

PEERING INSIDE THE “BLACK BOX”

The impact of management-side representatives on the industrial relations climate of organizations

Labour relations can have a significant impact on an organization's productivity and efficiency. Although much has been written about union stewards, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the key role that management-side labour relations representatives (MSRs) play in establishing and maintaining positive labour relations.

Building from a larger multi-phase study, the focus was upon a series of interviews with Canadian labour relations representatives and a national survey of frontline industrial relations workers. Dr. Shelagh Campbell, an associate professor at the Hill and Levene Schools of Business, and Dr. Johanna Weststar, an associate professor at Western University, considered the role of MSRs and their actions on the climate of labour relations.

Their findings, contained in their paper *Peering Inside the “Black Box”: The impact of management-side representatives on the industrial relations climate of organizations*, reveal that flexibility and informality have a greater impact on positive labour relations than formal education in industrial relations. MSRs have the potential to play an important role in maintaining a positive environment if they are given

more opportunity to take a proactive approach.

The authors used data from an interview-based pilot study of MSRs and consultations with a large public sector organization that enabled them to develop a model that was tested through an online survey. In interviews, MSRs were asked about their relationships with their union counterparts and their views on the general labour relations at their organizations. The authors noted that the interviews revealed positive relations take a long time to develop, but can also be quickly disrupted. For example, MSRs stated that positive working relationships were directly attributed to the personal relationships that they had built with specific individuals. However, these relationships could change if representatives changed. Interestingly, adversarial relationships could also remain even if the representatives changed.

There was a general consensus that adversarial approaches hindered labour relationships. Although some disagreements are to be expected, MSRs indicated that they were more inclined to focus on and preferred a more co-operative relationship. The interviews revealed that MSRs preferred to be proactive and informal with how they do their job and interact with union representatives. For instance, MSRs

mentioned they valued face-to-face contact, the ability to just drop in to speak to their counterparts, having the ability to speak candidly, and being able to take action to avoid problems.

The online survey was administered to MSRs and union representatives across Canada and was intended to confirm the connection between different factors affecting the industrial relations climate. Results revealed that there were no significant relationships between education and the MSRs' attitudes and behaviours, such as co-operativeness, informality, proactivity or autonomy. This was surprising as higher education was expected to encourage the type of attitudes and behaviour that would be conducive to more productive labour relations.

The researchers concluded that it simply may not be what the MSR does, but how they do it, that is the most important aspect of success. Further research should be conducted that investigates why organizations have not recognized the barriers that prevent MSRs to engage in better relationship-building tasks.

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