

Union vs. non union

Business, Employment



“ Employee Relations involves the body of work concerned with maintaining employer-employee relationships that contribute to satisfactory productivity, motivation, and morale” (Unknown Author, 2012). The pluralist perspective views the employee relations in an ‘ us versus them’ approach where there appears to be conflicting views as to whether there is a power imbalance in the working industry which later causes conflict between the employer and employee, as a result there is a lack of trust.

It is that perspective that invites a trade union to be involved in order to collaborate in contributing solutions that would otherwise result in a lack of employee voice. Unitarism represents the idea that employees benefit from their employers, and employers benefit from their employees; a unity that shares the same beliefs and goals and proves that there is more of a balance with respect to power, trust and loyalty.

Due to this equilibrium there is a mutual agreement that a unionized approach would go against everything a unitarist stands for as the participation the employees are entitled to have had a positive impact on their employee voice. The theory of Marxist should not go unmentioned however, as it imposes an underlying concept and describes that the work we do, we’re never truly rewarded for it, and that what you get is nowhere near what you have contributed to the company and what they get out of it.

There will always be an imbalance within the working industry and a need for mechanisms that will provide employee voice allowing for a harmonisation within the employment relationship. Unions, although declining, do have an undeniable influence among the employee and how they influence corporate decision making especially in industries that have a higher risk with line

managers who believe that their time could be focused on more beneficial things other than communication with their employees which in turn results in a disproportion among power, conflict and trust.

An ever increasing unitarism attitude indicates that there has been an awareness of issues that have resulted in a growing need of understanding that there is a mutual gain to be made and that what is good for the employee is good for the business and vice versa. Some businesses can thrive on a pluralist approach as well some companies can grow as a whole using an unitarist approach, and some with both perspectives and it is the constructive utilization of the voice mechanisms whether it be in a unionized or non-unionized atmosphere or a combination of both that will allow for a suitable environment in order to provide employee voice and harmonising the employment relationship.

Unitarism believes in mutual gains and believe that there is no conflict between the employers and employees which interferes with the theory that Marxist argues. Unitarist "...is a relationship of social membership which exists to satisfy common interests" (Craden, C. 2011).

It is believed that everyone within the company have a ' common ground' one that works together as a family and allow rewards based on individual performance. Set standards have been implicated that allows the employees to have an active participation alongside with management giving them the opportunity to voice their concerns, give input on what works and what hasn't been working building a sense of trust among everyone involved which in return creates productivity that benefits both the business and the people working within it.

Unitirasm is a pro-active approach, in which HRM creates a strategic plan that accounts for the importance of teamwork, empowerment and communication. It is perceived that the reason conflict incurs in the working atmosphere is largely on the fact that there has been a disconnection in relation to the communication between managers and employees. Employees are aware of what the objective of the business is and are loyal to the managers who in return provide strong leadership and communication assets.

The distinguishing feature of unitary perspective is the assumption that each work organization is an integrated and harmonious entity with a common purpose and a shared goal (Waiganjo, E. W. , Nge, J. M. , cited in Bray 2009). The pluralist viewpoint is that the employers try to get the most that they can out of the worker without having to give as much back. Pluralist "...is a negotiated, contractual relationship which exists to satisfy the interests of separate but interdependent groups" (Craden, C. 2011).

It is the common notion that since there is a difference in the objectives the employees have versus the management, that in return there will be different levels of loyalty throughout the business. They view that management imposes power over its work force which in hand gives more control and less trust between higher level staff and lower level staff with the power being given to the prior. Pluralism recognizes that conflicts occur and have orchestrated a unionized environment in order to help maintain the problems they encounter; trade unions are the most effective way to impact the employee relationship.

It is this unionization that allows for an effective employee voice in certain industries. In pluralism, the organization is perceived as being made up of powerful and divergent sub-groups, each with its own legitimate loyalties and with their own set of objectives and leaders. In particular, the two predominant sub-groups in the pluralist perspective are the management and trade unions. This approach sees conflicts of interest and disagreements between managers and workers over the distribution of profits as normal and inescapable. (Industrial Relations, 2012).

It is clear that there are very distinct characteristics of the unitarism approach as well as the pluralism approach, although there is a strong recognition on how the society is changing more towards a non-unionized setting there are still strong presence of unions and the impact they too have within our industries. The type of voice mechanisms differ between the pluralist interpretation (unionization) and the unitarist interpretation (non-unionization). Voice mechanisms can appear in both formal and informal manners and both interpretations may use formal and informal manners interchangeably.

The most common voice mechanisms within the industrial relations would be either the 'bottom up' method or the 'top down' method. The bottom up approach follows under the unitarism concept that communication is ideal and that everyone understands the objective of the business as a whole and work together to obtain success within the company. Using the bottom up concept HRM will get valid opinions from the employees, " The bottom-up approach implies proactive team input in the project executing process.

Team members are invited to participate in every step of the management process. The decision on a course of action is taken by the whole team. Bottom-up style allows managers to communicate goals and value...” (Filey, A. 2008). A unitarist informal voice mechanism may include tactics that encourage the strong relationship between management and lower level employees. Such practise may include, but are not limited to, email communication, workplace meetings, social gathering, and employee feedback mechanisms.

Formal mechanisms are more enforced and implemented through the human resource management, the HRM would strategically implement communication procedures that promote employee feedback, employee surveys and may even go as far as allowing the option for employees to have access to partial ownership through shares. The bottom up approach was discussed in relation with the non-unionization rational; therefore it would be correct to assume that the top down approach coincides with the unionized rational which is deemed to be a pluralists way of interpreting the industrial relations.

Under this approach there is a defined level of authority within the corporation, “... all the directions come from the top. Project objectives are established by the top management. Top managers provide guidelines, information, plans and fund processes. All of the project manager’s expectations are clearly communicated to each project participant” (Filey, A. 2008). When referring an informal voice mechanism to the pluralism standards and relating it back to what it is that employee voice means –

which is the participation of employees in influencing corporate decision making (Wikipedia, 2013).

It can be stated that an informal aspect of voice mechanisms would be how they can sway the “ corporate decision making” through actions such as missed work as well as forfeiting their involvement with the company. Unions are considered a formal voice mechanism as they give the employees the opportunity to address issues they have in their working environment under a collective bargaining process which may result in decisions that can benefit their employment conditions.

When first reviewing the different types of voice mechanisms it can be easy for one to side with a more unitarist stand point over the pluralist, however when considering all informal, formal, bottom up, and top down scenarios it is actually more favourable for a business to adapt a more balanced approach as there can be strengths as well as flaws in both. It is the perceived understanding that due to the shift of focus out of the manufacturing industries and more into the service sectors, from manual employment to non-manual employment that there has been a drastic decline in the number of individuals signing up as a union member.

It can also be argued that the reason unions are in decline is merely due to the fact that people are more knowledge based which could have been a result of the prior unionizations bringing attention to the issues that at one point in time were very present within the working society. There are many pros along with a list of cons that are associated with both unions and non-unionized businesses.

As mentioned earlier, non-unionized facilities are becoming more and more dominant in the working environment, the reason for this can be argued, however the focus now is not on why people are adapting a more unitarist approach or how the pluralist concept has seen a significant drop but to more focus on how these approaches can benefit the employees as well as the negative impact they may also impose on those same individuals in relation to the employee voice. Individuals that are employed by a facility that does not operate under a union agenda have a strong presence of employee voice surrounding them.

When referring back to what employee voice stands for (the participation of employees in influencing corporate decision making), allowing people to have a positive relationship with management gives them a sense that their voice is being heard, that what they have to say could have an impact on how business practises are ran as this is more done on an individual stand point and the changes that are made are more directed to the person alone and their performance and their relationship with the company.

Labour flexibility has their advantages, but coming from the pluralist mind set, it is the flexibility that, yes appears to be beneficial to the employee in some aspects but that other arising issues may go unnoticed, that of which managers also have the option to not only ignore such proposals made but to then convert the proposal into something more beneficial to the company and may not necessarily have a positive impact on individual employees, and should that be the case employees would not have a say in the matter.

“ Employees in the non-union sector were outside the decision making process in that they did not have the opportunity to challenge particular

changes” (Mooney, P. 2005). Although there is a strong belief that the flexibility can be damaging, the fact of the matter is that employees felt as though it was the flexibility that gave them a strong presence of employee voice, “ Flexibility of operations ranked as the number one advantage at all of the non-union companies visited” (Mooney, P. 2005).

It is said that unions are a representation of what employee voice stands for as it is the unions collective bargaining that imposes communication strategies with management on behalf of their members, allowing the members to enforce criteria’s within their working environment that may have otherwise been ignored or unnoticed if there were no presence of a union. The problem with this theory is the simple fact that a union being present supports the concept that there are issues with the communication between management and the employees to begin with which can then be perceived as a sign that employee voice within the company is absent.

“ Contrary to the view that unionisation diffuses conflict at the workplace, the very presence of a union may well mean that more disputes arise (Mooney, P. 2005). One person’s emotions and opinions influenced all the project decisions, and this person was the project manager. What was the result? Team members felt that they weren't listened to, that their voices didn't count. There was no effective collaboration between the journalists. They were not morally motivated to do their jobs.

The managing executives then realized that they needed to give more freedom to the teams and change their management style (Filey, A. 2008). The example just given was that of an experience The New York Times encountered after which they decided to use a more bottom up management

style, knowingly to us, that is a more non-unionised, unitarist approach. In certain industries working conditions may be tough, and line managers priority may not relate to the relationship between management and the workers in a positive manner, it is that reason that unions are formed, and can have a positive impact on the environment in which the member work in.

When there seems to be an unjust authority relationship, the sense that the employee is benefiting from the company is non-existent which can cause a decrease in productivity for the business, poor working conditions are ignored and as a result the employees may have no choice but to take an informal approach with things such as absenteeism resulting in a domino effect.