

JOINT TRAINING INCREASES UNION KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has been accompanied by a decline in unionization; however, while globalization poses many serious challenges to unions, it does not necessarily result in weakened unions. It is important for unions to identify and utilize ways to increase and leverage union power that are responsive to the pressures of globalization. Companies frequently introduce training during restructuring efforts aimed at remaining competitive in a global environment. This paper describes a joint union-management training program which offers an example of a pro-active union approach to joint training initiatives. The training took place in early 2004 in a typical paper mill in central Wisconsin. While the training was designed and undertaken in response to various competitive pressures, it was primarily fueled by employee focus groups. The training design is examined against criteria for successful union involvement in joint ventures. The paper argues that, while joint ventures typically address management's production concerns, a pro-active union can ensure that benefits also accrue to the union. Recent literature on union power in a globalized economy suggests that this training model could be used in other industries to enhance union knowledge and power.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has presented many challenges to unions, but, as Levesque and Murray note (2002), evidence that globalization weakens unions is not conclusive. Rather, they argue that the effects of globalization on unions depend on the ability of unions to mobilize their power. For many workers, the first goal is economic survival: retaining a (decent) job in a climate of plant closures, outsourcing, and offshore relocation. Some companies have reluctantly sought worker and union support, and others have discovered that it makes good business sense to tap into the knowledge of the people doing the job. In either case, unions and their members are encouraged to identify with the company's goals and productivity needs, and to enter into "competitive alliances" with management against other plants, including plants of the same company represented by locals of the same union. Globalization may place "winning hearts and minds on the table," but workers' interests for company survival spring from a more basic need for employment. In rare instances are workers and unions actively engaged in both enhancing firm performance and improving their own working conditions.

While a joint union-management relationship may appear to be symbiotic – productivity gains secure continuing employment and, potentially (though rarely), higher wages -- union identity often diminishes as the company's needs and goals are internalized by workers. As Levesque and Murray (2002) note, unions "have been invited to internalize a new set of competitive norms" in the global economy. But, for many unions, this "invitation" carries a hefty price: the compromise of union autonomy and strength as the

benefits of increased productivity accrue only to the company while workers see wage stagnation and job loss.

While the employer benefits from the knowledge and commitment of employees to achieve productivity gains, the union faces the dilemma of partnership:

Is the union likely to secure increased employment security and an increased level of worker participation in and satisfaction with jobs, or is it aligning with many manifest negative effects of the drive to greater productivity? (Levesque and Murray, 2002)

Research conducted by the School for Workers (Mericle, et.al., 2001) indicates that many joint employee-management partnerships do, indeed, go sour for the union. While workplace changes require employee cooperation and union consent, in many instances, the union feels that the company extracts this cooperation and consent, often with the threat of plant closing. Often, the workers receive nothing in exchange and are expected to be grateful simply to have a job. Or, once management has secured the changes it desired, it no longer has an interest in working with the union.

The union walks a fine line in cooperative ventures. Levesque and Murray (2002) also note that both approval and opposition of the union to management initiatives can weaken membership support. Approval of management initiatives can be seen as “mature” labor relations and necessary to save jobs, or it can be seen as a sellout. Opposition can be seen as a principled union stance or as obstructionist, even contributing to the loss of jobs and plant closures.

A proactive stance on the part of the union, by contrast, can serve the firm’s needs while simultaneously enhancing members’ identification with the union. However, it is important that unions retain – and members perceive – a proactive approach. One of the prime reasons that joint union-management relationships disintegrate is that union members perceive that the union leadership is too cozy with management and not looking out for members’ interests (Mericle, et.al., 2001).

The dilemma of partnership embody the essence of the challenge of globalization for unions. If they do not cooperate, there is a threat of plant closings, shown to be a very real threat. On the other hand, if they engage in joint activity, there is the danger of co-optation, both real and imagined. It is not necessary for the union to be co-opted by management, only that union members perceive that it has been, for the union to be weakened or starkly divided.

Several researchers have identified factors that contribute to successful – and sustainable – labor-management ventures. Levesque and Murray (2002) argue that the union agenda is key in building union power, and that internal democracy is a necessary condition for such a proactive response. Haddad (2004), in a study of labor’s participation in plant modernization in small- and medium-sized firms, found that union proactivity could not sustain joint projects in plants with poor labor relations or financial instability. She found that an active, representative joint committee with mutually

agreed-upon goals, management and union commitment, and a track record of effectiveness were necessary correlates of successful joint projects.

Frost (2001) also proposes that unions take a proactive stance in dealing with workplace restructuring. She identifies four capabilities necessary for unions to deal with management and represent members' interests: accessing information, educating and mobilizing members, balancing cooperation and conflict, and accessing management decision-making at multiple points.

The challenge to unions, then, is to embark on union-management cooperative ventures with an independent agenda, grounded in the needs of its members. The balance between cooperation and conflict, always an issue for unions, remains problematic. An appropriate balance between cooperation and conflict not only must be found, but also must be communicated to an informed and involved membership. Furthermore, union involvement must be integral, and not merely tangential, in the operation of the firm. Obviously, for both the union and management, the firm must be financially stable and labor relations good if labor-management cooperation is to be sustainable.

The literature suggests that "pre-work" in structuring and setting up a joint union-management committee may be a pre-condition for success. In particular, the committee must establish equality, share information, identify mutually beneficial goals, demonstrate that it is listening to employees, and deliver on a plan of action to demonstrate its effectiveness in order to implement and sustain successful joint union-management projects.

For unions, taking part in joint ventures may no longer be optional: survival and growth of companies depends on worker input. However, union survival also depends on unions adequately representing workers' interests, even when that places them in conflict with management. How unions juggle these demands may well be critical to their survival: globalization has raised the stakes for unions in getting the balance between cooperation and conflict just right.

This paper examines a case of plant-wide, inclusive training agreed to by a joint labor-management steering committee. Benefits of the training accrued to the union and employees because of the history of the steering committee and because the design and delivery of the training carried the elements identified in the literature for successful joint processes.

THE CASE

Background

The Industry

The U.S. paper industry is a mature, well-established and stable industry. However, between 1980 and 1993, seventeen of the top 51 pulp and paper companies – fully one

third of U.S. companies -- were merged or acquired (Slinn, 1993). This trend has continued and in recent years companies are finding changes in ownership to be a way of life. Technology has also had a major impact within the paper industry. The capital intensity of the industry requires that mills function at relatively high operating rates, running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Computer process control has affected both labor requirements and skill needs. In the last two decades, while the number of pulp, paper and paperboard mills decreased by 21 per cent, material throughput increased by 51 per cent, and the average output per establishment increased by 90 per cent (Smith, 1997). Employment in primary sector paper industries has fallen consistently since 1973 (BLS, 1994). Changes in technology, domestic and foreign competition, pressure from the financial community for improved rates of return on large amounts of invested capital, and mergers and acquisitions have strained industrial relations. The paper industry by the turn of the century had moved from relatively peaceful industrial relations to a climate of increasing tension and uncertainty.

The paper industry in North America is suffering from serious over-capacity and escalating costs. Since 1998, "North American producers shut 5.8 million tons of capacity". Mills in the northern U.S., especially, have a large number of older, inefficient mills and have only begun to address problems of over-capacity (Barynin, 2004). In addition, the costs of pulp, recovered paper, and energy soared in 2004 while product prices were held down by aggressive competition (Battista, 2004).

The Company

The paper mill described in this paper is a tissue mill which has experienced many of the industry-wide phenomena noted above. The mill, a Midwestern U.S. plant, had undergone two changes in ownership in five years, first a merger followed by a buy-out in 2001. As with much of the North American industry, the mill introduced technological changes similar to those industry-wide while continuing to operate old equipment. The most recent owner undertook a number of steps to regionalize production, including closing some mills, shifting capacity, and building a new mill. The effects of these changes, combined with rising costs and stagnant markets, were beginning to be felt at the start of the 2004 training.

Employment at the mill has been fairly stable for several years with approximately 300 employees. Union membership is also stable at around 85 per cent with the remaining employees being salaried (either excluded or managerial staff). Approximately 10 per cent of the workforce is female. The union-management relationship is mature and the joint union-management committee has existed for many years.

Previous training

The collective agreement at this mill specifies that several hours of training per year will be provided in non-job-specific areas. Beginning in 1999, the School for Workers conducted one or two days of experiential training per year in topics such as communication skills, problem-solving, conflict management, and managing change and stress. All of the training was deliberated over, chosen, and championed by the joint Union-Management Steering Committee. In 2003, the training became more job-

specific, featuring training in organizational communication, a presentation by the Plant Manager on the state of the industry and the company, and an afternoon of focus groups centered on communication within the mill.

The focus groups in the 2003 training were asked specific questions about mill communication and how it could be improved. School for Workers faculty analyzed over 300 pages of data from the focus groups and, drawing on these data and research results from studies of work communication, recommended training which featured an information exchange across all functional areas of the mill for 2004, to be entitled "Total Mill Process".

Total Mill Process Training

Training Design and Preparation

Previous plant-wide training and discussions with the joint Union-Management Steering Committee revealed that many employees did not have a thorough understanding of the entire production process. This was seen as an impediment to efficient production because work processes are inter-related, and it was seen as a problem contributing to reduced solidarity and employee dissatisfaction. It was surmised that a lack of understanding of others' jobs probably contributed to communication problems: if one worker does not know how his (her) decisions and his (her) work affect another area, s/he is less likely to pass on information. Workers and supervisors who are unaware of the information needs of others may be unable (or unwilling) to pass along information because they do not realize its importance. Failure to understand the total process also leads to a decreased sense of ownership and belonging for employees, resulting in reduced commitment. The company loses the ability to utilize fully the knowledge base of first line employees to discover creative solutions to problems, workers' pride and satisfaction in their jobs are diminished, and tensions between workers, between workers and supervisors, and between managers are unresolved.

The School for Workers proposed an inter-active day of joint, plant-wide, union-management training designed to reduce communication barriers in the mill and promote understanding of the total manufacturing process across all positions and among all employees. The goal of the training was to increase each person's understanding of the total work flow, their contribution to the whole process, and the inter-relatedness of everyone and all jobs at the mill. The training was thus designed and undertaken in response to challenges facing the industry and the company, and was fueled by comments solicited from employees in the focus groups conducted in 2003.

As with past training, the joint Labor-Management Steering Committee was thoroughly involved with the design of the training. Both the union and the company could foresee benefits to plant-wide training in the total mill process, and all members of the Steering Committee contributed to the program content.

Scheduling the training so that representatives from each function across shifts and departments, considering days off, absences, and production needs was difficult. In some instances, certain functions are performed by very few people, for example, boiler operators, waste water treatment plant operators, and some office and support functions. The Committee decided to make sure that some representatives of these functions attended the first training session so that their information could be captured by the School for Workers faculty and shared in groups where they were not represented.

The major component of the training featured workers describing their jobs to each other. Mill workers are not generally known for verbosity, but the stable nature of employment at the mill meant that nearly all of the employees were familiar with experiential training previously used by the School for Workers. Cryptic responses such as, "I make pulp," or "I make paper," were anticipated. Three strategies were employed to elicit "appropriate" responses; that is, sufficiently descriptive to be informative, but not so lengthy as to be tedious or too time-consuming. Initially, small groups, organized by function prepared answers to written questions which could then be used to guide their responses, so that individuals would not feel they were being put on the spot. The instructors also had additional, prompting questions to help respondents tell their full story. And the Company developed large "story-boards" to provide visual aids to assist in describing the mill process.

The Pilot Project

In December of 2003, the training program was delivered as a pilot to a selected group of union and management participants specifically recruited to critique the program. The pilot was critical not only in refining the program but also in gaining union support beyond the Steering Committee members.

The day gauged the flow of the information exchange and allowed for testing and revision of prompting questions. In addition, the day served to identify a realistic time frame for each component of the training.

The critics performed their function well. At the outset, one union member challenged the necessity for the entire program. By the end of the day, however, he had become a major champion of the training and he and other participants provided numerous suggestions for improvement.

The pilot also revealed that, with a full day of training, something had to be devised to steer the focus of the group to the story boards in order to utilize all of the information they provided. The Plant Manager suggested a contest and offered lottery tickets as prizes. The instructors devised three different 10-question quizzes, all of which could be answered by information on the boards.

The Training

The final format for the training had several components: introductions, a presentation from management, exchange of information on jobs and related frustrations, solicitation of suggestions for improvement, discussion of specific, problematic work events, and evaluations. Consistent with previous years, a union member of the Steering Committee introduced the training. Union members in the pilot session had raised the issue that some workers in the mill believe that “nothing ever changes.” In anticipation of this comment, the union representative read a list of accomplishments and projects underway in response to feedback from the focus group reports. There is no doubt that these interventions were beneficial in positively setting up the training.

The School for Workers instructors gave an overview of the day and turned the floor over to the Plant Manager for a presentation on the industry and the current state of the company, followed by a question and answer session. A similar presentation had been part of the 2003 training on organizational communication and had been well received; all 45 focus groups had indicated that they wanted regular updates. The Plant Manager's presentation was important for another reason: it demonstrated a strong commitment on the part of upper management to the training, and to listening and responding to employees' input. The major time commitment required to deliver the presentation fourteen times solidified for employees that upper management was serious about the training and prepared to commit considerable resources to ensure its success. The time and investment in the story boards also illustrated management's commitment to and investment in the process.

The union also took a very large role in the training. In addition to active participation in the development of the concept, the union has always had a representative present at every training day. Over the years, their function has grown. In addition to introducing the training, the union representatives, many of whom are extremely familiar with multiple jobs in the Plant, stood in to speak for functions on those days when representatives of small departments were not present. These activities and interaction with participants throughout the day provided solid evidence of the union's active support for the training and reinforced the proactive role of the union in the training.

Participants were seated by function at tables arranged in circles according to the general flow of the operation. Functions, roughly in this order, were: office and support positions, waste paper receiving, pulping, cleaning, boiler, waste water treatment plant, maintenance, paper machines (wet end and dry end), and warehouse/shipping. To facilitate group processes and thoughtful dialogue, each group (and some individuals, if their functional area was small) were given worksheets with specific questions to discuss in their group. After this initial preparation time, each group (or individual) described their work and frustrations in their job to the rest of the group. The trainers drew out responses, working around the room according to the flow of the process, asking for descriptions from each table of their function, prompting for specifics and elaboration, and encouraging interaction among participants. Several tables also had physical props supplied by the Plant which were useful in explaining various processes.

The Plant Manager's suggestion to have a lottery to encourage participants to study the detailed, prepared story boards was implemented. Following one of the breaks, participants were given some time to study the boards and then returned to their tables where they received a questionnaire based on information on the boards. The "contest" was designed to reward study of the story boards, and collaboration. Answers were submitted and prizes awarded by table. Participants enjoyed the contest, despite the fact that winnings totaled \$12 for the entire program.

The entire training process was extremely well received. The previous years of training and familiarity with the trainers, and a conscious effort to put participants at ease helped establish an informal environment for information exchange. But, most importantly, the expertise of the participants enabled them to articulate a description of their jobs, and to identify their problems and frustrations. Participants listened respectfully and took part in dialogue between functional areas. Despite the fact that many employees have been at the Plant for many years, not very many have performed multiple jobs in the Plant, and the process was very informative.

While sharing of information was the main focus of the day, all groups were also asked to envision improvements that could be made. These discussions generated a long list of recommendations, ranging from small quick-fixes to long-range visionary recommendations for the Plant and the company.

In some instances, the information exchange, delineation of frustrations, and recommendations for improvement lasted the entire day. Other groups had time to discuss one or more specific "work events" that had been identified as problematic in the focus groups. These work events were shift change, (paper) grade change, and shut downs. As the training progressed, it became apparent that most of the groups addressed these issues during the information exchange since they are among the major sources of frustration.

The School for Workers initiated two forms of evaluation at the end of the training day: formal evaluation sheets, and comments solicited by the union representatives in the absence of the instructors. These comments were recorded and shared with the instructors, and included in the report on the training given to the joint Steering Committee.

The instructors used a lap top computer and overhead projector to capture participants' frustrations, suggestions for improvement, and general comments. These data were organized by function and topic and appended to a summary report presented to the joint Steering Committee. The summary report emphasized, in particular, "quick hits" for immediate results, and problem areas for research and resolution. As with similar projects involving first-line workers, there were numerous far-reaching suggestions for improved quality, efficiency, and cost effectiveness. The full report served to transmit the full text of participants' comments to the Steering Committee.

DISCUSSION

In a climate of globalization which has put the struggle for the hearts and minds of workers on the agenda, and decreased the need to obtain collaboration through negotiation (because of dramatically unequal bargaining power), unions need to leverage joint union-management ventures to benefit the union. This section will discuss the Total Mill Process training as an example of joint union-management training that increases union knowledge and power. This case provides an example of the circumstances under which joint training can benefit the union. Recent literature on union power in a globalized economy suggests that this training model could be appropriate for other industries.

The training described in this paper is an example of a proactive union agenda. It is also clearly an example of workers being invited to internalize the company's needs and goals. More importantly, from the union's viewpoint, this training provided a channel to present workers' perspectives and needs to management, and to increase union solidarity through worker-to-worker dialogue.

Any training undertaken by the School for Workers is designed to benefit the union. The School believes that a strong union makes a strong company and our "tagline" is "education for a democratic workplace". The instructors communicated this position to all classes before training began.

How does training in the total manufacturing process benefit the union? First, union jobs depend on survival of union companies and survival of companies depends on their ability to compete in global markets. If employees understand the business and understand not only their own jobs but those of co-workers, they are in a better position to contribute to the company in ways that improve that company's chances for survival. If workers feel that they are an important and respected part of the company, they are more likely to be actively involved in ensuring its success. This training was designed from workers' concerns, and the report produced clearly conveyed workers' concerns to management.

Second, one of the biggest problems for unions is friction and animosity between members. The program served to increase workers' understandings of each others' jobs and to facilitate communication between departments and between workers. Understanding how their work is interdependent, and understanding how problems in one location in the production process flow through to other areas – and understanding the causes of the problems – promotes improved communication and reduces blaming.

Third, there is a sense of empowerment that grows as workers see just how important their own contribution is to overall production. As mass production reduced work to its simplest steps, workers experienced alienation from the production process. Work in the paper industry often entails responsibility for massive equipment, a staggering output, and relatively isolated, independent work. Training in the total production

process reduces worker frustration as workers better understand some of the decisions – made by co-workers, supervisors, and managers -- which have, hitherto, not made sense, from a more limited perspective. On the other hand, decision-makers were made aware of the impact of their decisions and the need for greater consultation with others in the mill. Furthermore, this training, by participants' own assessments, allowed workers to feel that they were an important part in the overall process.

Fourth, the union benefits from any training, generally, in which communication and analytical skills are applied. For many manufacturing workers, there are few opportunities for continuing education that are compatible with shift work and life style, and fewer still that relate directly to their work. On the job training during work hours, at the company's expense can benefit individual workers and the union. Even having all union members hear the same information from the company is valuable for the union.

Having union representatives present for an entire day's work, in their union role, also increases the union's presence and increases connections between workers and union representatives. For the union, sadly, this degree of contact and involvement with all of its members is rarely achieved.

The Total Mill Process Training conforms to Haddad's criteria for successful joint labor-management ventures (2004). Although joint ventures have been the norm for several years, the relationship between the union and management is fairly traditional. For example, Steering Committee members tend to sit with members of their "side" during meetings, bargaining is traditional, not consensus or interest-based bargaining, and strong union and management identities have been maintained. In keeping with Haddad's criteria, however, the union has been involved in the training design from the earliest stage; and there was a strong, joint, representative Steering Committee with strong commitments on both sides to the training. Relevant information was shared, not just with Steering Committee members, but information, even of a proprietary nature was shared with every class of participants. The trainer, the School for Workers, provided feedback from the training in the form of a comprehensive report to the Steering Committee, ensuring that feedback from the workers was captured and passed along. The goals of the training were agreed upon, and the Steering Committee had a demonstrable track record of success. Furthermore, workers have been provided with evidence that the Steering Committee, in general, and management, in particular, is listening to -- and acting upon -- their concerns.

It is notable that the 2004 training was conducted while contract negotiations were taking place. Despite rumours that the negotiations "were not going well", the union continued its support for the training and the rumours did not compromise the participation during the training days. In due course, a settlement was reached, although not easily; bargaining was characterized as protracted, due primarily to extensive caucusing.

It is also notable that the union has established connections with the union of the parent company overseas. Furthermore, the union negotiated a neutrality agreement with the

parent company and rapidly organized workers at a new plant built in the southern United States. The union is clearly proactive.

This case study provides evidence that joint training can enhance union knowledge and power. The union is in a better position to bargain with the employer if it knows and understands the company's economic position and strategy. The union is also in a better position to sell a realistic contract settlement to its members if they all have the same information regarding the state of the company. And the union is stronger if its members understand each others' jobs, and if they have a profound sense of their inter-relatedness.

The challenge this study presents is for labor to assess joint union-management ventures and take a proactive stance to leverage them to the union's advantage. If the only paradigm is based on power, unions are in grave danger of losing in the context of globalization. Without compromising on solid union principles and goals, it is critical for union advocates to explore alternatives to adversarial unionism to ensure union survival and strength. Furthermore, unions need to look at various methods to mobilize their power if they are to resist the more dire consequences of globalization. This study demonstrates that using plant-wide, inclusive training has the potential to be one such alternative.

Limitations

This paper does not present measurement data of union members' attitudes or labor-management climate. However, data were collected on participants' assessment of the training and the statements regarding the training success are based on those assessments. In previous years, survey data were collected on perceptions of conflict at the plant. These data were summarized and presented elsewhere (Olson, et. al. 2002); similar data were collected in 2004 and data from 2002 to 2004 were also collected on communication. These data are still being analyzed, but will speak to perceptions of conflict and conflict, over time. This paper provides a description of the training rather than a presentation of that data.

The training was conducted at a single plant in a single company in one industry. There is evidence to suggest the results may be dependent on the relationship between the plant and the trainers.

The training was conducted across an entire system. Benefits may well be more limited for the union where training is more specific and/or does not include both union and management personnel.

This segment of the paper industry has been somewhat sheltered from the harsher effects of globalization because tissue is sold in regional rather than global markets due to high shipping costs. Nevertheless, as noted, pressures of globalization and of aggressive competition, manifestations of globalization, apply.

Post script

At the end of 2004, the benefits of joint training were somewhat obscured by announcements of plant closures, temporary shut-downs, and lay-offs affecting various North American plants of this company. As anticipated, over-capacity, market saturation, rising energy costs, and overseas competition for recovered paper forced this company and others to reduce production. A December meeting of the School for Workers with the joint Union-Management Steering Committee (to plan the 2005 training) indicated that, indeed, the union leadership understood the economic climate and business needs of the company and were therefore grudgingly reconciled to these changes. However, Haddad's (2004) elements for continuing, successful joint partnership remain in place: an independent union agenda, good labor relations, an active joint committee with mutually agreed goals, union commitment, a good track record of success, and (good prospects for) financial stability. The tenor of the meeting also encompassed a joint union-management vision to recover through joint effort and more efficient production, and determination to ensure the future of the plant and to improve the quality of work life. To these ends, planning is proceeding for more joint training.

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