Empowerment in Industry

Why has employer-employee relations in the industrial world remained one of conflict ever since the industrial revolution? Today, a common phenomenon noticed among most, employers or industrialists is the aim to maximise profits amidst employee antagonism. It is this very ambition to accrue maximum profits that has resulted in bitter industrial relations. Despite the introduction of management theories at the beginning of this century and contemporary management theories, to guide industrialists, they have often been distorted in a bid to maximise earnings. Taylor's 'Scientific Management Theory' and Ford's 'Assembly Line' certainly revolutionised the production process, however earning the wrath of the workers in the process.

The general consensus among many industrial critics is that many theories that were proposed to speed up production have only enabled employers to exploit the maximum out of workers, sans appropriate incentives and pay cheques.

Then how do employers and workers balance their interests and strike a consensus? How can employers ensure job satisfaction. to their employees?

Primarily, it is important that whatever intrinsic motivation the worker puts, by way of achievement, competence, responsibility, etc., into his/her production, the worker must be rewarded extrinsically. These extrinsic rewards include high pay, promotions, security, fringe benefits, good supervisor relations and pleasant working conditions. Theorists have argued that granting extrinsic rewards for performing a task will reduce his/her interest in the task. However, specialists believe that if extrinsic rewards such as pay hike, etc., are to be effective, they should be in accordance with good performance.

Despite a contractual agreement between the employer and worker, the bargaining power of the workers is undermined when the employer is out to minimise costs by way of cutting rewards, incentives, etc. The workers in such situations work collectively to defend their interests. Today's employers interfere with the worker's environment in a bid to cut costs. Thus for example an industrialist may introduce technological and organisational changes disrupting the established schedule of the worker.

It is in moves of this sort that today we experience potential industrial conflict. Any kind of involvement of the management in altering the work process is viewed by employees as endangering their interests.

The best alternative to this would be the creation of channels of communication. However this communication pattern must not resemble the formal hierarchical structure of a bureaucracy where positions of highest authority are at the top of the pyramid. In a bureaucracy where decisions are made at the top and passed down the chain of command, some 'small' worker is held responsible for foul-ups. Channels of communication in a modern industrial setting is where the employee has access to his/her superiors at all levels, so that every change, decision or move could be exchanged and the workers have access to their managers to explain their grievances.

Whatever technological or organisational change is to be introduced must not alienate the worker from his product. He must be able to identify positively with the product. However, this is too much to ask of today's industrialist, when division of labour has come to stay as an inevitable part of industrial production.

Sometimes, freedom for the worker is so restricted that one is forced to agree with Marx when he says that the rights of political participation enjoyed by the citizen stops short at the gates of the workplace. Marx emphasised on the need to introduce democratic rights within the industry. Sri Lanka too can respond positively by ensuring industrial democracy. At least partial involvement in decision making ensures this democracy. To be involved in the decison making process gives the worker a sense of self-worth.

What employers must bear in mind is the fact that the more they cut on extrinsic rewards and bring about major changes that threaten worker autonomy, The more it would result in the formation of trade union organisations and informal groupings which in turn challenges the managerial prerogatives.

'Empowerment' is a term that crops up in many fields these days. Empowerment in industry would be the appropriate term to apply to the decentralisation of power. Decentralisation means the 'degree to which the authority to make decisions is given to lower levels in an organisation's hierarchy."

This is in contrast to the top down order of the formal bureaucratic organisation, where decisions are made at the top. Decentralisation is popular in industries in the

West, an example would be General Motors. Through empowerment, workers and worker groups are allowed to make decisions that affect them and their work. Empowerment allows them the ultimate ability of introducing changes to develop what they have in the environment. Empowerment enables worker participation in the production process.



Through empowerment workers can form ‘self-managing’ groups and the workers themselves are allowed to decide on quality and quantity, scheduling work and work breaks, etc. This has proved to be a boon to industrialists.

Of course such changes would bring about resultant tensions and anxiety among the workers, with management methods being altered. But once off the ground, the workers would respond positively. Once again whatever change needs to be introduced, must be effectively communicated to all those being affected.

Management theorists have argued the advantages of promoting self-managing teams. Such a team. formation, rather than the haphazard formation of workers grouping together in any work situation, will ensure in most cases higher productivity with an improvement in quality. In such cases workers are flexible to technological change and respond fast. Such teams contribute to lower levels of absenteeism. And most important of all workers in self-managing teams have positive attitudes conducive to industrial continuity.

Good supervisory skills not only account for favourable relations within the industry, but also result in increased production. Group formations are inevitable where industrialists have brought large numbers under one roof and group norms act as obstacles to the maximisation of profits. If managers do not account for good

supervisory skills, work groups can impose sanctions on the amount of production envisaged by the management. Strict and punitive supervisors are not looked upon with favour and in the event of a strike, management officials are likely to be under the threat of being held up forcibly. Thus employers have many ways of enhancing worker satisfaction by introducing varied techniques.

Whatever the change, it must be accompanied with higher wages and other fringe benefits. What all managers must bear in mind when dealing with workers is that they are dealing with a human community.

Worker satisfaction is not only derived from wages. There are many other factors that contribute. Interpersonal relations play a decisive role. If industrialists of today view interpersonal relations as a waste of productive time, they are only encouraging the formation of trade unions and other negative reference groups that pose a challenge to company stability. The major tenet that all industrialists must follow when implementing changes is that no man is a mere “automaten or a woodenman’.