

Teambuilding in unions

In the previous article two staffers at the London Head Office of a large British Trade Union (MSF) described how union employees handle conflicts between themselves and their employer, the union: In a nutshell, the traditional trade union approach is followed – the employees negotiate with their employer to resolve the inherent conflict in the employer/employee relationship.

The following article looks at the *same* union, but now examines how the union is seeking to resolve different *kinds* of conflicts: conflicts *not* arising from inherent antagonisms but from the pressures of employees working together in stressful situations.

JOHN FISHER, an experienced MSF regional officer, (ie organiser/negotiator) describes an experimental approach recently introduced into the union which is designed to improve working relations amongst the union staff.



Introduction

Our union, MSF, was formed as the result of a merger a few years ago. When our current general secretary was elected to his present position about 2 years back, he instituted a series of seminars with senior officials in groups of about 8 or 10, and encouraged them to speak freely about their problems in their jobs, and to put forward ideas on how to improve the union. A consistent theme that arose in these discussions was how isolated union officials feel in their work, and how much a feeling of team work was missing. So there was agreement about the need to develop team work in the union, but no clarity on how to do this. I personally was very interested in this challenge because I had a background in the field of counselling, and I felt that some of the techniques used in that field could fruitfully be adapted and applied to the problems of union staff. After talking to a number of colleagues in the union, it was agreed that I should start to develop step by step, by trial and error, a team building exercise amongst union staff

and executives. So far, despite the fact that we have been feeling our way, results have been very encouraging. Union staff involved in the exercise have been very positive about the process.

What we do is we get a group of union officers together – (about 6 up to 8) at a time. You can't have too many or it doesn't work. The group is made out of officers who have, in their normal work, to work together in some way, ie they are **supposed** to be a team in one way or another. The objective of the exercise, then, is to build a closer relationship between the team members.

Step 1

We sit down and take a suitable topic as focus, for example "the current (internal) situation in the union" and try to listen to each others views. We try to acquire listening skills. It requires concentration and practice. I give everyone equal time to have his/her say – perhaps 10 minutes each. No interruptions are allowed. I tell everyone: "Do not worry what you are going to say, you'll get your turn. Just listen." This stops people jumping in. It is a technique called "Approving attention". You are suppose to try and figure out where the person speaking is "coming from". The principle is that everybody has got a reason for their point of view (even a fascist!). It is surprising how much common ground you can discover if you listen properly in this way. You start to understand *why* people are saying what they are saying. The structure of the exercise means you cannot jump in and stop them as soon as they open their mouths!

Step 2

After everyone has had their say, I try to get people to make proposals that will improve the situation which group members have given their views about. No criticism is allowed. Proposals have to be positive. If you don't like someone's else's proposal, you may not criticise it, you must make a better one. This approach is essential. As union officials, we spend our lives being "trashed". Management trashes us, we trash

our members, we trash each other, and we end up trashing ourselves. I ask people: "can you remember a time when you were criticised and it did you any good?" Usually the answer is "No!". When criticised, we tend to freeze, then react. There are *ways* of not agreeing which are more constructive: "I liked what you said about X, however, there is another way of looking at Y," etc. It's in many ways a question of style, but it is *important*. I tell officials that they must not go into a box when they get criticised on the job (for example, by the shopstewards). They must turn a situation around. Say to the shopstewards: "Okay, maybe I am not doing great, but can't you see I am doing my best? So don't shout me down. I need your *help*."

Rules

Of course all of this is quite different from the normal way we go about dealing with our co-workers. For the team groups to work, there has to be a conscious decision to develop trust. It's essential to establish Rules/Procedures to achieve this:

- Listen
- Don't interrupt
- Value each other
- Be open.

Confidentiality is very important. I tell the group: "Nothing goes out of this room." (except with a speaker's permission).

Another rule is "Be positive". I ask people: "What's *good* about your work in the union? (People resist this. They want to say all the bad things first. You've got to stop them and push them.) For example, I say: "Say *anything* good, small or big. Like, you got here today without having a crash." People will always find *something* positive, even if it is a joke (eg "the personnel manager died.") But you've established the correct approach.

After you get around to the problem areas, the rule is to develop a positive response to the problem. I asked: "Okay. That's your problem area. What are you going to *do* about it? Do not tell me what

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IRISH REGION ECI WEEKEND SCHOOL

Teambuilding 16th-17th April, 1994

SATURDAY:

11.00am

Welcome and introduction to weekend

- ☆ thanks to participants for giving up a weekend, clearly shows a commitment to improving the situation
- ☆ no pre-set agenda: but a number of guiding principles to assist you as a group to work together more effectively
- ☆ we will be working in pairs/small groups as well as all together to ensure as individuals you get think-time and the fullest time to contribute

11.15 am

Introductions

Find a partner that you don't know very well or don't talk to often. Take five minutes each to talk about yourself. After which individually you will be invited to introduce yourself to the rest of the group along the following lines:

- ☆ name
- ☆ where you come from
- ☆ union position/workplace
- ☆ one thing you would like to achieve over the weekend
- ☆ one thing about yourself that no one would know by looking at you

Grounds Rules

How would you like people to behave over the weekend to ensure your fullest participation? eg, listening, no interruption, valuing each contribution, honesty, no criticism, confidentiality, respect.

ACTIVITY

In pairs:

- 1) What do you enjoy most about being an ECI member?
- 2) What keeps you participating in the ECI?
- 3) What difficulties do you have?

(Reports taken from each individual, one question at a time. All items identified listed on a flipchart).

2.00 pm

Key issues facing the ECI in order of priority.

In small group, identify the three most important issues that need to be tackled:

Group as a whole agree to top three issues that need to be tackled:

3.45 pm

In three groups – each group taking one of the issues, identify:

- 1) the current situation as you see it
- 2) practical proposals to improve the situation
- 3) difficulties you can anticipate in implementing those proposals
- 4) practical proposals to tackle the difficulties

Each group to relay these findings on a flipchart.

SUNDAY:

11.00 am

Barriers to effectively working together: tackling divisions.

Group agreement/discussion

- ☆ listening with respect
 - ☆ no criticism
 - ☆ asking interesting questions
- a technique to increase your knowledge of another group

11.15 am

Groups of 3

In 10 minutes identify the key divisions operating in the ECI and put them in order of priority.

ACTIVITY: DIVISIONS

- 1) What difficulties do the divisions cause?
- 2) What are your proposals to overcome these difficulties?

APPRECIATION

- 1) What did you like best about how you have contributed?
- 2) What did you like best about the way in which ----contributed to the weekend?

FINALLY

One thing you would do differently that would help improve the way in which the ECI is working.

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other people must do. What are *you* going to do?" The principle is to contradict people's stated powerlessness by pushing them to *action*. Regional officials moan: "I can't get anything out of the Head Office when I want it." They must be pushed to act, to *go* to the Head Office, send a memo, have a fight with the AGS. Whatever. If they *felt*, it was important they *would* sort it out.

Concluding

After people have set out their proposals, they must also think (1) what's going to get in the way of achieving their goal. Then (2) they must specify what *support* (from the other group members) they will need to overcome the obstacles.

Obviously, not all goals are achievable, but at the follow-up meeting, which is arranged for a specified date, we review the goals and how we got on with them. The

essential point is to stop the exercise of that highly developed union officials' skill of "passing the buck".

Variations of these techniques are applicable in all sorts of cases.

For example, where staff relations in an office are bad, you've got to get the group to state what they *like*, about a person. Not what they *don't* like! The follow up is: "What do *you* have to do to improve your relationship with that person?" Too often people complain that the other person doesn't treat them with respect. That's too passive. It puts the blame onto the *other* person. That's not good enough. People have to start taking *personal* responsibility for their work relationships.

Other situations where I'm using these techniques are eg in places where racism or sexism is an issue. Or where shopstewards are complaining about their officials letting them down.

Skills

Naturally, being a facilitator of group processes like this is an acquired skill. I can't get it right overnight. So I have to be open with the group I am working with. If something is not going well I get the group to discuss the problem, to *help* me in what I'm trying to do. Sometimes when there's deep division in a group. I have to split it, and let the "opposing" factions go off and discuss how to resolve the problem of the conflict and come back with proposals to the reconvened group.

It helps to have more than one facilitator in these group activities. The facilitator observing can figure out how his/her partner can be helped out of a hole he/she has got into. But most importantly, I've got to trust the *process* I'm involved in. I have to have the confidence to "get it wrong". With careful planning, once you get to know a group, you can pick the group members who will help you, and they can

be brought into the planning process. But it's the facilitator's job to *lead* the process, and to ask for help when that's needed. I say to myself: If it feels like I'm going wrong, it doesn't mean I *am* going wrong! In practice, if I'm just one minute ahead of the group that I'm facilitating, then I reckon I'm doing well. You've got to think on your feet.

The whole operation is to get people to work together better. The following agenda (for our Regional Executive members in our union's Irish Region) gives a good idea of what ground we would try to cover on a weekend school.

The process *works* because it brings problems out in the open but in a manner that is constructive, not destructive. The plan in our union is to carry out this teambuilding exercise broadly in the union, and then assess our progress after about a year and plan our next steps from there. ☆

