

# The democratization of work management essay



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The topic of the labour education and its relevance in organizational strategies and business ideals offers a deep foray of discussion on the achievement of leadership and managerial objectives. This topic encourages an ongoing inquiry into one of the key leverage of our current HRM recognized as employee development schemes. This assignment begins with a brief discussion of employee empowerment as popular organizational initiative and the unions' perspective on employee development schemes. I will provide a snapshot description of labour education and workers empowerment and its objective of combining education as a management's approach to workers' empowerment.

## **Empowerment**

Today, the conventional bureaucratic management approaches are no longer efficient.

Empowerment of workers is one of management strategy applied today by corporations in reaction to the need for change. However, empowerment is centered on a series of hypothesis that are in disparity to those usually made by managers. Empowerment jeopardizes manager's power over workers in three directions: downward, inward, and outward (Foegen, 1998). Downward loss of control can be discerned by the delegation of decision making to front-line staff. Many managers, most of which have more training and education than line employees, consider delegating decisions to a "less qualified-person" is not rational. They deem they are the most competent to make these judgments and they are the only ones that should make them (Foegen, 1998).

Empowered workers are thought to have ownership of their work process and a commitment to its continuous development. This implies that empowerment can allow employers to improve performance by allowing staff to make decisions about their work environment by allowing workers more freedom and autonomy. Wilkinson (1998) argues that employee empowerment is a managerially led inventiveness:

“ Unlike industrial democracy there is no notion of workers having a right to a say: it is employers who decide whether and how to empower employees. While there is a wide range of programs and initiatives which are titled empowerment and they vary as to the extent of power which employees actually exercise, most are purposefully designed not to give workers a very significant role in decision making but rather to secure an enhanced employee contribution to the organisation. Empowerment takes place within the context of a strict management agenda.” (p. 40)

Wilkinson (1998) thus implies that empowerment is consequently a managerially controlled event working at a “ workbased” rather than a strategic level within the business. Honold (1997) supports this notion by considering empowerment as “ control of one’s work, autonomy on the job, variations of teamwork, and pay systems that link pay with performance” (p. 202).

Businesses can build an empowered environment if they provide employees information, power, resources, and training, and consistent follow-up with recognition and corroboration. However, empowering employees is an incessant course of action. Companies that take the first step by

encouraging an environment of empowerment are expected to be the industry's leaders.

## **Trade unions and learning rhetoric**

Over the last two decades, the existing rhetoric surrounding “ workplace learning”, “ teamwork”, and the “ learning organization” within the agenda of promoting a knowledge economy has had an impact on trade union membership and union power in the US and UK (Bratton et al., 2004). Labels, such as “ shared ownership” (Senge, 1990, p. 13), “ engagement” (quoted in Schwind et al., 2007 p. 471) and “ owner of the business” (ibid, 2007) all in the premise of globalization and improved production are often eluded to marginalize unions (Bratton et al., 2004). We need to keep in mind that workplace learning is about workers learning to develop into a more proficient and accommodating “ human resource” (Spencer, 1994) and should be examined through an exploitative viewpoint of the “ human capital theory”. In many cases, workers are directed to accept the suggestion that there are no permanent jobs and to adhere to flexibility, cuts in their wages and benefits (Bratton et al., 2004). Today, the labour movement is often silenced and manipulated under the pretext of workers being labeled by companies as “ partners” and “ associate partnership agreements” (Bratton et al, 2004) emphasizing employer rights, including in some cases, refuting the right to democratically decide their own union steward (Wray, 2001).

Some companies are also discouraging workers away from unionization and to constrain workers to company objectives[1]. It has been argued by Robertson and his colleagues that many workers still find unionism an effective way to democratize the workplace and to guarantee a collective

voice, and avenue to equality, and economic security (1989). A number of unions, notably the International Steelworkers of America, have embraced worker's interest in workplace learning and have encouraged participatory practices (Bratton et al, 2004 p. 127). On the other hand, Wells (1993) claims that unions and HRM policies are in conflict, because of the imbalance of power between management and workers and that employees can only achieve equal power through their collective representation. According to Wells, unions make workplace democracy work better (1993). Unions provide a challenge to the total power of management and ensure workers have a say in workplace decisions that affect them through collective representation (Well, 1993).

Evidence attained from union involvement have confirmed the problematic nature of workplace learning initiatives and with this in mind, have initiated their own unique workplace learning programs.

### **Union – based education**

Education and training is offered to their members and representatives to prepare workers to take a more active role in the union. In some cases, unions have developed complete training programs and have partnered with schools, such as McMaster University, to include labour education and vocation training opportunities for their union members (cited in Bratton et al. 2004 p. 108). Labour education has also varied over time, but the final outcome is still the same – to effectively change the process in labour-management relations (ibid. p. 111). In their paper, “ Canadian labour education and PLAR at the turn of the century”, the authors, Spencer, Britton and Gereluk provided exemplary examples of labour education courses

offered by and for unions (2000). The choices of courses offered by these unions are diverse but most evolve around the particular structure of the shop stewards' function. These courses are the " tools" needed to understand the legal framework of trade unions.

A good deal of the critical literature also alleges that there is a contradiction between the new HRM ideals and the trade unions with their traditional industrial relations and collective bargaining. Godard (1994) argues that the main motivation for managers to accept the ' progressive' HRM processes is to shun or lessen trade union control. Nonetheless, he does admit that ' it would also be a mistake to view progressive practices as motivated solely or even primarily by this objective' (1994, p. 155). Other critics have advocated that trade unions should embrace change by harmonizing the same aspects of the " soft" HRM model. Such a union approach would promote a ' partnership' between businesses and organized labour which would transpire into a ' high-performance' environment with common benefits for both the workers and the organization (Betcherman et al., 1994; Guest, 1995; Verma, 1995). What is apparent from this HRM viewpoint is that this perspective has a strong political and legal agenda reflecting the decline in union participation and influence in the US and UK over the last decade. Never has it been more important for unions to establish their legitimacy and their own distinctive workplace learning programs. I was directly involved with a three month labour education program with my local union – OPSEU. I was introduced to trade unionism, labour policy and social justice issues. It provided me with critical approaches to current issues and it reinforced my idea that strong unions makes a strong company.

I accept the conflicting nature of the working-class unionism born out of hard struggles between capital and labour and their logical acceptance that capitalism as the only system in today's world. But I also contend that active unionism may provide the best chance to democratize the corporate workplace. Professor Hugh Glegg (1960) makes a revealing comment, that collective bargaining through trade unions or 'joint regulation' is industrial democracy.

## **Employee Development Schemes**

Employee development is now, more than ever, a key issue within the HRM paradigm. Against a background populated with concepts such as 'the learning organization' and 'lifelong learning' employers have been encouraged to capitalize on the learning potential of their employees, by encouraging learning activities. Research advocates that this style of non-vocational or non job-specific employee development pursuit has an array of benefits for both employer and employee (Industrial Society, 1996). Ever since Ford initiated their revolutionary EDAP scheme in 1987, employee development schemes have progressed and expanded to the level where the term can now include a wide mixture of development ideas. To enhance the company's industrial relations, the union and management initiated an interactive learning delivery intranet system called Solstra[2]. This avenue presented a means of packaging learning on an intranet. The system also overseen the progress of learners, kept records of assessments and modules completed, and would routinely renew individual records of training and skills profiles. Within 6 months, 15, 000 employees, depicting one-third of personnel, utilized the program (Mortimer, 1990). The Ford EDAP scheme

attained an involvement rate of over 50 per cent in three years into its existence (Holden, 1996).

The literature suggests that although the initial option made by employees pertaining to the type of learning was entirely non-vocational, later choices were inclined to shift in a more vocational direction (Holden, 1996). It is noteworthy that several case studies of EDS have noticed IT/computer skills courses to be one of the trendiest choices (Donaldson, 1993, 1996).

Overall, the data suggests that the development of employees allows them to yield a more considerable input to the achievement of business objectives. A highly skilled and flexible workforce can give the competitive advantage necessary for success. The evidence would appear to suggest that many workers enroll to take part in an EDS to attain new skills to develop job prospects, continuing a personal leisure activity, or simply general self-development or accomplishment (Industrial Society, 1996). A helpful result frequently reported by participants is an improvement in their confidence, both in their capacity to learn and in themselves (Policy Studies Institute, 1993). This seems mainly to be the experience of workers with no prior training and who are more likely to have negative recollections of their educational experience.

Many bodies of literature are littered with illustrations of individuals for whom partaking in their company's EDS has been a radical experience. The literature also proposes that employees may be more receptive to work-related training (Maguire & Horrocks, 1995). It also bode well for companies whose goal is to build a culture of learning within the company. Research



findings also implies that the provision of work and non-work related training makes workers feel more committed, empowered and appreciated (HOST, 1998). This is particularly true of junior level staff whose earlier experience of training was in-house and job-specific (Arulampalam, 1997). Employers presently perceive enhanced learning skills and a flexible workforce as the most advantageous results of an EDS (Maurer & Tarulli 1994). Another theme in which conclusive results has been recounted by EDS members is that of motivation at work (Maurer & Tarulli 1994). It is hardly surprising, given that improved employee motivation is often mentioned by employers as a motive for initiating a scheme. EDS provision often seems to foster a better relationship between staff and employer.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The benefits of labour education and employee development schemes reported by employers and staff are numerous. The existing literature proposes that employers currently regard improved learning skills and a flexible workforce as the clearest outcome. As well, it would seem that improved motivation, empowerment and confidence of workers are noteworthy outcomes. The fact that employees are often more keen to learn, and have more confidence in their abilities as a result of participation, can help shift a company in the aim of becoming a learning organization. Overall, the development of employees can permit them to make a significant contribution to the success of a business. However, there is a penchant in the literature to slip from arguing workplace learning to empowerment to industrial democracy is the identical process and to presume that if a corporation is training its workforce that it is empowering its workers. Such

statements need to be tested against employees as well as employer experience and placed in a more analytical understanding of the “flexible workplace” and the “knowledge economy”. I’m not convinced that corporate leaders believe that empowering employees makes a company more effective. Empowering workers means sharing power or increasing workers’ control and the powerful in business rarely like allocating power. Debates of workplace learning need understand the real issues of power, authority, control, inequality, and ownership for real empowerment and workplace democracy. Slogans such as “buying in” to company values and “owning” are an integral part of today’s corporate arrangement (being accountable for your own accomplishments).

Furthermore, it is important to understand the value of unions as a positive influence in democratizing the workplace. A long serving employee, with a good union contract, may perhaps have access to job security, but contemporary corporate position is for employees to take responsibility of their own careers. This means more than meeting performance goals. It necessitate routine demonstration of eagerness, display of loyalty, and continuous display of commitment by gaining new skills, volunteering for “new challenges” and indicating a readiness to do more than is necessary or expected. Commendable employees are seasoned overachievers; they have to be because doing “more than is necessary or expected” is precisely what is required and expected! Employee empowerment is not the key to structural problems. This does not signify that it will not receive wide acceptance and be hyped as a way to attain organizational excellence through workplace democracy. I believe that workplace learning is

deliberated to assimilate workers into management culture; labour education permits workers to challenge it.

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