

Employee Relations - Strategic Review

In periods of rapid change, engaging employees and maximising productivity are essential success factors. Beyond survival, organisations that thrive develop a strong alignment between the goals of the organisation and the needs of staff and their representative organisations.

In some organisations, developing a positive relationship between managers, employees and union representatives is problematical. Poor quality relationships - and the low trust which flows from this - can be a major barrier to developing a high commitment culture. Reviewing and re-gearing the industrial/employee relations strategy and practices allows organisations to break the stalemate which often exists and move forward. How is this done?



Step 1: How Are Things Now?

In helping organisations to review their employee relations strategy, our approach focuses on what's happening now. We analyse and review your current strategy - whether stated or implicit in actions - alongside existing procedures and practices. The intent is to establish whether current practices support the business goals. This review can be completed directly with the senior team or can be more extensive i.e. involving managers and employees in a consultation process. The available time and resources along with the overall goals of the exercise will dictate the route. Overall, our approach is *action oriented*, rather than *academic*.

The Outcome: Key 'gaps' will be identified i.e. aspects of the industrial and employee relations system that influence organisational performance. In particular we will identify procedures and practices that are no longer 'fit for purpose', that waste time or generate negative energy within the organisation. If desired, we can benchmark current systems and practices against leading organisations in the field.

Step 2: How Do Things Need to Be in the Near Future?

This step involves identifying specific improvements that need to be made by asking: *'how would the proposed change help to drive the business strategy?'* Client organisations are unique with distinctive challenges - in terms of history, culture, products and people. There is no one-size-fits-all solution and we will develop a customized approach for your organisation. Again, this exercise can be conducted directly with the senior team or designed as a highly participative 'culture changing' exercise, engaging managers, employees and representatives. Either way, the outcome will be a clear roadmap for changes and improvements to the current employee relations strategy. Typical areas for reform which emerge are:

Procedural Agreements: Consultation, negotiation, grievance and disciplinary procedures.

Employee Involvement: Information sharing, team working, project groups.

Reward Practices: The extent to which these support/detract from business objectives.

Change Practices: Consultation and involvement in major change initiatives.

Step 3: How Can These Changes Be Implemented?

Introducing changes in industrial/employee relations is similar to introducing changes generally. The Tandem Consulting approach to managing change equips leaders and teams with the necessary 'thinking and tools' to confidently drive the change themselves. While we guide the process, you stay firmly in the driving seat. Our role is to intervene as necessary to keep projects on track (or where you specifically request support). This approach combines the skills of the consulting team alongside the depth of understanding which exists internally.

Tandem Consulting in Practice

- Developing High Trust Relationships -

Phara Products (name changed) is a major manufacturing firm with 1000+ employees. Manufacturing staff are organised in one general trade union with a smaller number of maintenance personnel in two craft unions. Historically, relationships were 'low trust/arms length' – in what could be described as a 'traditional relationship'. While the Management team and the unions had experimented with a number of 'engagement mechanisms', including direct employee involvement and workplace partnerships, the relationship had always defaulted to the 'traditional model'. When the company were informed that they would not be the site of choice for manufacturing a new product, it sent shock waves across the Irish business. Plant management decided that they needed to radically 'up their game' in terms of productivity, acknowledging that workplace relations had been a barrier to flexibility. Tandem Consulting helped to develop a 'new approach' to employee relations - including high productivity workplace practices and faster dispute resolution procedures to underpin competitiveness and flexibility.



We carried out a series of individual interviews with managers and union representatives along with focus groups of employees. This research confirmed a widespread view that employee relations were a barrier to plant productivity. There was also an appetite for workplace change, provided that such change could be traded off against employment security.

We then facilitated strategic workshops with departmental management to set out specific changes that would be required to radically improve productivity. The likelihood of achieving those changes in the context of current workforce and trade union relations was explored and a 'discussions agenda' developed. This identified key changes in current collective agreements, information and consultation practices, negotiation arrangements and trade union facilities. It was a comprehensive 're-thinking' of the collective bargaining system in place.

The senior team presented the findings at a series of direct meetings with the workforce and separately with the trade unions. A new over-arching collective agreement was subsequently negotiated, including significant changes in organisational structures and working practices deemed necessary for survival and for acquiring internal investment. It also focussed on the role that positive industrial relations should play in supporting competitiveness, productivity and future opportunities. The new framework has led to a sea-change in terms of positive internal relations with staff and their trade union representatives and increased investment in the Irish operation.

**For a confidential discussion about your future plans
call us on 01-8330897 or email info@tandemconsulting.ie**