in their day-to-day interaction must have changed in some way(s). And, for behaviour to have changed, Individuals and/or their Environment must have changed.

This implies that labour and management leaders must have developed new SKILLS, for example, in listening, in assertive (but not aggressive) ways of expressing their views, in meeting effectiveness, in problem-solving, and most importantly, in regular self-evaluation of their process of interaction.

Likely, policies, programs, and/or procedures in the Internal and/or External ENVIRONMENT must also have changed. In other words, the parties must have altered some of the Determinants of their labour relations "system".

## REFERENCES:

Cohen-Rosenthal, Edward & Burton, Cynthia, "Improving Organizational Quality by Forging the Best Union-Management Relationship", National Productivity Review, Spring 1994, pp. 215-231.

Popular, John, Labor-Management Relationships by Objectives, Industrial Relations Guide Service, 1982, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Walton, Richard & McKersie, Robert, Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1991, ILR Press, Ithaca, NY.

*See Also* Modern Times Productions DVD & VHS documentaries:

"Beyond Collision: High Integrity Labour Relations"

"Transforming Labour Relations"

"The Cardinal River Story: A New Tradition in Industrial Relations"

"For People and The Business",

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Gratitude is owed to the wisdom and skill of Malcolm Roberts, Mark Alexander, John Popular, Cynthia Burton and Ed Cohen-Rosenthal--all great facilitators who have shown how it can be done.