

A GUIDE TO
GOOD PRACTICE



partnership working

a practitioner's guide

Partnership working – a practitioner’s guide

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Foreword

The relevance of any business proposition has much to do with timing and evidence supported by an underlying belief and bolstered by practical example. “Partnership Working – A Practitioner’s Guide” has all these features – it is written at a time when many businesses and services are reviewing the extent to which they are successfully harnessing the skills and knowledge of all employees; and many others are coming to terms with the implications of the forthcoming Information and Consultation Regulations. The IPA has a long history of arguing against the traditional confrontational approach to industrial relations in favour of partnerships designed to facilitate joint problem solving. Derek Luckhurst has built on this history with a wide-range of recent and current case studies which amply illustrate both pitfalls and successes. Partnership is not a quick fix but the long term rewards are enormous.

Employee involvement used to be thought of as having most relevance in the highly unionised manufacturing sector. “Partnership Working – A Practitioner’s Guide” usefully shows that tailor-made partnership ideas and institutions are relevant to organisations of all shapes and sizes, in the public, private and voluntary sectors. There are also frequent reminders that unions have an important part to play but, where they are not well represented, partnership principles are just as relevant to any organisation keen to achieve best in class status.

As the title suggests this is not just another personnel management textbook. It will be of interest and help to all of us who want to work in successful organisations. The task, particularly in those large, people intensive parts of the public sector, is considerable, but the potential benefit in terms of efficiency and job satisfaction are huge.

Hugh Stirk
Chairman, IPA



Introduction

The main aim of this guide is to provide a key reference source for people engaged in running existing partnerships by covering the various themes that will be of interest and concern to them. However, due to the wide scope of the research, many issues have been identified which will doubtless be of interest to all employee relations practitioners – HR managers, line managers, trade union officials and representatives, and employee representatives. Rather than look at particular industrial sectors or specific sizes of organisation, it seeks to distil the information gathered in such a way that it can apply to all organisations, and be useful to people working at all levels in an organisation.

This work should not be regarded as restrictive in its application, for many of the points examined will be ones which practitioners working in non-partnership organisations will recognise. This guide will help them to avoid problems, thereby improving employee relations more generally. In an effort to make this guide as accessible as possible, it is not set in a formal academic context. It is written with the practitioner in mind, punctuated with advice gleaned from managers, representatives and commentators at all levels and illustrated with key case study evidence.

It seeks to adopt as wide a range as possible, and in keeping with this, includes examples from organisations with and without trade unions. Where good (and bad) practice has been identified, these are included in this guide, whether or not the information comes from a formally recognised ‘partnership’ organisation.

It is important to stress that this guide has focused on behaviours and processes required to sustain partnership working. For some trade unions this may be an aspiration that cannot be achieved because certain organisations simply will not embrace the idea. Although this guide sets out a best practice scenario, some trade unions will rightly consider that a more traditional approach to industrial relations is the only way they are able to serve the interests of their members in these types of organisation. This is equally true of organisations that would like to work in partnership but cannot do so because the trade union is not willing to support the idea.

The questions addressed in this guide include:

- what sort of information do practitioners need?
- what information would be helpful and to what degree of detail?
- what have practitioners found helpful in developing partnership or fostering good employment relations generally?
- what have been the main stumbling blocks or problem areas and how have these been overcome?

The solutions and ideas presented here should not be seen as a ‘one-size fits all’ or ‘off the shelf’ problem-solving model. Rather, the guide presents a series of options which organisations may decide to adopt, amend or fine tune, as they wish. Certain policies may be applied to certain organisations at different stages in the partnership process, or may apply more directly to larger rather than smaller organisations. With this guide, organisations will now have access to the sort of detailed information which will help them navigate the employment relations maze.

This guide emphasises the importance of behaviours in successfully maintaining partnership working. As early as 1965, Walton and McKersie in their study, “A Behavioural Theory Of Labour Negotiations – An Analysis Of A Social Interaction System”, applied behavioural science techniques to the formal study of bargaining. The study recognised that the form of negotiations in situations where there was a continuing relationship between the parties is different from discreet, or one-off, negotiations. In examining the immediate results of a particular negotiation and also the long-term effects of the negotiation on the continuing relationship between the parties, Walton and McKersie identified a conceptual framework which divided into four sub-processes:

- distributive bargaining
- integrative bargaining
- intra-organisational bargaining
- attitudinal bargaining

Integrative bargaining, in particular, is relevant to this guide as it concentrates on the aspiration of entering discussions with the aim of achieving a "win-win" outcome by means of joint problem-solving. Although one of the conclusions in the Guide is that consultation rather than negotiation is the foundation of a successful partnership, Walton & McKersie's insights are as valuable today as they were when first published.

This Guide is for practitioners throughout the field of industrial and employee relations. In seeking practical solutions to the problems of sustaining partnership many established procedures relating to industrial relations have been challenged. Among these are the protection of sensitive information, the adoption of entrenched positions, motion-based annual conferences and the training of representatives. The role of negotiation within a


partnership is also challenged, particularly as the starting point for discussions.

These challenges are not intended to court controversy for the sake of it, but are presented to help organisations (including trade unions) to reap the many benefits that sustained partnership working can achieve. It is not easy to reap these benefits and few, if any, organisations have not experienced problems in trying to do so. Sometimes that is because expectations have been set too high, particularly in terms of how quickly the benefits will be realised, or an organisation has got its business strategy wrong. Often it is because all involved parties do not understand, or share the same understanding, of what partnership working actually means. More often than not, it is one key incident that triggers a problem with relationships between individuals, and the conclusions drawn from the research are a means of ensuring that all avoidable problems are identified and countered.

Each chapter is a detailed exploration of these findings, with the exception of those sections which provide a brief overview of what partnership working is and how the research for this Guide was formulated and conducted. These conclusions are as follows:

Partnership has to have a robust consultation process as its foundation

This chapter includes: the distinctions between consultation and negotiation, the separation of partnership issues and non-partnership issues, how joint-decision making is unsustainable, the need for mutual understanding, how best-practice consultation works, sharing sensitive information, respecting confidentiality, seeking alternative solutions, the managers' right to make decisions and the importance of good communication.



Partnership needs to extend to all levels of the organisation

This chapter includes: the extension of the relationship beyond senior levels, the inclusion of all staff in the process, the impact of command and control managers, the role of the line managers, representatives' ability to take criticism from their members or constituents, trusting managers to get on with their jobs, the role of the representatives in helping managers to manage better, and the impact of partnership on the day-to-day working lives of staff.

Everyone needs to change how they behave and how they discuss issues

This chapter includes: the importance of good behaviours over written agreements and procedures, honesty and transparency as an approach to employee relations, treating all parties with dignity and respect, managers accepting that there may be a better option than the one they have thought of, representatives letting go of issues when they have been fully discussed, the need for representatives to be empowered by their members or constituents, and how motion-based conferences are not compatible with the speed of change.

Training is important but it is not a panacea

This chapter includes: the training of senior managers and senior representatives, creating a shared understanding of partnership, discussing all issues and fears openly, the importance of training for line managers, the need to raise awareness amongst staff, partnership training as an on-going concern for organisations, and the commitment to allow people to attend training courses.

Partnership has to deliver effective change and been seen to do so

This chapter includes: the acceptance of change, delivering change with assistance rather than resistance, joint problem-solving and how it differs from joint decision-making, the robust business case and how it is communicated, how consultation does not slow down the speed of change, reducing the effects of the grapevine and rumours, the need for representatives to illustrate their part in the process to members and constituents, and how disagreements are not excluded from partnership working.

Expectations need to be managed but partnership has to provide benefits

This chapter includes: partnership providing the solution to most issues, the effects of obstinacy and entrenched positions, the need for representatives to balance short-term gains with longer-term problems, how posturing over pay is not compatible with partnership, the need for each partner to look at issues from the other partner's point of view, the critical need to publicise benefits of partnership, and how partnership has delivered real benefits.

Partnership needs champions

This chapter includes: the essential role of partnership champions in sustaining relationships, supporting partnership working, making partnership relevant to all staff, developing new champions, leadership qualities, the role of the employee relations manager, delivering hard messages to managers and representatives, and the importance of not relying on a few individuals to keep partnership going.

Key tension points need to be resolved

This chapter includes: the representative's relationship with his or her manager, managers' targets and objectives, issues arising from consultation not happening, low levels of trade union membership, over-reaction to events as a cause of relationships breaking down, disciplinary procedures for representatives, and how organisations need to listen and act upon good suggestions.

It is impossible to isolate the concept of partnership working from the Information and Consultation Regulations introduced in the United Kingdom early in 2005. As spelt out in detail in Chapter 3, partnership working relies on a robust consultation process for its foundation. In itself, this is not enough and this guide illustrates the potential benefits that organisations can achieve if they go beyond the basic legislative requirements and build a solid consultation process to maximise the benefits. Of course it takes time but some organisations are reaping benefits from European Works Councils legislation. There is no reason why the same should not happen with Information and Consultation legislation – particularly as this goes much further in terms of its instruction to parties that they should enter consultation discussions with a view to reaching agreement. It is difficult to envisage how that can be achieved without partnership principals and behaviours supporting those discussions.

Chapter 1 – A brief overview of partnership

'In the last two years industrial relations have improved beyond recognition in tandem with a membership growth of 50%. There is no doubt that a good working relationship between management and the unions developed on trust owes a lot to partnership working. There is a responsibility on all in the work place to develop a good working relationship if the obstacles placed before all employees are to be overcome. This is best achieved by a joint partnership approach.'

*Sandra Reffold,
PCS Representative at Inland Revenue.
Source – IPA Primary Research, 2003.*

The concept of partnership working has been the source of much debate since the original IPA model was developed in 1992. Towards Industrial Partnership identified three commitments to which all the parties should subscribe:

- the success of the enterprise
- building trust through greater involvement
- respect for the legitimacy of other partners

The report also identified four building blocks on which a partnership is built:

- recognition of employees' desire for security and the company's need to maximise flexibility
- sharing success within the company
- informing and consulting staff about issues at workplace and company level
- effective representation of people's views within the organisation

While everyone from the new Labour Government (from 1997), the Trades Union Congress and the Institute of Directors has

advocated some form of partnership, definitions have been quite diverse. At around the time of the IPA model being developed, Larry Adams produced the following definition that remains as true today as it did over 10 years ago:

"A partnership is an interest based relationship – that is a relationship based not on simply power or rights, but on the satisfaction of mutual as well as separate interests."

The TUC's six underlying principles of partnership are also a good starting point for understanding what partnership might mean in practice:

- joint commitment to the success of the organisation
- joint recognition of each other's legitimate interests
- joint commitment to employment security
- joint focus on the quality of working life
- joint commitment to operating in a transparent manner
- joint commitment to add value to the arrangement

These principles translate into common features that are associated with partnership working. For example, employees would show a strong commitment to the goals of the business and be flexible in their approach to achieving these goals. In turn, the organisation would understand and listen to employee concerns and actively pursue policies to address such issues wherever possible. Many organisations would argue that the increased commitment of employees is the most important benefit that can be gained from partnership as all of the other benefits flow from that one. For employees, the most profound benefit is arguably the fact that they realise that managers are interested in their opinions and, as a consequence, they do not feel so remote from the

decision-making process. This is particularly so if the managers are presenting an open and honest business case to them.

How could everyone benefit from a partnership approach?

Partnership is built on principles and practices of shared commitment between the organisation and the people who work there. This should produce the following business benefits:

- change implemented with assistance rather than resistance
- competitive edge for the organisation
- dealing with issues before they become problems
- less bureaucracy
- fewer, if any, tribunal cases
- higher levels of staff retention
- greater ability to recruit high quality staff
- low levels of absenteeism
- less conflict
- better decision making
- becoming employer of choice
- fulfilling the ethical expectations of staff

For a trade union or works council, all of these are benefits too. There are also some specific areas that representatives working in partnership will benefit from:

- opportunity to maintain or increase influence on company strategy
- opportunity to ensure that the impact on staff is considered in any decision
- opportunity to increase membership levels in unionised partnerships
- opportunity to develop the skills of the representatives to a much higher level
- opportunity to become an equal stakeholder within the organisation
- employees feel closer to the decision-making process of the organisation
- employees feel that managers are interested

in them and their opinions

- employees will not have to contend with a command and control culture

What can partnership mean to a representative?


It has become increasingly apparent over the last few years that partnership working will entail a change to deeply held beliefs. For example, all representatives must accept a need for flexible working, remove demarcations and accepted practices and understand that it is not acceptable to merely say “no”. This makes the job of a representative more demanding because he or she has to think about potential business impacts when looking for improvement to existing terms and conditions. It also requires them to accept that managers make the final decision.

This does not mean that representatives have to agree with everything that is placed in front of him or her. The difference to what has been referred to as “old-style” industrial relations is that objection should not be based on ideology. If a challenge is made to a business decision, it should be made in such a way as to facilitate a meaningful discussion. The challenge to unions is to think of another way of achieving something, rather than trying to stop something happening.

What can partnership mean to a manager?

The requirement for change is similar for managers. Middle managers are usually cited as one of the main reasons why partnership working fails. This is often because they are not engaged in the process. It is natural to feel disenfranchised when this happens.

They also receive mixed messages from their senior managers. They are told to accept partnership working but it is not referred to



in their accountabilities and objectives. This results in an understandable focus on achieving results without an evaluation of the costs, both tangible and intangible, that have been spent in doing so.

Managers should not feel threatened by partnership working. They have a right to manage and the final decision is theirs; the difference is that the business case is being made available to the representatives openly, honestly and at the earliest stage possible. A manager must be equipped with the skills to respond positively to challenges and should accept the employees' desire for information, representation and consultation before decisions are taken.

Partnership working should help managers to achieve objectives and should make their jobs easier. Being able to run ideas past a representative and gauge the potential response of the staff, can only help the decision-making process. An idea might be modified to take account of this or it might not but, at the very least, the reaction to a decision is known.

Behaviours and trust

All of this depends on how the managers and representatives get on with each other and, more importantly, how much they trust each other. If managers take representatives into their confidence by sharing ideas and information at the earliest stage, they have to know that this trust will not be breached. This is probably the most critical aspect of partnership working and presents as big a challenge to the representative as it does to the manager.

The old method of industrial relations was relatively simple when both sides would try to get one over the other side by being secretive and too bureaucratic. Openness and honesty,

however, results in a big increase in responsibility for all of those involved in partnership working. This takes time to achieve.

A manager should eventually feel comfortable with bringing any issue to the attention of a representative in the knowledge that any response will be calm and considered. In turn, the representative should feel comfortable bringing any issue to the attention of a manager in the knowledge that it will be considered seriously. All parties should communicate in a cordial manner without threats or a reversion to "command and control" styles.

Conclusion

Partnership working is a relationship based on the satisfaction of mutual as well as separate interests with respect given by both parties to those separate interests. However, partnership works best when representatives think about the business and business thinks about the staff before any decision is made or any action is taken. By doing so, a virtuous circle can be achieved rather than a vicious one. The latter is still perceived to be the normal way that industrial relations are conducted in the United Kingdom.

Chapter 2 Overview & research strategy

The key themes explored in this study into how partnership can be sustained are as follows:

- the need for a robust consultation process as a foundation
- extending partnership to all levels of an organisation
- changing behaviours
- the need for continuous training
- delivering change and being seen to do so
- managing expectations while delivering real benefits
- the role of partnership champions
- how to address tension points

The information which forms the basis for this guide was gathered from a variety of sources. The data can be separated into two areas – that obtained from primary (direct) research and that obtained from secondary (indirect) research.

Primary research

The direct research was undertaken with a number of different organisations, trade unions, academics and employment relations specialists. The main vehicle used for the research was a semi-structured interview. A full interview brief was developed by the IPA, which captured the full range of issues and potential problems (and solutions) experienced by practitioners. The interview brief was trialled and, following some amendments, interviews were conducted during the first half of 2003. The brief was used most successfully as an aide memoir to make sure all the issues were covered. In all cases, interviewees were provided with copies of the brief before the interviews took place, to allow them time to consider and prepare their

responses and provide good quality, detailed examples. Interviews were undertaken with key practitioners from the following organisations:

- Legal & General Assurance Society Limited
- United Welsh Housing Association
- Boots
- Abbey National Group
- Inland Revenue
- Bank of Ireland UK Financial Services
- USDAW
- PCS


The interview notes were written up and key examples and quotes identified for use in this guide. It was agreed that these contributions would be anonymous if requested. A point to note is that people are often reluctant to describe problems they have had and discuss errors which they or colleagues may have made in the past. Identifying such issues was fundamental to the research. Gratitude must be expressed for the honesty and openness exhibited by all those interviewed.

Secondary research

The material gathered came from a wide variety of sources, including:

- internal IPA files / notes
- IPA case studies
- the IPA Bulletin
- the IPA Partnership At Work website
- published academic research
- information published by DTL, TUC and ACAS
- information published by Unions 21, UKWON, IES and CIPD
- website information from organisations and trade unions

Material was gathered from as wide a field as possible to ensure that a truly representative sample was available – including the public, private and voluntary sectors. In particular it



was important to identify how the size of an organisation affected the way employee relations and partnership were handled. Case study evidence was, therefore, analysed from both large national multi-site bodies (e.g. Inland Revenue, Tesco) and smaller (single site or regional) organisations (e.g. United Welsh Housing Association).

The quality and detail of information provided within the project timescale through both the primary and secondary avenues effectively fulfils the terms of reference and objectives of this project.

Glossary Of Terms

USDAW	Union Of Shop Distributive & Allied Workers
PCS	Public & Commercial Services Union
IPA	Involvement & Participation Association
DTI	Department Of Trade & Industry
TUC	Trades Union Congress
ACAS	Advisory Conciliation & Arbitration Service
UKWON	UK Work Organisation Network
IES	Institute For Employment Studies
CIPD	Chartered Institute Of Personnel & Development
EEF	Engineering Employers Federation

Chapter 3 - Partnership has to have a robust consultation process as its foundation

By way of introduction, it is important to clearly establish that this chapter is about consultation which is distinct from negotiation. Both the IPA and ACAS have defined consultation:

“To seek views of employees through representation before decisions are taken and to take them into account when the decision is reached”

Source - IPA

“Consultation involves taking account of as well as listening to the views of employees and must therefore take place before decisions are made”

Source - ACAS

Consultation should be entered into with a view to reaching agreement but the process should not break down if agreement is not possible. Negotiation, on the other hand, does require agreement and the history of UK industrial relations is littered with examples of where that process has broken down, sometimes resulting in mistrust, anger, frustration and strike action. The end result of a successful negotiation is commonly a compromise decision which is seldom the best solution for an organisation or its staff.

Also distinct from consultation are information and communication:

Regular procedures to communicate the organisation's progress and plans, including financial performance.


Direct communication to employees about matters relating to their particular part of the organisation.

Source: IPA training programmes

Many partnership organisations separate subjects for discussion into two distinct areas – those which are dealt with in the partnership arrangement and those which are dealt within the more traditional framework of negotiation. Evidence at several organisations suggests that the separation option does not help the sustainability of the partnership. In one, for example, a trade union refused to discuss anything that specifically related to partnership because the organisation had not consulted them over a re-structure. This meant that important issues, where consensus decision-making was required, such as health & safety, life-long learning and equal opportunities were not discussed and only those matters outside the scope of partnership (terms & conditions and pay) were on the agenda and discussed against that backdrop of mistrust and suspicion. It is vital that the difficult issues are dealt with in the spirit of partnership as well as those subjects which are more likely to result in consensus. Good partnership practice does not depend on reaching consensus through negotiation although there is no reason why agreement cannot be reached on a number of issues, provided all parties have the same information at their disposal.

Practical difficulties soon emerged in distinguishing consultation and negotiation. The CWU was insistent that partnership boards must not get involved in negotiation. Pay and conditions are determined by national agreement but traditionally supplemented or varied by local bargaining, with the result that the national agreement each year was quickly dispersed. Attempts in recent years to strengthen the influence of the national agreement have somewhat reduced local bargaining except for issues of change at local level.

Source: CIPD – Information & Consultation, From Compliance To Partnership



Many organisations have asked questions about the actual process of best-practice partnership consultation and how they will deal with it in the reality of the workplace. A model based around the discussion of options has been developed as part of the IPA's advisory work. Its relevance is becoming more acute as concerns about the sharing of sensitive information, the question of who makes the decisions, and how much time all this will take, begin to develop amongst organisations. Even in some of these partnership organisations, consultation takes place, at best, once a decision to implement business change has been reached. This is not true consultation.

Option-based consultation does exactly what it says. When the need for business change is identified, it is good sense for the managers of an organisation to consider a number of options to meet that need. It is extremely rare that a decision is taken without looking at a number of ways to achieve an objective but, in all cases, there are two: do something or do nothing.

At the AnUMan Conference in 2003, DARA answered the question "Why are we in partnership?":

For The Trade Unions:

- Respect and encouragement for Union views
- Involvement before key decisions are taken
- Better communication of strategic changes

For DARA:

- Commitment from Unions to making a success of DARA
- Wider input to decision-making
- Reduced risk of industrial disputes

As far as employees are concerned, it is rare for them to have any idea about the sort of options their managers have considered and they usually feel that decisions are taken in "ivory towers" with no thought as to how they, as employees, will be affected. In a redundancy situation, for example, employees usually believe that the redundancies are the business objective itself rather than a consequence of it. Buy-in to any change process is difficult to achieve in such circumstances.

It is also rare for representatives to be included at this stage of the process resulting in a similar feeling of "fait accompli" when discussions start about the implementation of the decision. By this stage, it is too late to influence the outcome.

At Abbey National Group, "the consultation bodies work well and have a very open dialogue – often following an option-based consultation model. There is an adult to adult approach with all the pros and cons of a policy or plan being discussed. They leave the egos and mobiles at the door."

Source – IPA primary research, 2003

Principles of option-based consultation

As soon as a business objective is identified and options to meet that objective have been looked at, consultation with representatives should begin before one option is selected as the way forward. This, of course, has implications for managers in sharing potentially sensitive information but this establishes everybody's responsibilities right at the beginning of the process. Employees and trade union representatives have to be aware that they will only get the chance to break such a confidence once. (Some managers have indicated at IPA facilitated workshops that they would never share sensitive information

with a representative again if a leak occurred). There is no reason to believe that an engagement at this stage of the process has led to leakages of information. For managers, it is a good opportunity to develop their skills in both consideration of an issue and their ability to communicate their views.

Since all this happens before a final decision is made, the representatives' opportunity to influence the outcome can be a real one. Once a decision has been made, there are only two possible outcomes; agreement or disagreement. It is often the latter. If anyone has ever played football, they will know it is impossible to get a referee to change their mind once they have made a decision, however unjust that decision appears to be. The psychology in this process is no different; once managers have made a decision it is almost impossible to change it unless industrial muscle is used as a persuasive tactic and that is often unsuccessful.

The discipline of stating the business objectives and the thought process to meet them is a good one for managers and, if the representatives are unhappy with the current options on the table, they can always suggest alternatives. This, in turn, presents the representatives with a greater challenge than merely saying "no" and it is important that they think carefully about any further options that may be more palatable to staff.

At this point in the process there will be a shared understanding of the need for change and the various ways available to make the change. There may not yet be agreement and nor is that necessary, but a clear understanding of why something has to change is fundamental to the success of the process. The representatives should challenge the business case if they do not understand it or agree with it. They

should challenge the options presented to them but management should also challenge the representatives to come up with alternatives. It should produce a healthy, mature and courteous discussion aimed at producing the best decision for the organisation's needs while taking into account the views and concerns of its employees.

With all of the information about the options and the representatives' views in front of them, management now have the responsibility to make the decision. This process is not about removing the right of managers to make decisions; in fact it firmly establishes this right where there may have previously been some ambiguity. However, more importantly, it extends the right of the representatives to have a clear and full understanding of why a decision has been made and why other options were rejected. This is an important communication tool for the representatives because, although they will not buy-in to every decision that has been taken, they will be able to explain the reasons for them with authority to their constituents or members. This authority must never be underestimated in its contribution to achieving a more open, transparent and trusting culture.

Communication with constituents or members is an integral part of the consultation process. Depending on what issue is being discussed, this communication might take place very early by means of a genuine canvassing of views and reporting them back. Alternatively, the consultation process might require total confidentiality until an announcement or a joint-announcement is made.



At Boots this process is working well. "Before the partnership, the union's initial response would always be negative – what are they trying to slip past us here? I set out to get topside of the manager and, in fact, I could get anything I wanted out of him. Every discussion would be like locking horns and we could never get to any agreement. Now, I would describe the atmosphere as one of quiet problem-solving without the automatic 'no' of the past. Often, the union may be presented with a plan or proposal and they are given time to go away and consider it. The company do not put pressure on the reps to provide instant feedback or response. There is a greater willingness to work together and, through that, trust develops. We are no longer looking for the hidden agenda."

Source : IPA primary research, 2003

The representatives should never put themselves in a position of unnecessarily worrying their constituents or members and leaking information never actually helps anyone in the long term. However, all parties have a shared interest in making sure all communication is delivered well. Discussing the communication process as part of the consultation will be helpful in ensuring that neither party surprises the other with what they say and when they say it.

Benefits of option-based consultation

Option-based consultation will also achieve real business benefits in terms of better decision-making and removing the current gap between the decision makers and those affected by their actions. It can work equally well in a unionised or non-unionised environment provided the

representatives are fully trained in the skills and behaviours necessary to make the process work properly. Management training is equally important because it may require as fundamental a change in attitudes for them as for a trade union representative schooled in the more traditional negotiation-style. What it will give the latter is a greater ability to influence by intellect and reason than they might have by simply using power. It should also make managers more comfortable in engaging in the consultation process earlier which will mean, in turn, that the change process will not necessarily take longer.

Trust and respect, openness and honesty, between the two sides are beginning to grow, and the parties are beginning to reach a position where they feel they can share information more freely. Partners agree that openness on all sides, including sharing detailed information, will enhance working together. They also recognise that they will need to work on building trust between managers and the shop floor.

The point is that if all sides have access to the same information, and are able to interpret and understand it, then everyone is likely to come to the same logical conclusion, and agree about what needs to be done.

*Source: "Entering The Maze"
Case Study – American Standard, Hull*

This model is vitally important as a potential underpinning to sustainable industrial partnership. Whereas a number of partnership agreements separate some discussions into a more traditional industrial relations framework from those that are discussed in partnership, option-based consultation provides the potential for all discussions to go into the

partnership agenda. However radical, even pay discussions can be brought into the equation particularly as the model can pave the way for

companies to share market data with representatives.


United Welsh Housing Association and Unison explored the possibility of using the IPA's model during a facilitated workshop, spread over two days, in November 2002. At this time, consultation had already begun on the issue of opening a new office in Cardiff and relocating a number of staff from their existing Head Office in Caerphilly some five miles away. Although the Unison representatives had drawn their own conclusions about the business need for the new office and supported the idea, it was quite revealing to hear the senior management team explain their thinking in such a comprehensive and open manner.

They revealed that the business issues explored by them were not limited to the key drivers of the need to deliver service to the local community and put their customers first. Other drivers such as: strategic influence, political influence, diversifying the business, being closer to their largest proportion of business partners, and making their service more flexible were also discussed openly along with the more practical situation that some of their other offices were full. Most significantly, the Chief Executive outlined how he and his management team had given a great deal of consideration as to whether the organisation would simply be disadvantaged if they did not open an office within the booming economy of the Welsh capital.

This discussion provided the union representatives with a complete picture of the management's thinking on a major re-structure for the organisation. There was still a feeling, however, that the very nature of the issue under discussion produced a *fait accompli* of sorts in that the seemingly obvious answer to these business objectives was, indeed, to open an office in Cardiff. Further discussions revealed that the reality was not quite so simple. In fact, a number of options were explored by the senior management team including the operation of a "virtual" office, joining an existing group structure in the area and even moving the entire organisation there. The other option of doing nothing was also considered, taking into account costs and the possible effects of disruption to the business and to the staff.

The union representatives could see that this issue was not change dreamt up on a whim, there were serious business reasons for doing so and the solution was also not decided on a toss of the coin. From this position of mutual understanding, a number of further consultation issues were identified and discussed outside of the workshop in the reality of the organisation's Joint Consultation Group. At the top of their agenda was the development of a communication strategy as well as the more nitty-gritty issues such as, skills matching, selection criteria for moving, car parking, child care, how to utilise flexible working in the new office, addressing peoples' fear of change, and how to take special individual circumstances into account. The end result is that the Cardiff office is now up and running and, although a few residual issues are still being discussed, the move has been successful.

Although United Welsh Housing Association and Unison began using option-based consultation from a retrospective basis, they have continued to utilise the model for all subsequent discussions



at their Joint Consultation Committee meetings. In addition to this, however, all of the organisation's managers have been trained to use the model, wherever possible, when dealing with their staff on issues that relate to their teams. This is important because it has meant that there is little confusion between the consultation that takes place between the union and management at the Joint Consultation Committee and the consultation that an individual manager must undertake with his or her staff.


A good illustration of this can be seen in the organisation's discussions surrounding the Responsive Repairs Maintenance Service re-structure. This area provides a key service to the organisation's tenants and a need was identified to improve that service by reacting quicker to requests by, amongst other things, creating better communication between this department and the Housing Officers. As the consultation developed and options to meet this business objective were discussed, the staff in the area became involved as part of the agreed communication strategy. As the senior Unison representative stated, "We, in the union, are keen to let people do their jobs. This is easier to do when you don't have to second guess a strategy in the dark." In fact, it was a member of staff who suggested a further option that the management of the area decided to adopt, thus clearly illustrating that partnership with a sound consultation basis can spread throughout an entire organisation. Another senior manager supports this idea; "You can't have partnership without empowerment. Managers have to manage otherwise there will be a gap in the consultation process. Here, the union empowers the managers to manage."

When the organisation identified the need to review the shift patterns for their Cardiff Housing Link department, the initial consultation with the Unison representatives conformed to the option-based model, during which a discussion paper was put together and subsequently issued to the staff. The business case and the options considered to meet it were outlined in the paper. Once the management made the decision about which option to adopt, the staff were given the reasons why it was chosen and, importantly, why the other options were not. Even though the option chosen resulted in a change from a 35-hour week to a 38-hour week, the shifts became more flexible and staff bought into the change. Less reliance on agency staff resulted in less pressure on the permanent staff and the union representatives have confirmed that the staff are happy with the outcome. What could have been a very difficult process – an increase in working hours is an emotive issue – went through smoothly and efficiently. This has certainly not been the case in many other organisations.

United Welsh Housing Association and Unison have worked hard to use the option-based consultation model both in a practical sense to deal with real issues and as a strategy to ensure their partnership is sustainable. The relationship is further underpinned by a Code Of Conduct, written in plain English, which outlines how people employed by the organisation should behave while performing their day-to-day work. All staff have received training on how option-based consultation is being used in their organisation including how it links with this Code Of Conduct. This has required a great deal of commitment - for example the line managers have been involved in two full-day training sessions - but the investment in making sure everyone is involved and feels involved is clearly having a positive effect throughout the organisation.

Summary of key points

- separating issues into “partnership” and “non-partnership” categories will potentially lead to the breakdown of that partnership
- partnership cannot sustain consensus or joint-decision making
- partnership must create a culture of mutual understanding
- robust consultation is the key foundation of partnership
- option-based consultation is the best-practice process
- consultation needs to start early in the decision-making process
- managers need to be open and honest about what they are trying to achieve and why
- representatives must always respect confidentiality
- representatives must seek alternatives rather than block change
- managers have a right to make decisions
- good communication from managers and representatives is the key to creating the culture of mutual understanding



Chapter 4 – Partnership needs to extend to all levels of the organisation

A recurring question that people have raised in IPA facilitated partnership workshops relates to whether the partnership is limited to the relationship between senior managers and senior trade union representatives and, if it does, where that leaves employees who have chosen not to join the recognised union. In non-union partnerships this is not an issue but there are fewer examples of these. In most partnership organisations, the issue of including all employees is encapsulated in a key question: Is this a partnership with the union or the employees?

Partnerships which essentially exist only between key senior or personnel managers and the senior trade union officials can work well for a limited amount of time. However, as these key individuals move on to other roles or stand down from their elected posts, their replacements may not have the same desire or the skills and experience to continue working in partnership. As we have examined in the previous chapter, the option-based consultation model provides a mechanism to create a consultative culture throughout an organisation of any size and, therefore, a framework to create a partnership that also works at all levels.

It extends the responsibility of working in a consultative way to line managers, the network of representatives and even to team leaders and the employees themselves. This creates a large number of individuals within an organisation who have gained the necessary skills and experience to continue working in this way as they gain promotion through the management chain or win election to more senior union posts.

Partnership, in these circumstances, becomes the normal way of working and is able to withstand the loss of key instigators or champions.

A key to the continuing progress towards partnership is the strong, enthusiastic relationship between the two key players, the senior T&G steward and the human resources director. Both men envisioned *New Initiative* as laying firm foundations for the future; both worked throughout the six years around the negotiating table, seeing the proposal through to endorsement and implementation, and both are convinced of its value, and keen to stress the benefits. Their energy and example are seen by everyone as critical to its success.

The lack of concern about the break up (through retirement of the human resources director) of this pivotal relationship is one indication of how well embedded into the organisational culture the principles of partnership have become.

Source: The Partnership Company, Case Study 1, Emhart Fastening Technologies Industrial Division-Europe, 1998

There have been a number of companies who have struggled to extend partnership throughout their organisational structures; some have failed. Some, such as Tesco, Legal & General and Littlewoods have recognised the difficulties that have to be faced when trying to take partnership beyond the key representatives and managers. Littlewoods realised they needed to do a great deal of work in this area, in fact, a staff survey confirmed this need. Partnership was not impacting on the day-to-day lives of people working there. Both Littlewoods and the union have worked hard to address that gap. Legal & General have also gone through a major training programme for their line managers which has included detailed instruction on how to use option-based consultation.

Middle managers are generally perceived to be “a problem” with regard to partnership working. This is the case in both unionised and non-unionised workplaces and stems from the fact they are often excluded from the processes that underpin partnership. To them, partnership is something that happens at the senior management and union level and does not concern them so long as they reach their targets and objectives. Many believe that consultation slows things down and takes away their responsibility for decision-making resulting in a loss of their leadership status.

Whereas this disengagement may not, on the surface, appear to be a large problem, it can have a cumulative effect. If these managers do not consult but behave in a command and control manner, a gap between the way industrial relations are conducted at the senior levels and how staff are treated in their day-to-day working lives emerges. Such a gap can create tension between local representatives and these line managers which cannot be rectified by simply telling them to work in partnership. Ironically, this is sometimes done in a “command and control” manner. It is important to engage in dialogue with managers who hold such views because only evidence to support partnership working will convince them.


There is little evidence that disengaged line managers deliberately attempt to sabotage partnership working. It is unusual, for example, that partnership working or consultation is part of a manager’s core training and they simply may not know how to do it. There can be a particular problem if a disengaged line manager has a representative in his or her team and resents seeing that representative go off to meetings where they have direct access to senior management when that manager does not have the same access.

The feeling of being excluded from the partnership processes can only damage that partnership in the longer term. If, however, the organisation and trade union adopt a strategy of making sure the line managers are made aware of the benefits of partnership and are given the chance to develop their consultative skills evidence suggests that they will take the opportunity, as illustrated by the examples from United Welsh Housing Association in the previous chapter.

Once line managers take such an opportunity, there will be a period of adjustment for them and the representatives they deal with. This includes the need to engage with their staff and representatives at an early stage in their thinking, to take on board ideas, to accept having their opinions challenged and to take the time to explain the thinking behind their decisions in order that everyone understands. How managers do this is covered in the following chapter, but it is important to acknowledge that this entails a shift in the way most line managers have been trained, selected, judged and rewarded.

For the representatives, it increases their responsibility to engage with the managers in the same way and it would be unrealistic to expect such a change to happen quickly and without problems. The partnership will be unsustainable in the long term if line managers are not engaged, trained and supported in employee relations and communication skills.

For partnership to extend to all levels of the organisation it is not only vital that all managers communicate with their employees effectively, it is equally vital that the representatives do so too. For trade unions in particular, working in partnership can often lead to accusations that they are in management’s pockets or that they have sold out. By being included in the form-



ative stage of the thought process, union representatives can be accused of being an integral part of unpopular decisions and they need to be very clear in their communications to outline exactly what their part in the process was, where they disagreed and what alternatives they put forward to mitigate disadvantages to employees.

One aim is to improve the ability of the local Partnership Forums within different areas of the Bank to participate more fully in meetings. It is hoped that this will also raise the profile of partnership structures among staff, and encourage more to play a fuller part.

A series of joint communications are also being delivered to increase awareness of partnership throughout the Bank. These include a newsletter for UNIFI members, *The Cooperative Spirit*, outlining partnership objectives and achievements. A booklet about partnership will be issued to every member of staff and used to induct new employees too.

Source: Renewing Partnership at the Co-operative Bank, Tony Britten & John Brawley, IPA Bulletin No. 13, Feb 2002

In exactly the same way as line managers have to communicate with their employees even when the latter may not like the message, the union representatives have to engage with their members and clearly explain what they have done and why they have done it. The union representatives at United Welsh Housing Association state, “the union must be equally clear in their explanations to members as managers are in their explanations to them.”

It may not always be practical for this to be done face-to-face. An accurate and detailed circular or newsletter is often the best mechanism, providing there are means for

members to ask questions either by a letters page or via email.

Representatives at Legal & General have, in the past, been very forthright about the need to do this, “partnership makes your communication fifty times more important than it ever was. You have got to keep on and on telling the membership what you’re doing, what the successes are, where you’re adding value. Because it just isn’t visible anymore.”

Source: Peter Haynes & Michael Allen “Partnership As Union Strategy – A Preliminary Evaluation (2000)

Such an extension of partnership to all levels of an organisation can result in misunderstandings over whose responsibility it is to communicate with whom. As trust develops, however, representatives feel more comfortable in letting managers get on with their jobs – of which communication with their employees is a critical part. Similarly, managers become more comfortable at the sight of a representative talking to his or her employees. As the relationship evolves, a representative might become a regular contributor to a manager’s team meeting which increases the quality of communication.

A natural extension of this relationship would be where representatives proactively help these managers develop their skills and vice versa. For a representative, it could be argued that helping the managers to manage their employees in a more consultative manner is, ultimately, the most effective means of representing their group of constituents. For the manager, it provides a critical sounding board through which they can be positively influenced to take people into account whenever they identify the need for change. Such a development can make the difficult job of managing and representing people easier.

Partnership sometimes consists of little more than warm words, but our Partnership Principles, signed in 2000, are backed up by a range of practical arrangements to enable the union to represent its members and help promote our common interest of the continued, long-term success of the business.

Having a strong network of local representatives means that the mechanisms such as the disciplinary process runs more smoothly since employees know where to go for support and to be accompanied at hearings. And as we devolve more responsibility to line management, the infrastructure of trained lay representatives lets consultation take place at the appropriate level.

Source: IRS Employment Review, 24 January 2003, Page 2 – Article by Peter Dugmore, Group Employee Relations Director, Barclays Group entitled "Partner Of The Union"


To fully extend partnership working to all levels of an organisation a great deal of commitment from the key decision makers and budget holders is required to ensure that awareness of the benefits of doing so is understood. Smaller organisations might hold an annual staff conference. The mechanism for raising awareness is already in place but this has to be followed up with regular communication to encourage participation. For larger organisations, there is less possibility of giving the message to all staff at once unless it is done by means of video or a written communication to everyone. The disadvantage of a video or memo is that it is one-way and people will not have an opportunity to ask questions or debate the arguments. It is important therefore, that information is cascaded by word of mouth by formal training sessions, focus groups, team away days and team meetings.

Legal & General have a dedicated manager in all of their four major sites who has the objective of developing partnership working and behaviours throughout every department. This is important as they are empowered to ensure partnership working and behaviours fit with the particular needs of each different location – one size does not fit all in an organisation of such diversity. Staff have been surveyed in order to assess how successful this process has been.

Source – IPA primary research, 2003

The issue of encouraging staff to engage in the process also needs to be addressed. It is not realistic to expect everyone to actively participate in these focus groups, away days and team meetings but it is important that everyone is given the opportunity to do so. Just as the trust has to develop between managers and representatives, it also has to grow between managers and their employees before the latter are willing to contribute views that they may believe are controversial. Employees are often reluctant to do this because they fear being regarded as negative or a trouble maker. This issue of not putting your head above the parapets is one of the key reasons why representatives can add such value but, in an open and honest organisation, it can help to make people feel involved and to allow them to have an influence over their own working lives.

Partnership working underpinned by a solid consultative process must extend beyond the boardroom, national joint consultative committees, and regional consultative committees to sites, offices, areas and teams. Only then will the benefits of partnership working become fully realised by extending it from simply a way of an organisation and a union working together in a more positive way to a huge cultural change throughout that



organisation and that union. However worthy the former is, the true potential of partnership working will only be unlocked if everyone gets the chance to contribute.

Summary of key points

- partnership needs to extend beyond relationships at senior levels
- partnership must be inclusive of all staff
- managers at all levels must behave in a consultative manner rather than “command and control”
- partnership must impact on the day-to-day lives of people
- line managers must be engaged in partnership practices and behaviours
- trade union representatives need to be robust in the face of criticism from their members
- representatives need to be able to trust managers sufficiently to let them get on with their jobs
- managers need to be able to trust the representatives when they are talking to their employees
- helping managers to manage in a more consultative way is, ultimately, the best way of helping the employees
- the true potential of partnership can only be unlocked if everyone gets the chance to contribute to it

Chapter 5 – Everyone needs to change how they behave and how they discuss issues

An organisation can have any number of procedures in place to sustain partnership but, unless peoples' behaviours are compatible with them, individual relationships will break down over a period of time. There are few definitions of what partnership behaviours are but there are plenty of examples of what they are not. The type of behaviours generally associated with industrial relations include, taking pre-planned positions in relation to issues, arguing one-upmanship, spin and rhetoric, hidden agendas, and trying to wear the other party down.

Partnership behaviours have been defined in United Welsh Housing Association's Code Of Conduct:

- progress legitimate interests of their constituents by open dialogue through agreed channels and procedures with the intent to settle any differences
- respect the legitimate interests of other parties and actively listen to their interests
- look for, explore and try to establish common ground with other parties
- look for and secure genuine and sustainable agreement
- follow the principles of partnership
- encourage all employees to follow the principles of partnership, this code of conduct and appropriate partnership behaviour

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

Whereas this is not an entirely accurate picture, it is clear that these types of behaviours can have no place in a relationship based on trust,


mutual understanding, honesty and transparency. It is equally clear that tip-toeing around issues because one party does not want to upset the other is also unsustainable. Partnership behaviours, therefore, are about respect and dignity, and a desire to try to solve problems however difficult they may seem.

The management team would table an idea as a paper at the quarterly Joint Staff Consultative Committee (the JSCC) for formal consultation. The staff side (as union representatives are known in the NHS) would argue that they needed plenty of time to consult their members. But, as managers were usually reluctant to dither with such time-consuming processes, any fundamental objections were frequently bulldozed over, with only modest window-dressing efforts to acknowledge the staff side's concerns.

The trade unions were perennially on the defensive, seeking loopholes in proposals to stall them, recognising that they were unlikely to change the substance of any policy, but could "take a red pen" to the wording, for any future tribunals. On occasion the trade unions threatened but never carried out local industrial action; "the workforce is not especially militant", lamented one shop steward. There was little sharing of the agenda, and few efforts at joint problem-solving, let alone strategic planning.

In short, the depth of trust was poor. When asked why this state of affairs persisted, the general consensus was that, put simply, "this (confrontation) was the way things had always been done here."

Source: Wigan & Leigh Health Services NHS Trust, IPA Case Study No.2, Series 3, July 2001



A manager has to feel that they can approach a representative about any issue and know that their reaction will be calm and measured. It is less likely to be if the discussion starts as a fait accompli because there are only two reactions to that: agreement or (more likely) disagreement. Similarly, at joint consultation meetings, the old language of industrial relations driven by the perception of us and them has to be left with, as already quoted, the “egos and mobiles at the door”. Union representatives believe that managers should treat their employees with respect and dignity. There is no reason why they should not treat managers in the same way, and managers should treat the representatives no differently. Individual relationships are one of the keys to sustaining partnership. Despite this, organisations and trade unions often continue in the old style, relying on pieces of paper to validate their partnership agreements.

Partnership working has to spell the end of “command and control” attitudes on both sides. For managers, we have explored already that there is a need to engage in consultation early and accept that there will be challenges to his or her way of thinking. However, there is more to it than that. They also have to have the courage to change their minds if they hear a better way of achieving a business objective and not see it as a sign of weakness. Similarly, the representative must not be afraid to change track during the course of a meeting and must remember that partnership is not about power and weakness – it is about reaching the best solution to a problem.

This is a massive change from the attitudes which many managers and representatives have been trained in pursuing. These attitudes still exist in some organisations that claim to work in partnership. Many representatives are overly

conscious of not rolling over and having their tummy tickled during conversations with managers at all levels, just as many managers might think that not changing their mind and forcing an issue through is a sign of good leadership.

One manager at the Inland Revenue was particularly honest about this issue, “I have some difficulty with members of the trade union. When they approach me, I immediately want to say no. They are like a dog with a bone and won’t let go.”

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

Those representatives who display “command and control” type behaviours usually rely on rules and procedures and, therefore, find it difficult to exist in a partnership where the nature of discussions is more informal. It is usually a sign that they lack confidence and knowledge which then makes it difficult for them to discuss issues on an equal footing with managers. The managers, who might be expecting a more open discussion, find this frustrating and will not look forward to further engagement with that representative. This is especially so if the representative becomes like a dog with a bone over certain issues. Consultation, the foundation of the partnership, is far less likely to be effective in such circumstances.

As far as employees are concerned, it is essential that they are empowered by their managers. It is difficult to see how partnership can work in the longer term unless the organisation creates a culture of empowerment where people are given the opportunity to express their views directly to managers and to their representatives. In some ways it is easier for the organisation to create this type of culture than it is for the trade unions and there is evidence that a number of

organisations with partnership agreements have started to achieve this. They have identified that “command and control” managers might get results but at a price, which may include higher levels of sickness, absenteeism, disengagement and resignations.

United Welsh Housing Association believe that, “partnership cannot exist without empowerment. The senior managers believe that the union empowers the managers to manage.”

For trade unions, there is a similar need to empower the representatives and members. This is not as simple as it may appear if the union is bound by rules and regulations, decisions from annual conferences and other concerns that are not workplace-focused. Representatives working in partnership need flexibility, to look at every issue on its own merit and not seek to hinder the change process by constant referral to committees or members. There will be times when they will have to do this but, wherever possible, a representative should be empowered and trusted by the members to represent them.

At United Welsh Housing Association, the Unison representatives have had to take a bold step, “the union have sacrificed the automatic trust of the members and have had to be more open and honest about the things a representative cannot say.”

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

Speed of change can be very quick and union representatives need to be adaptable to keep up with the pace and make sure they are influencing the decisions. Their own empowerment is critical to ensure they are able to do this for there is evidence that, if they do not keep up, the change will happen but without their vital input.

To enable the representative to do this effectively, they need to know what their members think. Modern technology means they do not have to rely on conferences and meetings to do so. The internet and email provide a means for individual members to communicate directly with their representatives – there is no need for carefully worded motions to conference which are usually put forward by activists who may not always have the same views as the ordinary member.


For those who do not like to put their hands up and ask questions at a mass meeting of members, email provides a way for their views to be expressed. The representative gets an accurate and balanced view of what members are thinking and is, therefore, equipped with sufficient knowledge about the key issues facing the members at any given time. Not only does this extend empowerment to every union member, it extends democracy from the top to the bottom of the union’s structure.

At Legal & General, the AMICUS representatives “are expecting more of the membership. We are expecting them to tell us what they want the union to do for them – not whisper things in corridors, but actually communicate.”

Source: Peter Haynes & Michael Allen “Partnership As Union Strategy – A Preliminary Evaluation (2000)

Younger staff who come into a dynamic, flexible and fast-paced workplace may find the current union structures and processes cumbersome in comparison. That is assuming they are interested enough to find out but, nevertheless, it is unlikely that they will join the union in such circumstances.

It is important that the structures of the union are examined closely to see whether they allow sufficient flexibility and empowerment. A critical



appraisal of the value of motion-based conferences in the light of new technology seems appropriate. The Legal & General AMICUS Section, for example collate the views of their members all year round either by emails, the letters page of their monthly magazine or by direct contact. These views are then adapted for their workshop-based annual conference where the delegates come up with an action plan to report back to the membership. Not only is this more democratic than having the same motions brought forward by the same small group of people every year, it makes sure that the representatives have flexibility in their consultations with management rather than having their hands tied by a specifically worded motion that has been passed at a conference. If anything, the accountability to their members is greater in these circumstances as they have to keep them informed about progress on the action plan rather than simply stating whether a motion had passed, failed or been remitted to their executive.

difficult but this implies that “command and control” behaviours are instinctive. It is also important to examine what lies behind these behaviours: power. The acquisition of power fuels ambition and power has traditionally been earned by promotion to a more senior position. However, partnership working is not based on power and if people continually revert to type the ability to sustain it will be greatly diminished.

Accepting the negligence in the past toward training and organisational support for the new behaviours and attitudes, the Trust is at present discussing together with the unions what might feature in a competency framework to support partnership in Wigan & Leigh.

The competency framework may eventually form part of the personal development process and appraisal of the managers, as well as guiding the Trust's future recruitment into those positions.

Source: Wigan & Leigh Health Services NHS Trust, IPA Case Study No. 2, Series 3, July, 2001

It is not easy to change behaviours or long-held procedures. There is a tendency for people to revert to type when the discussions become

Summary of key points

- written agreements and procedures become irrelevant if peoples' behaviours are not compatible with them
- partnership has to be based on trust, mutual understanding, honesty and transparency – the antithesis of the general perception of how industrial relations are conducted
- managers have to feel that they can approach representatives about any issue
- managers, representatives and staff must be treated with dignity and respect
- managers must have the courage to change their minds if they are presented with a better option
- representatives have to be flexible enough to discuss issues informally and to let go when an issue has been resolved as far as it can be
- partnership cannot exist without the empowerment of managers, representatives and staff
- trade union representatives must be aware of what their members think and be able to communicate those views back to managers quickly
- trade union structures need to be adapted to ensure that representatives can keep pace with the speed of change whilst remaining accountable to members
- motion-based annual trade union conferences are not compatible with the requirement for representatives to be adaptable enough to contribute to fast-paced change



Chapter 6 – Training is important but it is not a panacea

Partnership working requires mature, adult and informed discussion between managers, representatives and employees rather than engagement on the basis of one party holding more information than the other. Training is the key to making this happen but it is the type of training and the frequency of it that will determine how sustainable any partnership is. It is not enough to concentrate solely on senior managers and representatives although they have to be the starting point.

Some partnerships have developed without any formal training. This does not invalidate any achievements that may have been experienced. It can mean, however, that managers and representatives do not have a shared understanding of what partnership is and what it is not. In the longer term this will create tensions that could affect sustainability.

At Boots, the partnership manager described how their partnership was initiated:

“After meeting all of the representatives and managers, I detected a strong anti-partnership attitude but the reason they were afraid of partnership was that they did not know what it was. I organised training for the stewards on the principles and aspects of partnership. We got all the stewards from the distribution centres up to Blackpool for the weekend. They went away and they sold it to the members.”

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

It can also mean that the real potential of any partnership is not explored. If partnerships are borne out of the desire to improve foundering

relationships, that partnership will be limited to what each side feels comfortable discussing in a formal setting. A training course creates an environment where any possibility can be discussed openly particularly when exploring best practice in other organisations. Without training, the possibilities are limited to the knowledge and experience of those instigators in any one organisation and union.

The Abbey National partnership manager said:

“It is important to get the reps and managers in the same room to make them realise that they are all part of the same process – there is not a separate union process and a separate management process.”

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

Once a shared understanding is established, this needs to be cascaded to all levels of the organisation. Managers, in particular, will have a number of concerns which need to be explored in an informal setting because they will often feel threatened by such a change in the way they have been trained to do things.

Employees, even if they do not receive formal training, will need to be informed about what this means to them. In short, partnership training can be a large undertaking for an organisation which requires investment and time commitment. Trade unions may provide partnership training but it can never be focused on how a single organisation might have developed their partnership. Although there is merit in trade unions providing a general guide to partnership, they cannot establish a shared understanding if only one of the partners are present.

At Severn Trent Water, the overhaul of the partnership in 2002 identified “the crucial role of joint-training” for middle-managers and employee representatives who were getting involved in the consultation process, often for the first time.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

The training provided by trade unions tends to centre on three core issues; organisation, negotiating skills and legislation, for example Health and Safety. These are critical for trade unions who do not enjoy the benefits of working in a partnership environment, but for those that do other skills are equally important. The example below illustrates that a representative working in partnership requires different skills to those they would need in a hostile or neutral environment: such as business acumen, behaviours, the ability to come up with alternative ways of achieving business objectives, communication and how to recruit new members on a partnership platform.

Evaluation has identified weaknesses in the performance of the consultative role by representatives who are more accustomed to a bargaining role. The average representative is in his mid-thirties, 20 years out of school and with low educational qualifications. Consultation demands an ability to sit through the presentation of plans, figures and detail to which they are not attuned. The result is that it is difficult to get engagement and rational debate on the issues, and there is concern about their ability to feed back outcomes to other members. Management and unions agree that there is a need for training to improve skills in presenting information and making information understandable.


Source: CIPD article – Royal Mail

There is little evidence that this type of training is readily available from trade union educational establishments. Legal & General supplement the training available to their Amicus lay-representatives by allowing them to participate in all management training courses run internally. They are also trained alongside employees in the human resources department on new and existing policies such as managing sickness and absence.

Managers, as already recognised in previous chapters, are often left out of the partnership process and training them is the easiest way to make them feel involved, letting them know what partnership means, and to give them a safe environment to express their views. Instead of partnership being something that only relates to how the senior management and the union interact, it becomes a useful management strategy which achieves better decision-making, acceptance of change, the inclusion of employees and representatives and a knowledge of what reaction their decisions will provoke. Evidence strongly suggests that the more managers know about partnership, the more willing they are to support it which, in turn, has a positive effect on sustainability.

At Birds Eye Walls, partners have recognised that for partnership to work and for widespread participation to succeed, people need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge required to work in partnership. This includes helping people who have not traditionally been involved in business management and economics to become familiar with those topics, providing them with the skills and confidence necessary to perform in meetings.

Source: “Entering The Maze”.



Joint training is, therefore, vitally important. Not only does it set the foundations of the partnership in place, it makes sure those foundations are solid enough to keep it going even when key instigators move on to other roles. Exposure to good practice in other organisations gets people to think about what could work in their organisation and open them up to possibilities that they had not previously considered. Companies who have not taken this step initially have done so once a form of agreement has been established. This is certainly better than not doing any joint-training at all. For those who do nothing, there is little evidence to suggest that they have achieved all of the benefits that partnership can bring. This can mean that fewer people buy-in to the principles and practices which, inevitably, means there is less chance of it lasting.

At AWE, the approach of “growing partnership from within” necessitated a significant investment in the training of all staff. A programme of three day workshops was arranged for employees to learn, among other things, how to identify the difference between one’s own interests and those of others and how to approach problem-solving as a team of individuals with different interests.

Informing & Consulting your Workforce: AWE plc, IPA Case Study, No 2, Series 4, Dec 2002

Training cannot, however, be a one-off activity if partnership is to be sustained. There will always be new people coming into the organisation and new people being elected as representatives. For those organisations who believe that driving partnership practices and behaviours throughout their structures will sustain their way of working, on-going training is a necessity.

Partnership needs to become a core element of management and representative training to ensure that there is a seamless transition when people move on. Partnership awareness should be tackled during induction training for new employees in partnership organisations. In these organisations, it is also reasonable for representatives to have access to new employees at this time.


United Welsh Housing Association, for example, have held two facilitated training sessions with their line managers to explore how to use option-based consultation with their teams. By having a second session, it re-enforced how seriously the organisation were taking partnership and it helped to uncover some of the barriers the managers faced in their attempts to engage employees. The training did not stop there, however, as training and awareness sessions on option-based consultation were subsequently held for all employees.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

A programme of on-going training will facilitate the process of getting everybody involved in partnership and remove the gaps between the senior managers and the line managers both in terms of knowledge and engagement.

Summary of key points

- Senior managers and representatives must be the starting point for any partnership training programme
- a shared understanding of partnership is critical to its sustainability
- training courses must create an environment where all issues can be discussed openly
- line managers must receive training if partnership is to be cascaded throughout an organisation
- all employees need to be aware of partnership and what it means to them
- partnership working and behaviours needs to become a core subject in trade union training programmes
- on-going joint training is vital to sustainability
- new employees in partnership organisations should receive information about it during induction training
- managers and representatives should feel free to express doubts and concerns during partnership training
- organisations and trade unions must commit resources to partnership training and ensure that people attend the courses



Chapter 7 – Partnership has to deliver effective change and be seen to do so

Change is inevitable. Over the last twenty years, the pace and breadth of change in the workplace has been monumental. For example, if you walked into a typical office in the early 1980's, you would see one or two computers which would be used by as many as forty staff, so irregular was the need to do so. This situation evolved into people having computers on their own desks as more of the work became dependent on database access to information. As organisations developed their own internal electronic mail systems in the early 1990's, the use of those desktop computers increased – not all of it for strictly business purposes. With the internet explosion, email became the prime communication tool across businesses in the UK, Europe and beyond.

The West Bromwich Building Society said that, "change is now constant and a partnership approach offers greater opportunity or potential to gain benefits quickly."

Source: IRS Employment Review, 779, July 2003 page 11 - "An Open Relationship"

This change was not met with universal approval and the trade unions, in particular, identified new technology as a threat. Industrial relations at that time were publicly perceived as poor and, to some extent, the unions' ability to influence the change process was limited to certain managers in certain organisations who were willing to speak to their representatives. Even then, it would be on a "this is what is going to happen" basis rather than in a "these

are the options" manner. The genuine fears employees had about what change meant to them were generally addressed by the unions trying to enter into a stalling debate with management who simply would not talk and who told employees to get on with it or find another job. This may be a slightly simplistic way of illustrating the state of industrial relations at that time, but anecdotal evidence from people involved suggests that few would disagree that it paints an accurate picture.

Change with resistance still results in change happening but it means that the process can be slower and organisations can lose a competitive advantage if a rival achieves buy-in when they do not.

"The redundancy programme was handled poorly – it was not consistent because of the involvement (interference) of people such as trustees, a lack of leadership at the top and the employment of a hatchet man. The staff who got it in the neck were the support and admin grades. Formal consultation over the programme did not really take place and the feeling was that minds had already been made up and consultation would have been pointless in any case – it was a cost cutting agenda. The project itself was called Opportunity 2000, which itself caused a lot of cynicism and disillusionment. People started leaving of their own accord because of the poor management and morale at this time."

Source: IPA Research, Full Time Officer, PCS, 2003

There is no doubt that achieving "change with assistance rather than resistance" is the key driver for organisations who have chosen to work in partnership with a trade union or, an

employee forum. It is quite clear, therefore, that a partnership that fails to deliver this objective will run the high risk of disintegrating and that would be a serious issue for trade unions that have a relatively low membership.

Jointly constituted problem-solving groups are often set up to deal with specific projects as and when required:

- Twyford Bathrooms have an improvement team
- at Huhtamaki (UK), joint working parties have devised new company sickness and "dignity at work" policies
- West Bromwich Building Society's joint problem-solving group produced an equal opportunities policy
- Wales & West Housing Association set up a joint steering group on pay and benefits
- West Lothian Council has a joint team working on the highly problematic implementation of the new single-status agreement

Source: IRS Employment Review, July 2003, page 8-21 – "An Open Relationship"


The trade unions who work effectively in partnership will understand the organisation's key driver but will expect to receive detailed information about any need for change, particularly the business case and the implications of doing nothing. As explored in Chapter 5, management's thinking can be influenced over a period of time to take implications for staff into account when they are formulating ideas but the trade union representative will still have an important role in the process on behalf of their members in ensuring this happens. The task of coming up with alternatives if the current ones are not palatable to the union members is a

tough challenge for a representative but, given the inevitability of change, it is an essential part of their input. Training, as already shown, can help to achieve this but it is joint problem-solving that will ultimately provide the basis for maximum input from all parties and ensure the change process does not get delayed.

At DARA, their change programme included: a full pay and grading review, creation of self-directed teams, a change in working practices and demarcations, training in problem-solving plus the introduction of an organisation-specific computer system across all four sites. The Chief Executive gave a strong and clear message that all of the changes would be discussed with the unions from the outset and that there would be no compulsory redundancies – despite that fact that a drop of 35% of the workforce was identified as an option.

Source: AnUMan Presentation Jan 2003

It is important to stress that joint problem-solving is not joint decision-making. The latter is not sustainable in partnership whether anyone likes to admit it or not because management will always make the final decision. But joint problem-solving is important in partnership because it establishes joint ownership of issues. It is difficult to understand how unions can describe issues as management's problem because of the inevitable knock-on effect management's problems will have on the employees they represent. What is equally difficult to understand is why a union would withdraw from any discussions relating to change because it removes their ability to influence proceedings. However, these things do occur in partnership environments sometimes due to the representatives being bound by union



policy formed at conference (see Chapter 5) or because a group of representatives do not want to be implicated in something that will be unpopular. Both result in the employees being unrepresented and a strain on the partnership.

During any change process, both management and representatives have to accept responsibility for communicating difficult messages to the employees and the members. In other words, they have to stand up and be counted. This, of course, takes courage but change with assistance is dependant upon accurate communication of why something is happening. If the trade

union representatives have closely examined the business case and believe the change is simply for the sake of it, they have to say so while still representing their members if that change remains inevitable. If managers constantly present feeble business cases to representatives but push through the change regardless, the partnership will not last for long. But there will be occasions when genuine disagreements occur. In the main, however, the business case will be understood, the need for change accepted and both parties will embark on a process to make the change less painful.

When the Legal & General closed its office in Dudley and relocated to a site in central Birmingham, every aspect of the process was dealt with in partnership. The senior union representatives were brought into the discussions at an early stage, options were debated and a communication strategy was established. Confidentiality was maintained throughout but the union representatives were still able to speak with authority about the issues their members and staff would, naturally, be concerned about. As part of the communication strategy, the senior representatives were able to talk the local representatives through the process before the major briefing of all staff took place. This meant they were fully prepared for any questions the members would ask. Importantly, there were answers to these questions because practically every detail was discussed as part of the consultation process. The briefings were held and the senior union representatives were present. The members were encouraged to speak to those representatives after the briefing sessions.

Although the move was unpopular with some of the staff, the fact that they were given detailed information about why it was happening and exactly how it was going to happen meant that the shock factor was considerably reduced. This was vital in ensuring that people could focus their attention on the issues that really mattered to them. The union played a vital role in ensuring that these individual issues were brought to the managements' attention and many were dealt with quickly and effectively.

The distance between the two offices was just over seven miles. It would have been difficult for the representatives to argue that this was not a reasonable distance to travel to work and the organisation had made it clear that nobody would be made redundant. However, consultation meetings took place to discuss those individuals who would have genuine difficulties in travelling to work and the union representatives only brought such cases forward. A generous severance package was discussed and offered to those with such genuine difficulties, even though the organisation would not have been legally obliged to pay anything. This created goodwill, particularly amongst those staff who would remain and who were pleased that their colleagues had been treated well. Unusually, it created a positive grapevine and disruption to the day-to-day work was minimal.

The union representatives did have to give hard messages to some members who saw an opportunity to gain some money out of the organisation but that would have had a detrimental effect on the genuine cases if the union had supported all of the members blindly. This was a very clear case of partnership requiring both parties to give and take.

The entire change process was dealt with in good time and there were certainly no delays to the target date because consultation took place. In 2000, by using exactly the same consultative process, the same organisation was able to set up a new department of approximately 100 people within 48 hours to cope with the adverse publicity surrounding endowment insurance policies.

Source: IPA primary research

Change does not get delayed if issues are consulted on a partnership basis. As these examples show, it can actually speed up the process as it cuts out talking behind managers' backs, the negative grapevine and meetings at the drinks machines. It helps to ensure that organisations do not lose staff they would have liked to have kept, and creates a deeper understanding of why things happen and a sense that managers are interested in what individuals think and feel.

A senior manager in British Telecom was clear in his mind about the role trade unions can play in any change process, "British Telecom has managed to make some of the most fundamental changes that any company has had to face in the United Kingdom in terms of its markets, its organisation and its people. We have done this in partnership with the trade unions. I do not think we would have achieved these changes without the support of the trade unions."


Source: Peter Cressey, 'Implementing Organisational Change in British Telecom' in 'Facing Up to the Learning Organisation Challenge,' Nyman, Kelleher, Cressey and Poell. Cedefop Reference Series 41-11, 2003

It is important that the union representatives ensure that their members know precisely what part they have played in the change process and

to outline what issues and concerns they brought to the consultation table. If they do not, their contribution on their members' behalf will be invisible. It is equally important that the organisation recognises and reveals the union's contribution. This is just as necessary if the partnership is with an employee forum, perhaps even more so.

The starting point was the movement of the bandwidth from 7.30am to 7am, to "capture" staff that were coming in early and not getting credit. This was originally resisted by the senior manager but was supported by managers generally and, with pressure from the trade union, a change was made. The 2003 pay deal included a commitment to no core-time flexi but implementation was up to individual offices. In November 2002, PCS called a member's meeting and the subject was discussed. After this, the senior manager was approached informally and made aware of the strong membership support for pursuing the national core-timer arrangement. He said he would support it and it was agreed that a working group would be established to discuss the details of the arrangement.

Source: IPA primary research 2003 – Inland Revenue, Worthing



This communication is not about spin and rhetoric. It is about proving that a contribution has been made by the representatives. The more this is done face-to-face with employees so much the better, but that is not always possible. Whatever way it is done, the members and employees must be told that their interests, concerns and issues have all been discussed and what the outcome of those discussions was.

Failure to engage with employees in this way could have a detrimental effect on the union or staff council. People leave the union if they do not believe they make a difference. This will, naturally, affect the credibility and sustainability of the partnership. Representatives, therefore, have to be brave enough to engage with their members or the employees. It may not always be a comfortable experience but it is an essential element of their role and responsibilities within a partnership organisation. While doing so, there is little point in reverting back to old-style language which tries to deflect criticism away from the union directly and solely on to management. Disagreement is fine if it is backed up by a clear explanation of why disagreement has occurred.

To reiterate an essential point, union representatives need to be prepared to stand up and be counted in front of their members. There will be people who claim that a union should be in there fighting for our rights, but that is an outdated notion. Unions do not represent the volume of people they once did – it is currently around 20% of workers in the public sector – and it is difficult to see how union representative can be in there fighting for rights if they only represent a small percentage of the workforce. In partnership organisations it is not unusual for that figure to be between 25% and 35% of employees. The membership, therefore, have to

understand that this is a much more honest and effective way of dealing with change in a partnership environment. There are, of course, a large number of organisations where the attitude amongst union representatives is about being in there fighting for our rights and that is perfectly understandable, particularly where minimum legislative requirements are not being met or where employees are treated unfairly.

Managers have to be equally brave in engaging with their employees. Just like representatives, they are laying themselves open to direct criticism resulting from unpopular decisions but it is important that the representatives are not the only source of unwelcome information.

Unison officials identified, over a period of time, that there had been an increase in claims of compensation as a result of work related stress amongst its members. They believe that a number of factors led to that increase – the re-structure was under-resourced and marginalised health and safety issues; budgets were under significant pressure; the climate was one of more or less; there had been a freeze on recruitment and managers had been put under pressure to meet a range of performance measures. Proper dialogue through early consultation would have addressed issues like these before they happened but the changes were made at a considerable cost. As proven by many organisations, change does not have to result in this if it is embarked upon in partnership.

Source: Debora Sanders "Brighton & Hove Commits To A New Occupational Health Strategy", IRS Employment Review 750, pages 42-44, 29 April 2002.

Partnership clearly does deliver change effectively. There are still serious problems within UK industrial relations that centre on the question of change and whether it can be stopped. The Fire Brigade's Union conducted large scale industrial action partly on the issue of pay but also partly to do with the changes to their watch system and the suggested use of paramedical equipment. Despite their industrial action, those changes will be implemented.

Summary of key points

- Acceptance of change is a key element of partnership sustainability
- partnership has to deliver change with assistance rather than resistance
- joint problem-solving groups are an important means of delivering change and gaining maximum input from all parties
- joint problem-solving is not joint decision-making
- there are no issues in partnership that are simply "management's problem"
- accurate communication is the key driver in delivering change, particularly the dissemination of a robust business case
- consultation does not delay change if it begins early enough and if the business case is thought through and presented well
- partnership can remove the grapevine as a major source of communication
- trade union representatives need to outline what contribution they have made in the process
- disagreements are part of partnership working but disagreement over one issue should not cloud discussions over another



Chapter 8 – Expectations need to be managed but partnership has to provide benefits

Partnership is not a panacea to all industrial relations problems an organisation might face, but it will provide solutions to the vast majority. To have any chance of doing so, however, the expectations of all partners need to be established and understood. By drawing information from a number of IPA facilitated workshops, it is apparent that some managers believe partnership means that, whatever they do, the union will agree to it. They believe disagreement has no place in a partnership organisation. It is equally apparent that some union representatives believe they will hold a power of veto over the final decision and can threaten their withdrawal from the partnership if they do not get their own way. Both of these views are equally incorrect.

In a survey undertaken by the IPA in May 2002, union representatives in a major UK retail company appeared to consider that partnership had not lived up to their expectations. Their involvement in the business had not materialised. Rather, partnership mean centralised decision-making and they were merely part of the implementation process, without either a problem-solving, decision-making or employee voice role locally (of the kind found in many strong partnership cultures). As a result, many were disenchanted and felt disenfranchised by partnership with a much reduced role.”

Source: IPA survey 2002

To sustain partnership it is vital that a shared understanding of what each partner expects from the other is established, preferably from the outset. As explored in Chapter 6, training is essential in achieving this. A safe training environment is the most productive setting for all concerns, or even fears, to be aired and discussed. From these discussions, mutual and separate expectations can be understood and assessed as to whether they can be met. All long-lasting relationships are based on expectations that are, not only understood, but met. Failure to do so will lead to cumulative disappointment and a breakdown in that relationship.

If an environment is created where managers can share sensitive information with representatives without the fear of confidentiality being broken or knee-jerk reactions occurring, the first expectation has been met. Similarly, if the representatives are given a clear and honest explanation of the business case in good time and before the decision on the solution has been made, another expectation has been satisfied.

In a sense, that is the easy part. The representative will expect to be genuinely listened to if they present their case equally clearly and honestly. The managers will accept such a challenge and modify their decisions if that is an appropriate course of action. This may not be possible in all situations but, when it is, they must do so. Nothing will damage partnership more than obstinacy on either side as nobody should want to keep going back to revisit the same issues time and time again.

The issues surrounding expectations are, possibly, the most important in terms of sustaining a partnership. Differing expectations will strike at the core of partnership principles eventually because they will breakdown any trust that has

been built up. In simple terms, it will put up a brick wall between the partners. It will create an environment where it is all too easy to cite the union or managers for acting in a non-partnership way when, in reality, neither party might actually know they are doing so. So, the managers get frustrated when their view is challenged and the representatives get frustrated when they do not believe they are being listened to – particularly when a modification of the original manager's view is apparently an obvious solution to their disagreement. If a written partnership agreement has been signed, there might be a good reference point to remind people of what they can expect from each other. On the other hand, it is more likely that there will be no such reference point or one that has little substance beyond nice words.

Peter Haynes noted that, “USDAW was similarly dissatisfied with the representation process in Tesco, particularly with the narrow scope of union influence and the after-the-event nature of consultation which the union representatives felt frequently presented them with a *fait accompli* rather than genuine consultation.”


Source: Peter Haynes & Michael Allen 'Partnership As A Union Strategy - A Preliminary Evaluation', (2000)

A good place to start establishing these expectations is the TUC's six underlying principles of partnership, as outlined in Chapter 1. It is not, however, sufficient to simply write them down on a piece of paper, sign it and then congratulate each other for doing so. A discussion about what they will actually mean in practice is as important as understanding that these expectations will not be met overnight and may not always be measured in pure financial terms. These two themes will be returned to later in

this chapter but, for now, it is important to explore what partnership practitioners can expect if they adhere to the six principles.

It is a big step for trade unions to undertake a commitment to the success of any organisation. Some representatives see such an undertaking as diametrically opposed to their principle of achieving benefits for their members. This is, however, a one-dimensional view. Is it the job of a union representative to get the best possible pay deal for his members? Certainly pay is less important to union members than job security and flexibility in their jobs according to surveys undertaken by trade unions like the GMB. That is not to say it does not have any importance but it means that pay negotiations are not the beginning and end to the union representatives' job.

As Nick Pandya reported in The Guardian in May 2003, Legal & General and Amicus have moved away from “the annual ritual of simulated conflict over pay negotiations. This has been replaced by a new joint employer-employee forum, at which the company's books are opened up for scrutiny by the union and the implications for staff are discussed. This full disclosure has increased trust and collaboration on both sides. Under the mutually agreed system, pay data obtained from two independent bodies align jobs in common groups across the financial services sector and then monetary values are applied to those jobs.” To understand why the union were keen to do this, it is necessary to examine Peter Haynes' 2000 study of the same partnership where he noted that “key seconded and full-time union officials were concerned that the union had positioned itself as a ‘once a year concern’ perceived by many members to be unable to influence changes in staffing levels and work organisation



implemented by management, and that membership was beginning to decline as a result.”

A senior union representative at Legal & General summed up the situation:

“If we look at it now it was fairly horrific really, because you would have ballots for industrial action which would greatly weaken the union the cycle of pay bargaining would be a yearly thing, free collective bargaining with the union going in for something unrealistic. But, to be fair to the union, we didn’t know what the company could afford because they didn’t open the books to us like they do now, so you could only measure it in terms of inflation, outside factors rather than internal factors. The management would come back with something fairly derisory, they wouldn’t meet in the middle, they’d meet further towards their original derisory offer. We would ballot . . . and the membership would reject management’s offer and we would then ballot for industrial action and the membership would reject industrial action. I could see all this and I knew it was stupid. I knew it was a matter of posturing on both sides and that . . . it was just pointless, a waste of money, a waste of time.”

Source: Haynes and Allen 2001

It is possible that old-style pay negotiations can work in partnership but it requires a commitment which means that, in practice, a union will take into account the potential effect on the organisation when it makes a case for a pay increase, an improvement in benefits or anything else that will cost money. As one union official has stated, there is little point in the

mutually antagonistic posturing that still happens in organisations that do not enjoy the benefits of partnership working. In a partnership environment, however, representatives will expect managers to modify their positions over issues if the business case can still be achieved – by the same token, managers will expect representatives to modify their wish lists if the contents might have a detrimental effect on the organisation. In turn, such an effect will have a detrimental impact on the staff and members eventually.

Officials of the USDAW trade union are obliged to perform a cost-impact analysis of any pay claim on the assumption that it is met in full. This creates a far more realistic basis on which to start negotiations.

*Source: IPA primary research
(Interview Sir Bill Connor, USDAW
General Secretary 2003)*

It is sometimes forgotten, however, that trade unions are independent, self-financed organisations. It is, therefore, logical that organisations take into account any impact that their decisions might have on them. Essentially, this means the union’s ability to gain revenue by recruitment of members. This is usually a difficult issue for organisations to address but, failure to do so, could see the union’s effectiveness diminish over a period of time. The joint commitment to job security becomes, therefore, of paramount importance. Unions need to ensure their claims are reasonable in order to prevent job security becoming less stable and organisations need to ensure that any job losses that result from change must be a last resort and kept to an absolute minimum. It is not a partnership behaviour to go through a redundancy programme simply to increase the share price.

At Legal & General, union membership levels and activist numbers have increased since the advent of partnership. With the full support of the organisation, Amicus membership has risen from 28% to 41% over the last 18 months. Over 100 new members were recruited on the first Partnership Day where a joint initiative raised awareness amongst staff about how partnership works in practice. A new joint logo was launched on the same day.

Source – IPA primary research, 2003

The commitment to focus on the quality of working life also has a vital role to play in any partnership. This means, however, that partnership cannot simply be a way of forging good industrial relations, important as that is. It has to mean that partnership extends to all levels of the organisation and to all staff. The Inland Revenue and PCS *Our Time* project, for example, has successfully dealt with work-life balance and workplace learning issues. In essence, it requires the commitment of all partners to ensure that all staff are treated with dignity, that all staff are consulted about matters that affect them, and all staff have an opportunity to influence their working lives. It means an end to “command and control” management and an end to trade unions focusing their time and attention away from the workplace. Hopefully, no one enters partnership with the expectation that it will be easy.

Each partner’s legitimate interests are more simply demonstrated. Management have an acknowledged role to manage the business in a partnership and unions have an acknowledged role to represent their members. This is a rather broad commitment on both sides and, as a result, is the principle which lends itself to


most excuses for reverting to the old ways of “command and control”. Management make the ultimate decision and the representatives influence that decision based on the legitimate interests of the members and employees. Unless everyone understands that, there is little chance of the partnership being successful in delivering the anticipated benefits.

The next underlying principle is the key to allowing these legitimate interests to be protected. By acting in a transparent manner, many of the fundamental problems surrounding old-style industrial relations are solved. This means neither partner will “pull rabbits out of the hat” or “pull cards from the sleeve” with the simple and yet dramatic effect of removing distrust and replacing it with mutual respect and an acknowledgement of the other partner’s integrity. It could be argued that, in such circumstances, rights become far less of an issue. The union representatives know that the best possible decisions are made and the managers know that the union will contribute positively to any change process whilst also ensuring that the best interests of the staff are taken into account.

When the NatWest bank launched a takeover bid for Legal & General in 1999, the senior Amicus representatives were made aware of these overtures days before the news hit the media. Throughout the talks the union was kept abreast of developments. In the end, the bid was scuppered by the Bank Of Scotland’s counter-bid for NatWest, but the unions showed they could act responsibly when they are kept informed.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

At a first glance, the final underlying principle seems straight forward in that all partners will



add value to the arrangement by treating each other with respect while discussing the important issues that relate to the organisation. Nobody will waste time, trivialise, put up barriers, posture or wilfully stall for time. Everybody will be open, honest, adult and respectful while the union think about the business and the management think about the employees. In current times this is, arguably, the most important issue surrounding the future of partnership. However, to achieve this culture, everyone has to throw away many of the behaviours and tricks they have learned through training and experience.

Even if this culture is achieved it will not, in itself, keep the partnership alive. That will only happen if value is also linked to what every partner can gain from the arrangement. The benefits of partnership, as outlined in Chapter 1, have to be realised and that can only be done if the organisation contributes to the union and staff being able to reap these expected benefits and, of course, vice versa. One of the benefits of

partnership is the achievement of lower levels of absenteeism. The representatives have to play a significant role in ensuring this happens by supporting fair attempts by the organisation to manage sickness, by supporting those whose absence is genuine and by not supporting those who are considered to be malingering.

Similarly, a union or employee forum cannot maintain or increase its influence if the management do not consult with them and constantly present them with a *fait accompli*. However, a number of IPA facilitated workshops have strongly indicated that management will bypass the representatives and not consult if they constantly try to stop change from happening. Such a strategy from the representatives would reduce the organisation's competitive edge by increasing conflict and potentially failing to bring the staff with them leading to lower morale and higher turnover. This illustrates how easy it could be to fall into the trap of assuming partnership is so well established that it will not matter if a few short

Throughout Boots there was a major drive to reduce costs and the partnership group developed a scheme to challenge all employees to come up with three money saving ideas – this involved stewards and members. The local partnership groups had received a number of complaints from employees about the quality and fit of the Boots 'work wear' (overalls etc). The groups put out a request to all 3000 employees asking what was wrong with the existing clothing and asking what would be preferred. The replies were fascinating – and drew attention to the point that the clothing had been designed for men although it was also issued to women. A working group was set up to look at the whole issue and it was chaired by an USDAW official. The only rule was whatever they decided, it should not cost more than the existing kit. It was first agreed that the new kit would be provided to new employees and later to existing employees as old kit had to be replaced – it would not be issued wholesale to all employees. By replacing a big Boots logo with a 'designer' tab, the necessary tax implications were met and the staff were a lot happier with the design. By using a proprietary dark blue dye, rather than the official 'Boots Blue' colour, savings were made. Each set could be produced for £6 less than previously, and it included fleeces and shorts that were a lot more popular. The process did take a long time but by involving the entire workforce, the result was a win-win – a huge saving for the company and better equipment for the employees.

Source: IPA research 2003 - Boots / Usdaw

cuts are taken. Short cuts will only lead to more bureaucracy in the end and a greater potential for grievance cases and tribunals.

Brighton & Hove City Council introduced a occupational health strategy in partnership with their staff and Unison. The benefits for employees were considered to be as follows:

- improvements in individual health
- reduction in stress
- access to a variety of professional support
- improved morale and motivation
- positive impact on service delivery
- consistent method of reporting and recording absence
- a marked reduction in long-term absence

Source: Debora Sanders "Brighton & Hove Commits To A New Occupational Health Strategy", *IRS Employment Review 750*, pages 42-44, 29 April 2002.

It will, however, take time for these benefits to turn from aspiration to reality. The organisation will not suddenly experience higher levels of staff retention any more than the union will suddenly experience managers taking careful consideration of staff in their decision making. Everybody has to be patient while people make mistakes and staff remain slightly cynical about the organisation's motivation. This requires a degree of faith and can make the role of the partnership champions critical. That role is explored in detail in the next chapter.

The more that people at all levels see visible benefits that can be attributed to partnership, the more they will buy-in to the practice. This will encourage others to maintain this way of working when the pioneers have moved on to other challenges. Some frustrations will, quite naturally, occur as these benefits take their time to show themselves. It is important, therefore,

that if "quick wins" are genuinely available, that the opportunity is taken. They must, however, be genuine otherwise staff will see them as a charade and credibility will be seriously damaged. Partnership sustainability is less about gimmicks, although they can raise awareness, and more about publicising solid achievements. Sheffield Hallam University, for example, produce a monthly partnership bulletin called, *Working Together* to do just this.

Not every benefit can be measured in monetary terms. It is important, therefore, that as many as possible are evaluated because there will always be people who assess anything purely in financial savings. In a survey undertaken in 2003 by IRS, three quarters of the 24 partnership companies had agreed to avoid compulsory redundancies and to discuss and negotiate alternatives with the workforce. Others mentioned they had experienced a better employee relations climate, reduced costs, better quality, improved productivity, reduced absence and improved delivery or turn-round times. Although not every organisation claimed to have achieved every one of these benefits, this illustrates that partnership can meet expectations when it is done properly.

The managers of the organisation must support union recruitment and the development of the representatives' skills. In United Welsh Housing Association, for example, Unison membership has increased from around 32% to 59% in one year partly due to the success of recruiting from a partnership platform but also partly by the management publicly endorsing the union's value to the business with the result that staff feel more comfortable in joining reassured that it will not "affect their careers".

Source: IPA primary research, 2003



Summary of key points

- Partnership may not provide solutions to every problem but it can do so for the vast majority of cases
- partnership does not mean a representative is obliged to agree with everything
- managers must be able to share sensitive information without confidentiality being broken
- representatives must be able to expect an honest explanation of the business case driving any change process
- obstinacy from either partner will damage relationships – both sides must consider and respect the views put forward by the other
- the job of a trade union representative is not to achieve short-term gains at the cost of longer-term problems
- posturing over pay negotiations is not compatible with partnership working
- unions need to “think business” and managers need to “think staff”
- partnership has to deliver real benefits to all parties and, when it does, everyone needs to be made aware that it has done so
- partnership has been proven to deliver real benefits to organisations and its staff

Chapter 9 – Partnership needs champions

There are a number of differing views about what a partnership champion is. Among key figures the unanimous verdict is that their role and status is essential if the arrangements are to have a chance of being sustained. A partnership champion is someone who “understands how it can help to achieve goals, understands how trade unions can legitimise what the company does and who believes in a consultative approach.” Champions, in another organisation have to continually illustrate benefits to key people or, elsewhere actively endorse the coming together of employers and employees. All of these definitions are valid although, interestingly, none of them explore the possibility that a champion also has to be a role model where partnership behaviours are concerned.

The senior representative at the Inland Revenue in Worthing introduced the idea of pre-Whitley meetings with members, which is common practice in network tax offices. Management were horrified by this suggestion, “this has never happened at this office before”. In discussions, the representative realised that this reaction was due to how the management felt about a previous representative. “It is amazing what a disproportionate effect one person can have on a branch or a Whitley committee – either positive or negative.”

Source: IPA primary research, 2003


Clearly, a partnership champion has to do exactly what the title suggests. In a sense, they have a quasi-evangelical role to play to try to

convince other managers and staff of the benefits of working in a mature, consultative manner. They play a vital role in the communication process by making sure that partnership becomes relevant to the day-to-day working of the organisation. It is a demanding role if it is going to reach more than the handful of people each champion will tend to come into contact with when going about their normal activities.

The number of champions varies considerably from one organisation to another. Including union officials, the Abbey National estimate there are as few as 4 where a vastly smaller organisation, in terms of employee numbers, like United Welsh Housing Association claim to have 6. Legal & General believe they have between 25 and 30 which illustrates a considerable growth since partnership awareness training was provided. This is still a relatively small number in an organisation of some 7,500 people although the figure would have been closer to 10 only a year or earlier. The Bank Of Ireland UK Financial Services, a non-unionised organisation which was formerly the Bristol & West, reported that they have over 80 champions although the vast majority of these are employee representatives. The number of senior managers is, however, increasing.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

It is quite usual for Chief Executives to be partnership champions and just as usual for them to be instrumental in setting up the arrangement in the first place. It is perhaps strange, therefore, that a consultative approach to managing employees does not form part of their line managers’ accountabilities and objectives. There is an understandable reluctance to do this because it is actually difficult to measure.



It remains the case that targets form an overwhelmingly large part of manager's accountabilities and objectives. How those targets are achieved remains largely unspecified. This is not to say that these Chief Executives do not take partnership seriously, it is simply a case that they do not believe such a way of working can be achieved by a "command and control" order.

There is a powerful argument, however, that an inclusive culture could be developed relatively quickly if managers were judged on how their targets are achieved. It certainly did not take long for the "command and control" culture that began in the early 1980's to develop, so perhaps the converse could be equally fast to take hold on an organisation's culture.

For senior union officials, the challenge is just as great to convince their members and potential members that partnership working is delivering benefits to them. Many organisations have seconded a member of staff, who has been elected by the members, to head the workplace trade union or employee forum and it is essential that person is a partnership champion and displays the required behaviours at all times. Above all, that individual needs to develop leadership qualities and understand that everything they say and how they behave is central to sustaining the partnership arrangements. Their words, actions and behaviours will have an impact – either positive or negative – on the partnership and how managers and staff perceive it.

This introduces the concept of a trade union or employee forum senior representative as a leader or statesman. There is nothing revolutionary in this as it is important for anyone in positions of major influence to adopt leadership qualities. Leadership is not about

dictating policy or driving change through but it is about being able to carry people with you by setting out the arguments and welcoming comment.

At Boots, the senior union representative stated that, "everything is about perception. I am so aware of every single word that is used. The cynics will jump on anything they can, you must not give them the ammunition."

Source IPA primary research, 2003

Managers have been converted to champion status by a willingness to observe, listen and debate the pros and cons. This has happened at Legal & General where other managers have also become convinced about partnership after they had tried working in that way and realised it made their jobs easier. United Welsh Housing Association has had similar experiences although they have also been able to enhance numbers via large increases in trade union membership. Most organisations acknowledge that they need to increase their numbers of champions but, to do so, a combination of all of the disciplines discussed in previous chapters is the best strategy.

Legal & General were able to sustain their partnership when 5 key partnership champions all left the organisation within six months of each other. They did so because these champions had managed to develop others who readily took their place and because they embarked on a major commitment to raising partnership awareness partly funded by the Department Of Trade & Industry's partnership fund. A major focus of this awareness training was to ensure that managers and staff were convinced of the relevance of partnership working to their day-to-day jobs and this, more

than anything, has brought about their increased numbers of champions.

As stated in the Abbey Case Study, sustainable partnership is more than amicable relations between a few good men in grey suits. This is because there is no guarantee as to how long these “good men in grey suits” will work in any organisation or trade union. Partnership can collapse if one or more leave.

Source: IPA research 2003

The employee relations manager's role lies at the heart of sustaining the partnership by its championing and making sure industrial relations are effective and seen to be so. Such a role is strategic and requires the jobholder to be a role model for other partnership champions as well. The role is becoming key in many of the organisations that practice partnership, often chairing partnership strategy groups and dealing with potentially difficult issues that could result in partnership being damaged.

There is some difference in this role between organisations particularly in the area of neutrality between the management and the representatives. In reality, total neutrality is unlikely given the fact that employee relations managers often report through the human resources or personnel line but objectivity is vital as the jobholder may have to relate hard messages to managers as well as representatives.

At Marks & Spencer, an employee forum representative stated that, “it is fantastic to have Roger Holmes (Chief Executive) chairing the BIG (consultative forum) and get support from the top. For a lot of people that has set it alight.”

*Source: 'Mind Your Business'
People Management May 2003*

If a situation arises that could potentially damage partnership relations, an employee relations manager should provide a critical role in being “somewhere to go” if anyone feels the need to raise concerns. As a person who should have one of the most detailed understanding of what the partnership agreement is in their organisation, they can also act as valuable sounding boards for people who are less sure. If, in the course of such conversations, they identify potential partnership champions that is an added bonus.

Although champions cannot sustain partnership on their own, their influence can help to ensure managers are aware of the potential benefits, make them realise it will make their jobs easier and limit the effects of negative representatives and managers. Their role in doing so cannot be underestimated as most of the partnerships established in the UK have been a direct result of a few of these individuals in a company or a trade union.



Summary of key points

- Partnership champions are essential to sustainability
- being an effective champion requires commitment to take every genuine opportunity to support partnership working
- the more champions an organisation has, the stronger that partnership becomes
- champions have a vital role to play in making partnership relevant to all staff
- senior managers and representatives have a responsibility to develop new champions
- leadership qualities are essential for senior trade union representatives to have if they are working in partnership
- managers become champions when they realise that partnership working makes their jobs easier
- the role of the employee relations manager lies at the heart of partnership sustainability
- the employee relations manager must be empowered to deliver hard messages to both managers and representatives when appropriate
- partnership can be, and often is, established by a few individuals but those same individuals cannot sustain it on their own in the longer term

Chapter 10 – Key tension points need to be resolved

Tension points can exist in even the most established partnerships which, if unresolved, will have a long-term detrimental effect on sustainability. The broader solution to these tension points lies in the previous chapters in the form of pre-emptive action, but it is worth examining how some of these issues arise and how they can be dealt with.

Time off for representative duties

The need for lay representatives to leave their normal duties at work to perform their separate duties for the union or employee forum can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements between the representative and their manager. Managers have difficult objectives to achieve and losing one of their key resources for a period of time can cause frustration if the manager cannot see the bigger picture or does not understand the role the representative is carrying out. The representative has a responsibility to give as much notice as possible to his or her manager and to ensure that the manager is aware of where the representative is. There are occasions where a representative will actively seek time away from their normal day-to-day work and this will, quite understandably, lead to friction. It is important that the representative takes a balanced view of what is urgent and what is not and schedule their duties around normal work, wherever that is possible.


Even if a representative does all of this, some managers will still resent time spent away from their workplace. This is where education is important. Managers have to be made aware that a representative has a wider duty to the organisation they work for. The time a representative spends

away from their day-to-day work must be taken into account in the managers' individual targets as well as those of that representative. If that is not understood further up the management line, the partnership champions have a responsibility to change the way those managers think.

The trade union representative felt that the managers who have representatives working on their teams were under specific pressures; “they don't get any benefit from the work that rep does for the union – they just see that they are not in the office”. There is a problem with the target process – the individual target for the rep is reduced but the target for the business unit and the manager remains the same. This causes managers to resent the presence of a rep on their team. The objectives for managers and reps do not cover the trade union duties – there are no measures for the evaluation of the rep's trade union duties. They are looking at a system of personal development plans where generic skills beneficial to the trade union role could be delivered by the organisation.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

The role of an employee relations manager can be critical in resolving this type of issue. They can help to build trust between the representative and their manager and ensure both parties have a sounding board on which they can air their concerns. However, simply talking will not resolve the issue. If a union representative is spending unreasonable amounts of time on union duties, the senior representative or regional officer must intervene to achieve a balance. Similarly, if a manager is unreasonably complaining about a representative spending time which they are entitled to, the senior managers must deal with it.



A senior representative pointed out that there is no active encouragement for PCS membership or support for reps. She explained that her own line manager “tolerates” her PCS work and believes that they “don’t need a union”. As her PCS workload has increased (now 68% facilities) this has led to some conflict. Her annual appraisal only takes account of her official work and there is no acknowledgement of the contribution to the business made by her in her trade union role.

The personnel manager at that office referred to this problem and was concerned on her behalf that she was building up flexi-time on union duties and then taking time off, minimising her availability for union duties.

Source: IPA primary research, public sector, 2003

The danger in not dealing with such an issue lies in the potential breakdown of individual relationships. It can also lead to other members of staff becoming reluctant to stand for election to a representative role. For partnership, this is potentially disastrous. If representatives believe they are being penalised for carrying out their duties, only the most robust will continue – possibly with some resentment. Partnership cannot survive if representatives develop such a mindset. It is equally unlikely that any manager involved in such a situation will become a partnership champion as he or she will tend to personify their view of partnership by their perception of the representative they have had the problem with.

We now have 140 jointly accredited UNIFI lay representatives, plus newly appointed health and safety representatives. The representatives have access to telephones, PC’s, photocopiers, internal mail and private areas whenever needed. They can spend up to two days a month on representative duties by arrangement with their line managers. In practice, even these limits are not set in stone, since the volume of change in the organisation means a lot of work for the representatives. Nine Barclays staff are seconded full time to UNIFI for an average of two years each, to participate in partnership committees and joint working parties on issues such as reward and parental support policies.

Source: ‘Partner of the union’ IRS Employment review 768, Page 2, 24, January 2003 (Peter Dugmore, Group Employee Relations Director, Barclays Group)

Issues where consultation does not take place

This can cause the most serious breakdown of relationships. It should not, of course, happen but most partnerships have experienced examples where an organisation will take a decision not to consult, or at least not until the last minute, or where somebody forgets to ensure it happens. Some managers might not be aware that consultation should have taken place, others might simply forget. There may also be a lack of a shared understanding about when and at what stage consultation should happen.

As explored in Chapter 3, a robust consultation process is the foundation of partnership. How that process works will define how strong the partnership is, how effective it is and how likely it is to last. Without it, partnership will eventually break down. It is not unreasonable,

therefore, for representatives to expect to be consulted in good time on all matters that affect the staff in their organisation. If that bedrock of partnership does not take place when it should, it is equally reasonable that the representatives should be acutely disappointed. In such circumstances, an apology from senior management is the least they should expect. If it keeps happening, the key decision-makers in the organisation must ask themselves the question as to whether they really want to work in partnership or not.

In larger organisations, a situation can exist where one site or area is very good at making sure consultation takes place as opposed to another site or area where it does not. There can be a tendency for the partners on both sides to either turn a blind eye to it or simply regard it as too difficult to deal with. In fact, such a situation can be dealt with by ensuring that a manager's responsibility to consult with elected representatives is reflected in their written objectives and accountabilities. Such a radical development is still seen as aspirational in many partnership organisations but the practicalities of doing so (in particular the difficulties of measuring how well or otherwise the objective has been achieved) have resulted in few, if any, actually adopting the principle in practice.

Low trade union membership & works councils

The trade unions currently represent approximately 33% of workers in the United Kingdom. Around 70% of these are in the public sector which graphically illustrates how few members they have in the private sector. However, previous chapters in this Guide have illustrated that unions with less than 30% – 40% membership in the workforce can work effectively in

partnership as their role is based on influence not power. Low membership does not, therefore, directly affect the sustainability of partnership. It does, however, have a longer term effect on how people regard the employee voice in such an organisation which can lead to question marks surrounding the union's ability to truly represent all staff.

The senior representative identified a vicious circle:


Low trade union membership-few reps-less visibility-low trade union membership

Management have tried to support the union by encouraging representatives to stand but it was not easy. At some of the "Greenfield" sites there were no reps and a young non-union minded workforce.

Source: IPA primary research – Abbey, 2003

In a partnership environment, it is vital that trade unions increase their membership levels in order that these questions do not arise. Those who argue that unionised organisations where non-members account for up to 70% of the staff should set up employee forum arrangements for them have a powerful case. That argument becomes less and less powerful as union membership increases until the reasonable view that 10% – 20% have effectively "opted out" of having an employee voice becomes legitimate. If the partnership is to be perceived by staff and managers as equal, the union should aspire to achieve as high a membership as possible and the organisation need to help them to do so.

If an employee forum is established to represent non-union members in a partnership organisation, there is a good chance that it will cause tensions that will affect sustainability. Some unions would regard it as a "stab in the back"



although others have indicated that they would be comfortable working under a dual arrangement. There is a case that such dual arrangements strengthen a union in the longer term if they assert their independence and contribute a greater influence than the employee forum. However, this becomes irrelevant if the union can credibly claim that they represent the employee voice.

Behaviour of representatives & managers

As detailed in Chapter 5, the behaviours of people working in partnership have a major influence on its sustainability. Aggressive behaviour, threats, bad language, accusations and “looking for trouble” are all behaviours associated, rightly or wrongly, with “old style” industrial relations. The adoption of preconceived positions is not conducive to working in partnership although it still happens. In some extreme cases, vendettas against “anti-partnership” managers are believed to have taken place.

Over-reaction by representatives is the behaviour that managers most object to in partnership. This is particularly so if that over-reaction leads to “digging their heels in” and this is most likely to happen in individual issues such as disciplinary or grievance. Obstinacy is the behaviour most likely to frustrate the representative if that behaviour is demonstrated by a manager, again particularly in individual cases. Tensions can occur if representations are not perceived to have been considered sufficiently or if they receive “wishy-washy” explanations for decisions. Incomplete explanations will lead to inevitable conclusions that hidden agendas exist leading to a breakdown of trust.

The partnership champions and employee relations manager have a decisive role to play in

these circumstances. Some organisations have developed a code of conduct for partnership behaviours that, in fact, underline a model culture for the entire organisation. Potential sanctions for not behaving in an appropriate way are varied although most partnership organisations would consider disciplinary measures against managers if the behaviours persist. Very few workplace trade unions have a disciplinary procedure for representatives.

The Legal & General Amicus group do have such a procedure passed by their annual conference in 1997 and has been used twice since. Other workplace unions should consider adopting such a process as it is unreasonable to expect trade union and management transgressors to be treated differently.

Source: IPA primary research, 2003

Handling disagreements

Disagreements are inevitable in partnership. Although organisations and unions can agree or reach mutual understanding on the majority of issues, there will be occasions where common ground is impossible to establish. The motivation behind these disagreements is the most important thing to establish. For example, a union needs to carefully consider why issues surrounding pensions, the move of jobs to Asia, redundancies and pay are brought to the partnership table. If the management of an organisation are simply cutting costs and have only looked at the most obvious ways of doing so, it is right for a union to challenge and seek other ways of meeting a business objective.

Problems occur, as we have already explored, when representatives are presented with a fait accompli. Partnership cannot be sustained in such circumstances. If, for example, a large

number of jobs in a call centre are transferred from the UK to India, a trade union in partnership must be brought into discussions early and have a real opportunity to influence the fate of their members. Management cannot have it both ways in partnership. Such an action will strike at the core of partnership principles, particularly the one relating to job security. There is some evidence now emerging that these 'offshoring' issues can be handled within a partnership context.

UNIFI, the finance union, today announced a breakthrough agreement with Barclays, which creates a framework to deal with the bank's strategic options on outsourcing jobs overseas. This is the first major national agreement on globalisation within the UK finance sector to be concluded with UNIFI and represents a benchmark for avoiding compulsory redundancies.

Lead negotiator for UNIFI, Keith Brookes said today: "The agreement represents what can be achieved through positive and progressive industrial relations in an atmosphere of partnership between unions and employers. UNIFI has recognised Barclay's need to reshape the business and the bank has recognised the union's need to protect the employability and job security of its members".

Source: UNIFI website 5.1.04

There is a "bandwagon effect" for organisations who work in partnership. For those companies who do not, moving 500 jobs abroad is something they may do with little or no consultation. A competitor of that organisation may work in partnership and they will face pressure from shareholders to do something similar in order to maintain their competitive position. It is often

events triggered outside of a partnership organisation that affect its sustainability.

This situation has occurred in many organisations regarding pensions, particularly where final salary schemes exist. Legal & General and Amicus have recently concluded discussions relating to the organisation's final salary scheme and their successful outcome is mainly due to two factors: the union were brought into discussions very early and the management listened to them. There is, however, another critical factor in that relationship. The union assess what they gain from the partnership from a broad strategic viewpoint. This does not mean they will not disagree on particular issues, but it means that no single issue will affect the partnership to the extent of threatening its existence because, in the bigger picture, disengagement would only have a negative effect on staff when the next serious issue is raised. The union can adopt this strategic position because they know the organisation will engage them early and with the full picture. They also know that, if they come up with a more palatable solution, the organisation will run with it.



Summary of key points

- It is essential that representatives build a good relationship with their line manager to avoid conflict around the issue of time-off for duties
- the individual targets and objectives of managers should reflect the fact that one of their staff is a representative
- the issue of non-consultation is a major factor in the breakdown of partnership
- consultation should be included in the managers' objectives and accountabilities
- low levels of trade union membership is not a direct barrier to partnership sustainability but it will raise questions about whether a union is truly representative of the employee voice
- trade unions must endeavour to raise their membership to high percentage levels and the partner organisation must help them to do so
- over reaction from a representative is the behaviour most likely to cause the breakdown of the relationship with a manager
- trade unions should adopt their own disciplinary procedure to ensure representatives behave in an appropriate manner
- events happening outside an organisation can damage the partnership within it
- a union will act reasonably and positively if the organisation listens to its representatives and acts on suggestions wherever possible

Chapter 11 – The future of partnership working

There is little doubt that partnership working produces tangible benefits for organisations, trade unions, works councils and staff. Yet, it remains a "minority sport" with the majority of organisations and trade unions maintaining the traditional ways of dealing with industrial relations either through choice or a lack of knowledge regarding the potential benefits they might achieve. It is rare, for example, for a trade union to seek recognition by a partnership agenda.

Many organisations who have sought guidance from the IPA have been put-off by a union's approach simply because that approach has been based on negotiation and agreement. A partnership approach based on consultation and joint problem-solving would have received a far more sympathetic consideration.


In these instances, an organisation is rarely presented with a case which illustrates how recognising a trade union can help to make the business more successful. Statutory recognition campaigns are often negative in terms of the language used and concentrate on things that are going wrong without making suggestions as to how they can be put right. If a statutory recognition ballot is successful – and this is often not the case – the relationship between the organisation and the union has been tarnished before it has begun in earnest. It is difficult to recover from a start like this.

Organisations who consult via employee forums often limit the role of the representatives to such an extent that it is impossible for either the management or staff to gain any benefits from the process. This is often the case where

organisations have introduced an employee forum as a direct counter to possible trade union organisation. Ironically, by placing such limits around the role of representatives – and, as a consequence, the potential achievements they can bring about for staff – these organisations sometimes produce a groundswell of opinion that a trade union could achieve more for them "because they have more power". This increases a trade union's ability to win a statutory recognition ballot and so the vicious circle continues. However, trade union power is determined by membership numbers in the world of negotiation and, when it becomes clear these expectations cannot be met, those membership numbers will be too low for any "power" to be exercised.

It is almost inconceivable that organisations with no current consultative arrangements would, under these circumstances, recognise a trade union as a means of fulfilling the requirements of the Information & Consultation Regulations. There is a real danger that the trade union movement will miss out on a huge opportunity to increase its influence on the culture of employee relations in the United Kingdom as a result. If, however, partnership working and behaviours were adopted as a strategy, this might not be the case. There is little evidence to suggest that such a strategy is on the trade union movement's agenda.

The fundamental issue from the trade union movement's perspective is the fact that partnership is not based on power and rights. This is precisely the reason why trade unions have rejected partnership. Out of necessity, this is what the history of trade unions has been based on and many individuals are loathe to give up that power and those rights which they and others have worked hard to win. However, as



examined in detail in this guide, trade unions represent only 33% of the United Kingdom workforce and, as a result, their power – in traditional circumstances – is not there in reality. It is vital, therefore, that the trade union movement should seek other ways of maintaining its influence and to make sure it continues to perform its excellent work in helping to ensure that people are treated fairly and with dignity and respect at work. This guide also shows that well-trained trade union representatives are capable of even more than that.

Another argument that features in anti-partnership rhetoric is that trade union members are suspicious of their representatives getting too close to management and that, as a result, they are unable to stand up to the organisation when they are proposing something unpopular. This argument is not borne out in practice. Both Legal & General and United Welsh Housing Association have experienced dramatic increases in trade union membership as a direct result of partnership working which has entailed each organisation providing support for the two unions' recruitment activity.

In both cases, the percentage increase in membership of 27% in United Welsh Housing and 13% in Legal & General is huge when compared with the national trend and it is proof that a positive agenda attracts people far more than a negative one. The entire staff at United Welsh Housing Association were asked in a survey whether they preferred their senior management and trade union officials to consult over issues that affect them or use traditional negotiation methods. 85% of staff stated that they preferred consultation with the other 15% unsure. Not one member of staff stated that they

preferred negotiation. Moreover, when asked whether they believed that the trade union and senior management were successful in dealing with issues by joint problem-solving, 59% of staff answered positively with only 3% stating the opposite.

It is not just trade unions, however, who are sceptical about partnership working. Many organisations believe that any consultation via elected representatives slows down the change process despite all of the evidence to the contrary. Perhaps these organisations are really saying that it is too difficult or too expensive, or perhaps they have a belief that staff should get on with their jobs and leave management to get on with managing.

One-way communication is, still, too often confused with proper consultation even in organisations that claim to be high-performance workplaces. Perhaps it simply comes down to people in positions of power being unwilling to test their ideas on people who are not, in their eyes, worthy of consideration.

The word “partnership” may be going out of fashion in industrial relations circles, but it is the most effective means of consulting, influencing, making the best decisions and making staff aware about what is happening. Partnership working and behaviours can change the entire culture of an organisation for the better by moving it from a “command and control” base to an inclusive one. It also has the potential to change the culture of industrial and employee relations in the United Kingdom. For this reason alone, it is imperative that partnership working and behaviours have a future well into the 21st century.

How the IPA Can Help

The IPA is the main organisation in the United Kingdom promoting employee involvement and participation, and partnership at the workplace. It is a not-for-profit, independent body that provides advice, consultancy and training services, but also carries out research, organises conferences and events, and provides a network of information to organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Many of Britain's best-known companies are IPA members, as well as a number of leading trade unions. Funding from membership subscriptions is very important to the IPA although its main source of income is derived from assignments carried out on behalf of client organisations.

The IPA is supported in its work by an Advisory Council which has participants from many of the UK's leading employer and workforce representative bodies. The Council acts as a policy sounding board for the Executive Committee and Director who are responsible for the running of the organisation.

The IPA works with similar bodies throughout Europe and maintains close links with the academic community and government.

The IPA is committed to ensuring the highest quality of service and delivery and operates an ISO9001:2000 quality system.

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