

Co-operatives and Trade Unions
A REPORT OF EXPERIENCE IN THE
GREATER NOTTINGHAM CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

by

H. ROBINSON

(Personnel Manager, G.N.C.S.)

Our contribution to the discussions on this subject is related to experience in the field of industrial relations between the Greater Nottingham Co-operative Society and the trade unions with which we are associated.

The GNCS has always recognised the integral role of trade unions as a determinant factor in the successful application of its policies and objectives. The underlying theme, therefore, of our industrial relations policy has been a concern for human dignity, job security, improvement in living standards and quality of life of our employees; commensurate with an appreciation of the overall economic objectives of the enterprise. We are aware that the pursuit of a single minded policy of commercial and business efficiency at the expense of concern for the people who work for our Society will not only prove to be extremely inefficient but in many cases will be counter productive. Workers may well show adverse reaction if they find themselves in what they believe to be a bureaucratic working environment which is directed by an autocratic style of management.

Our aims have been to gain the commitment of every individual working for our Society. The most effective means of gaining this commitment and at the same time improving the efficiency of the Society have been to encourage an environment where people feel that their job is meaningful and worth while. Every job can be satisfying to greater or lesser extent if it provides individuals with an opportunity to exercise their skills and abilities, some degree of discretion and responsibility and a feeling that they are contributing towards an end product.

As our Society has developed there has been the inevitable extension of the hierarchal relationship between Executive Management and the shop floor with the attendant danger that we may have taken away responsibility and self esteem from some of our staff, thereby creating islands of discontent and disillusionment. Lines of communication become stretched and often distorted and to an extent our employees could feel that they are in danger of being regarded as becoming inconsequential within a faceless bureaucracy.

We must, therefore, at all times consider the areas in which progressive industrial relations policies can be developed to create situations whereby people at all levels are informed, satisfied, effective and committed. This can only be achieved on the basis of "shared understandings", mutual co-operation and the continuous involvement of the trade unions with the Society's management. We feel that we have been able to engender this type of relationship accepting the fact that there are always areas of conflict, but also that such conflict can be minimised by both parties adopting objective attitudes towards the determination of problems that must inevitably arise in the modern industrial environment.

Some of the policies we have pursued in this vein fall within the following areas:-

1 Consultation

The basic philosophy of joint consultation is that it is a process by which management seeks the views, feelings and ideas of employees through their representatives prior to negotiating or decision making.

It is our belief that effective consultation can lead to better co-operation between managers and employees because people accept even unpopular decisions provided they are given the reasons why, when their opinions have been genuinely taken into account. It is face to face communication with employee representatives who are able to speak up on behalf of their constituents without fear of victimisation and it is one effective form of employee participation. Joint consultation can reduce misunderstandings by giving managers and

other employees the opportunity to understand each others views and objectives and it can improve industrial relations by providing for regular meetings between management and employee representatives.

Consultation works best where management asks relevant, meaningful questions in addition to providing essential information. If management does not ask the questions and simply uses the system for the representatives to raise problems, there is the danger that consultation will degenerate into a discussion of trivialities and grievances. It is management's role to take the initiative to introduce change to gain people's commitment to work and to indicate the nature of most of the subjects for mutual discussion. Our Society has put these principles into practice by establishing a total of twenty-six joint consultative committees which represent the greater majority of the people employed within the Society.

Meetings are held at frequent intervals, employees are encouraged to attend and participate in these meetings and free and frank discussion takes place on a wide range of subject matter. Our experience has shown that our joint consultative machinery has played a significant role in maintaining and improving staff morale, employee co-operation and participation and has been a contributory factor in bringing about improvements in efficiency and productivity. Joint consultation is no easy way out. It is certainly not just one more amenity to be granted by enlightened employers, nor is it merely a way of jointly discussing management ideas. It is a positive recognition that everyone in an organisation has a contribution to make. This is a field where there is no room for complacency. Even in Societies such as our own, with well thought out and smooth running joint consultative machinery, management still needs to ask whether it is being used as fully as it could, whether it is producing new ideas, whether it is arousing widespread interest or whether it is settling down into a rather pointless routine. This Society recognises the fact that joint consultation offers

immense scope simply because it acknowledges the obvious truth that the success or failure of an enterprise depends upon the people within it.

2 Staff Training and Education

Our Society places a great deal of importance in our training techniques relating to job skills. There has been a high degree of co-operation from the trade unions in relation to this matter and the Society's success in obtaining the Distributive Industry Training Award was due in no small way to the progressive attitude adopted by the trade unions towards the Society's approach in relation to the complex subject of training staff in a wide variety of skills. Great efforts have been made to avoid the mistake of treating staff training as a mechanistic process of teaching job skills merely as an aid to improve efficiency and proficiency. We have been aware that it is necessary to apply a high degree of effort to the question of education with regard to human relations. It is arrant nonsense to presume that workers should not be informed or understand the economics of the business in which they are employed. If people are aware of the consequences of their actions on the effectiveness of the business then it is natural, or reasonable to assume, that they will adopt far more responsible attitudes. We have attempted to ensure that all our staff are equipped with the knowledge and techniques to enable them to understand our organisation, its aims and objectives in terms of effective utilisation of financial, physical and human resources.

3 Remuneration Policy

One of the corner-stones of good industrial relations is the wages and salaries structure used by the employer and in company with the majority of Co-operative Retail Societies we are fortunate inasmuch that the Co-operative Employers' Association and the Joint Trade Unions have arrived at National agreements which provide a very sound basis.

However, there are areas due to local conditions including labour market scarcities and competition, attempts to improve productivity and efficiency, when it has been recognised that the relevant national agreement has not fully met our requirements and where management and the trade unions have felt the necessity to enter into various forms of local agreements. This is, of course, quite apart from a whole range of collective bargaining issues on conditions of employment, working hours, protective clothing, holiday arrangements, staffing norms, redundancy, re-training and re-deployment, etc.

In cases concerning majority groups (craftsmen, etc.) most of these issues tend to be resolved by discussion and negotiation between the Industrial Relations Officer and Shop Stewards of the appropriate trade union and where necessary a full-time trade union official and the Society's Personnel Manager become involved.

The situation in respect of USDAW, which represents a substantial majority of staff employed in the Society, is that the negotiating machinery consists of Officers of the Regional Branch Committee including the full-time trade union official who meet the Personnel Manager accompanied by the Industrial Relations Officer along with Departmental Managers as required. Formal meetings are held on a regular basis in order to resolve problems as they arise and to negotiate on a whole range of collective bargaining issues.

We would claim that by adopting these procedures we have been able to fulfil our labour requirements despite the fact that over recent years we have been subjected to various pressures including:- statutory incomes determination with the resultant erosion of traditional differentials, the rapid increase in inflationary pressures and the need to satisfy the monetary aspirations of our employees whilst at the same time exercising extremely stringent controls in the vital area of personnel costs.

4 Shop Stewards

Together with the trade unions we have actively pursued a policy of encouraging employees to participate in trade union activities and to accept the responsibility of ensuring adequate "official" shop floor representation. At the present moment there are 90 accredited shop stewards representing a total labour force of approximately 5,000 full and part-time workers throughout the Society. By and large the facilities afforded to our shop stewards compare favourably with the guide lines expressed in the ACAS Code of Practice discussion document. In addition to these facilities all shop stewards are entitled to serve on their respective Joint Consultative Committees.

The Society also has an agreement with USDAW which provides for the appointment of a Principal Shop Steward who is actively engaged on trade union/Society business on a full-time basis. The Society pays the salary of the Principal Shop Steward and provides office accommodation with the appropriate facilities.

The Principal Shop Steward does not accept a direct responsibility for dealing with many minor problems that arise on a day to day basis at shop floor level throughout the Society. His attitude is that departmental shop stewards should raise problems in the correct manner with the departmental manager concerned. Only where there is a failure to resolve the matter at this level does he undertake a personal investigation of the facts and if necessary assist shop stewards in representing these facts to management. In many cases he advises shop stewards that there is no basis for an approach to management, in other cases he is able to achieve a satisfactory solution. His determination to understand both the facts of a particular situation and the general policy of management results in a constructive attitude towards the resolution of many problems. The Principal Shop Steward plays a prominent part in the examination of the Society's proposals for the introduction and implementation

of change. His discussions with the staff affected by possible change can be invaluable in allaying their worries and fears and, at the same time, be a source of meaningful information to both the Society and the trade union. Under these circumstances the Society is able to conduct discussions and negotiations with the assurance that agreements will not be repudiated.

An important factor in the Society's industrial relations policy is the relationship between the Principal Shop Steward and the Society's Industrial Relations Officer. There is a constant dialogue between the two people concerned and emerging from this invariably there stems a recognition of problem areas and possible solutions. On some occasions this is only achieved after prolonged bouts of heated argument and the reconciliation of often totally opposite points of view.

Conclusion

The GNCS does not claim to have discovered a panacea for all industrial ills nor do we wish to intimate that our labour relations are totally trouble free.

We do claim, however, that a substantial and concerted effort is made to engender an acceptable climate of industrial relations which compares favourably with other organisations when examined in the broader sense. However, in the modern business world there is no room for complacency and the secret of success lies in our ability to anticipate at an early stage changes in the socio/economic/political environment and to respond to such changes rather than react to a fait accompli situation.