



LEADER

Staff participation in management decision-making

There seems to be something rather special about the word 'democracy' and the phrase 'living in a democratic country'. To hear some people talk, very few decisions should be taken in the work situation before everybody has had their say.

Books have been written extolling the virtues of industrial democracy as the means of decision-making. Some trade union branch meetings seem to concentrate on using the word yet it is surprising how many people only want to see democracy at work when they want to disagree or change something which is not in accord with their particular viewpoint.

There are two basic interpretations of the word 'democracy'. They are (a) a form of government where supreme power is vested in the people collectively and either administered by them or by officers appointed by them, and/or (b) a state of society characterised by recognition of equality of rights and privileges.

Some managers seem uncertain as to the extent they must or should go in allowing or encouraging staff to participate in making decisions. The question often asked by managers is what is the role of staff participation in my organisation and how much authority should be given to other staff and union officials?

Whatever the individual views of managers are — they must always assess seriously what staff think on all subjects that affect them. The possibility of the more junior managers or union representatives not always assessing a particular situation objectively must be a consideration. A union official can sometimes suggest what later turns out to be a wrongly estimated, over-rated reaction from staff while a manager may not understand that the staff have a genuine concern over a matter. Even the past experience of a senior manager can on occasion hinder a proper and just decision being made.

I remember in the 1950's working on a heating project in a ship yard for a company when I became acutely aware of a considerable amount of unrest among the workers. I mentioned this to the works manager who reassured me and advised me that when I had had his experience I would be able to assess more accurately the reaction of staff. Within three days the whole of the workforce was on strike. There must be a constant reassessment of situations, attitudes, operational and overall policies, and changes made as necessary.

Because a manager knows that a union official often over-reacts to situations the next perceived over-reaction may be in fact a genuine grievance which is ignored at the manager's cost. Likewise, junior management may wish to cover some extent their own inadequacies and give a very personal 'low key' interpretation of what is happening.

What I am asking for is far less rigid management. Because in the clinical areas the procedures have to be strictly adhered to, is no reason for senior management to develop inflexible policies which staff dare not question or challenge. On the other hand, staff and their organisations want to be able to understand the logic behind making a decision and see that it is just. Perhaps managers should make it a priority to see where staff can make a useful contribution to decision-making and identify those areas where staff participation must be minimal. Having done that then to decide to be courageous enough to say clearly that the necessary information on a particular matter is to hand, it has been carefully considered and . . . 'I have decided' . . . Staff and union reaction may be good or adverse but I guess many staff will secretly, if not openly, admire a manager who is prepared to make a decision and stand by it.

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