

# Quality

THE JOURNAL FOR **and** SPECIAL REPRINT ISSUE

# Participation

**SPECIAL REPRINT EDITION**

*What Managers Should Know About...*

**Union Involvement  
In New Work  
Systems**

Robert B. Leventhal – Restructuring Associates Inc.



**SPECIAL REPRINT EDITION**

*What Managers Should Know About...*

**Union Involvement  
in New Work  
Systems**

Robert B. Leventhal – Restructuring Associates Inc.

*What managers should know about...*

## **Union involvement in new work systems**

Robert B. Leventhal – Restructuring Associates Inc.

---

*Managers in unionized companies considering or that have already started efforts to convert their traditional organization into a high performance, high involvement work system should understand something that many unions do not: a union's role in such an effort must be either that of a full partner or a committed opponent.*

---

Any position in between these extremes will, in the long run, harm the union. It does not matter whether the transition is a success or a failure from management's point of view. Neutrality, lukewarm or selective support, passive resistance or studied ignorance will win the union no credit for success (and a growing perception of irrelevancy). If the effort is deemed a failure, the union will no doubt receive at least some blame.

At the same time, a company that proceeds in the face of a passive or grudging union is operating without all of its available resources, and in fact, may be forced to spend precious resources removing or circumventing roadblocks placed by the union.

Thus, managers have a vested interest in getting the union involved. Yet managers should understand the costs and benefits of full union participation before inviting the union to join in a major change effort.

**Assessing the union's current roles and services** — Before thinking about the union in the context of some future system of work, managers should examine the unions current role and capabilities in its dealing with management. What are the inwards of working for or with the union? What are the frustrations? Is the union's ability to change any greater or lesser than that of management (first line supervisors, for example)?

***“Values should be generally consistent but the structured systems flexible.”***

Unions generally have a well-defined role to play in traditional organizations with represented employees. While due process representation such as grievances and arbitration and bargaining are the two main services of the union, they are not usually the only ones

By examining other services that the union provides its members, management can begin to assess the unions organizational capabilities.

What other functions does it serve, both formal and informal? When is the union proactive, rather than reactive? What does it do for its members who do not have grievances or complaints (other than negotiate collective bargaining agreements)?

Evidence of administrative and organizational competence by the union bodes well for a fledgling labor-management partnership.

### **Labor-management relations in new work systems**

New work systems require labor-management cooperation on more issues than in traditional labor-management relations, including:

- Work operations & design
- Pay systems (beyond rates and scales)
- Training
- System governance

New behaviors and expectations... Partnership requires joint problem solving based on a knowledge of the ritual interests of both parties. There is a continuing effort at defining these mutual interests as well as an appreciation of their separate interests. In new work systems, both sides treat each other professionally. Both are seen as competent with something of value to bring to the party. For the union, this also means accepting some responsibilities that it could previously ignore or avoid. It cannot simply react. Proactive efforts require research, preparation, knowledge of subject matter.

These issues emphasize the needs of the 95 percent of union members who don't have the kinds of problems or complaints that are the usual basis for grievances or whose needs are specifically spotlighted only during bargaining. Thus, new work systems have important implications for the way in which the union functions and in its relations with its members and management.

New working relationships... All working relationships require an element of trust. The difference between traditional labor management relationships and those in new work systems is that the traditional ones are based on a series of "backstops" that are created for those times and situations in which the relationship breaks down, or things fall through the cracks.

In fully developed new work systems, there's less reliance on written procedures, the "answers" contained in the contract. Detailed contracts are evidence of efforts to cover every conceivable situation or problem with an answer or procedure.

The impact of a non-traditional contract... Replacing a traditional contract with a briefer document that emphasizes trust does not mean that relationship is simpler or easier. There are new skills needed and new demands of time and resources.

If the organization has to be flexible to be successful, so does the labor-management relationship. Values should be generally consistent but the structured systems flexible. Contracts become guides and not the means of stonewalling change. Yet both

sides still need to be good at being adversaries when that behavior is appropriate.

### **What kinds of skills and resources does a union need?**

Labor-management relationships in new work systems are problem solving relationships rather than judicial or bargaining processes. Of course, traditional labor-management has some problem solving aspects to it, and it often sets up problem solving processes for example, health and safety committees.

Taking on management -type tasks... As a partner with management, the union may be asked or expected to take on tasks and responsibilities usually reserved for management, such as planning and organization development.

As with management, the type and amount of communications needed in a successful new work system is greater than in a traditional environment. Unions also need to understand group process since so much of the communications in the organization takes place between groups.

The union may share responsibility for training, including designing the curriculum and conducting classes.

The management of meetings is a skill important not only to workteams, but it can be used by the union in its own meetings to make them more effective.

### **The union's role in a new work system**

Many unions involved in new work systems have responded to the changes brought about by new work systems by altering their usual ways of representing the membership.

#### *New approaches to dispute resolution...*

Methods of dispute resolution, such as grievances, become back-ups; secondary means of solving problems. First steps are informal and based on the governance system for the new work system which is usually team based.

Grievances are still available. You don't dispense with due process after all. But there is an effort to avoid third party decision

### **Objective of this article:**

*To get managers to think about the traditional and current role of the union in its dealing with management.*

*To promote understanding of the change in the role of a union in a new work system.*

*To provide a framework for assessing the need, if any, for change by the union, its leaders and members, and helping the union to understand its need.*

## 6 Union involvement in new work systems

*“The more general nature of the contract language means that the contract is ‘written’ as practices develop, decisions are made and problems are solved.”*

making arbitration in favor of third party facilitation, or grievance mediation.

*Flexible work rules and the union steward...*  
Another key element of new work systems that may require a change in the union’s role is the reliance on flexible work rules. This may invite more abuse because it’s less clear cut, because union stewards will not be able to rely on contracts or rigid job descriptions for answers, instead they will be engaging in informal problem solving and decision making with management.

*Performance feedback...* Performance feedback among peers is the first step in dealing with performance problems and violation of norms or standards of behavior. Feedback is designed to give the recipient the option to change his or her behavior not to punish or gain revenge.

Peers often find it difficult to give effective feedback. There is also a legitimate concern that feedback may be confused with discipline, with detrimental effects on union solidarity and loyalty. The presence of a union can provide a clear boundary between interpersonal communications designed to improve work operations and progressive discipline needed to enforce employer rules or legal requirements.

*New contract language and ongoing negotiation...* Negotiations may also be conducted in a different manner. Even traditional contracts aren’t rigid. There are side letters, changes stemming from arbitration, reopeners. But in a new work system it is more overt. The more general nature of the contract language means that the contract is “written” as practices develop, decisions are made and problems are solved. However; pay, vacations, benefit grievances processes are spelled out, not written in general language.

### **What does all this mean for the union as an institution?**

A union should be skilled, competent. Proactive, an equal partner in decision making and problem solving.

In new work systems, many unions struggle with their roles, trying to marshal adequate resources in the form of money and staff or leadership.

*Not so good news...* Many unions have the necessary skills but have used them in other arenas such as politics and legislation. The difficult part about expanding the use of these skills to new areas is that it is expensive and time consuming, and most unions are already overburdened.

*Good news...* The good part for the union is that all this makes for a stronger union – it is transferable, for example to better stewards’ training, bargaining schools, et cetera.

*New relationships within the union...* New work systems may alter the relationship of the union to its members. It may provide new opportunities to demonstrate the value and importance of unions to the membership through means such as role modeling new skills and behaviors. It’s not just stewards catching flack all the time, Unions can work with members at times when they aren’t angry, scared, disappointed.

*Expansion of traditional roles...* The union also serves as the conscience of organization. Reliance by new work systems on a strong, overt value system leaves plenty of opportunity for lapses, inadvertent or not. In the absence of a traditional contract, the union is the conscience that helps point out and protect employees in these situations. It also protects against burnout and abuse stemming from a high level of commitment to the job. Finally, the union acts as a defender of minorities and a balance to the majority. Jointness often leads to a belief in “sameness”: we are all alike here. The fact is that power is still unevenly distributed and those without it (a definition of minority) still need an institutional backstop.

If the union is successful in marshalling resources and uses them wisely, most managers will have to take on a new mindset, one that is pleased with the competence and strength of the union.

### **Encouraging union involvement in a partnership**

If a company envisions this kind of future, and seeks to encourage it with a reluctant or shortsighted union, how can it involve the union?

Jointness should begin as soon as possible, even to the point of learning together about the conditions that make the transition to a new work system so important that a joint decision can be made to go forward or maintain the existing system and relationship.

If there is agreement on the need for change, there should be a similar effort to examine current values and adopt a set of new ones that will guide the transformed organization and its labor-management relationship.

The union should be represented on every structure that is a part of the transition process. This means informal design groups, as well as high visibility steering committees.

To maintain the union's visibility and independence, key positions such as trainers and facilitators should be filled with both a union and management representative. Where the union lacks skills such as organization development or training design, the company can take on a mentoring role.

Finally, the union should be recognized for its particular strengths and competencies, for example, its ability to take the "pulse" of the employees.

### **What management can do with the union**

Management can point out new or additional services that the union might provide its members with skills and abilities the union obtains from the implementation and operation of a new work system.

Finally, management can point out learning opportunities or courses of study for union leaders, such as attendance at conferences and workshops. ♦

*Robert B. Leventhal is a consultant to companies and unions in the field of high performance work systems, group facilitation, labor/management cooperation and employee involvement. His experience dates back to 1980 when he took part in the crafting of the agreement between the Bell System and its unions which resulted in one of the largest quality of worklife efforts in the United States.*

*He spent ten years as Assistant to the President of the Telecommunications International Union, where he directed the union's efforts in quality of worklife processes and technology changes. At other times during his tenure, he handled the union's press relations, training programs and internal publications.*

*In September, 1989 he became affiliated with Restructuring Associates Inc. of Washington, DC, a consulting firm known for its expertise in the creation of high performance, high involvement work systems and labor/management cooperation.*

**Restructuring Associates Inc.  
1050 17th Street, N.W., Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20036**

**202/775-8213  
Fax: 202/223-0346**

Association for Quality and Participation  
801-B West Eighth Street, Suite 501  
Cincinnati, OH 45203  
513/381-1959  
FAX 513/381-0070