



Forging A Collaborative Relationship Between Employers And Unions

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 29 November 2023

Recently, news headlines have included many union wins. The United Auto Workers (UAW) negotiated historic wage deals with US car manufacturers. In the UK, the RMT declared victory by agreeing a deal that could end 18 months of crippling rail strikes. Commentators point to unions 'winning big,' alongside talk of employers 'losing' or 'taxpayers paying the price'. The labels of 'winners and losers,' 'victory and defeat,' or 'attack and defense' are often assigned to these types of union and employer negotiations, but they miss the point. Regardless of who is perceived as winning or losing, partnership working is critical to an effective organizational conflict strategy. As a new federal law comes into effect shortly, which could allow millions of US workers to unionize, how can employers and unions develop a more collaborative working relationship?

The power of union involvement

From individual issues between workers, to large-scale strike action, workplace conflict is disruptive, costly, and time-consuming. A key part of a more proactive approach to conflict is for workers to have the support of advisors at the earliest stage of a relationship breakdown. A UK report estimated that when employee conflict was dealt with through formal procedures, it cost an average of £6,405 per employee. In contrast, the costs were around £1,941 per person when employees discussed their issues with managers, HR, or union representatives, and didn't take further formal action. Union representatives can also play a part in reducing the human cost of conflict, by providing skilled support, either in their day-to-day role, or as part of an organization's internal mediation or conflict resolution team.

Building effective relationships with unions

Fostering a good relationship between unions and employers requires investment on both sides – in time, commitment, and consistency. Based on years of working alongside organizational leaders and union representatives in managing workplace conflict, I have observed three principles that can help pave the way for a mutually successful union-employer relationship:

- (1) *Early and open communication* – Talking to unions late into a decision-making process, or only when there's a problem, doesn't lay the ground for success. Transparency from the start, rather than bringing unions in as an afterthought, demonstrates respect and offers the best chance to benefit from their expertise.
- (2) *Leadership support* – Senior leaders play a crucial role in a successful union relationship by role modelling a collaborative approach. Regular monthly meetings bringing unions and managers together to deal with concerns and evaluate progress on organizational objectives ensures that union representatives are a partner in any potential changes to key processes.
- (3) *Staff empowerment* – One of the key roles of unions is to be a voice for employees. Building an organizational culture where staff have the means and confidence to speak up without fear of

repercussions will align with core union goals. Upskilling staff and managers so they can recognize and address conflict early will demonstrate a commitment to staff and help to create a positive working environment.

With employers and unions often meeting over the negotiation table when representing conflicting interests, it may seem a long journey towards a more collaborative way forward. Yet, there are many cases of unions working closely with employers, even if these don't make the headlines. In the end, a healthy conflict culture in the workplace is one which places less emphasis on conflicting interests, and more on early and open communication, leadership support and staff empowerment. That makes everyone a winner.