

Building relationships between trade union officers and the Human Resource team

A case study describing how Acas brought the trade unions and the Human Resource team closer together at an Engineering and Manufacturing organisation. This led to better communication between the two sides and a better understanding of each party's point of view.

The UK arm of this organisation is a division of the global group. Its main office is situated in the north of England.

This case study is focused on the organisation's north of England facility, which employs around 5,000 people and recognises around four trade unions, of which Unite and the GMB are the main ones. Union density is estimated to be high: around 70 per cent in the staff group and around 90 per cent in the manual group. The organisation has other facilities around the UK, which are not unionised, and together employ around 250 project team staff, engaged in support and design.

Acas ran three joint workshops for trade union and HR representatives in order to help build partnership working between them.

This case study charts the progress of this project and the impact it had on the organisation.

The challenge

There had been a history of difficulty in the relationship between the HR function and the trade unions at this facility. A partnership working agreement between management and unions had been put into place in 2003. This had worked well at first but with hindsight, both HR and union interviewees admitted that the success at this time was mostly due to the relationship built up between senior union representatives and the HR function at senior level. This relationship subsequently broke down when the Head of HR left, and the trade union representatives felt that there was a lack of understanding of the business on the part of the HR function, within which staff turnover was relatively high. Trade union representatives therefore felt that it was difficult to build relationships with the HR function. This relative lack of experience of the HR function was acknowledged by the head of HR, who realised that the HR team needed help in their dealings with the trade union representatives.

The relatively polarised positions of the two sides was described as follows by the main Acas adviser who worked with the organisation on this project:



“The basic union line was that the existing agreements, some dating back 20 years, were sacrosanct. However, the HR department was peopled by young graduates, with no background in engineering, who didn’t like the old agreements – they were sometimes written before they were born and in a language that they did not understand. There were therefore very different cultures in HR and within the unions.” Acas adviser

The trade unions were also suspicious of the new Head of HR, with whom they had not worked before. The actual trigger for contacting Acas was the fact that the trade union representatives gave a letter to the HR Director, voicing their dissatisfaction with the deterioration of the relationship between the HR function and the trade union representatives. It was at this point that HR felt that the organisation needed external help to build up the relationship.

How Acas helped

Acas advisers came and talked with the HR function about what they wanted to achieve from the workplace project. Similar preparatory meetings were held between Acas advisers and trade union representatives so that they could put their view across.

Acas then ran a total of three joint workshops involving around 60 participants in each one, drawn from the HR function and from manual and staff trade union representatives.

The first workshop involved a session in which both sides could raise issues and then talk about how to resolve them. In the afternoon session of that workshop, talks were given by Acas advisers on issues such as the history of the trade union movement.

The second workshop followed much the same format as the first workshop, with the emphasis of bringing the two sides together into a shared environment in which they could work together.

The third workshop attempted to bring together the learning from the first two workshops. Each side gave details of what their job consisted of, which both HR and trade union representatives felt had been helpful.

The outcomes and benefits

Overall, the view from most of those interviewed was that there were benefits from the workshops, although some possible improvements to the workshops were also mentioned.

Although some of the participants had some doubt as to the relevance of some of the workshops, both the trade union representatives and the HR representatives felt that they had come closer together as a result, and now understood the other party better. The view from the HR function was that the very fact that the two parties had spent a considerable length of time in the same room together had contributed to improving their relationship.



One particularly striking point was made by the Head of HR, who noted that during the Acas project, this was, for some people, the first time that they had sat down with a person from the opposite side in a non-conflictual situation. By allowing people to interact socially, they could begin to see the other side as 'more human'.

"The Acas workshops got people sat around tables actually talking to each other and building networks, just that social interaction at coffee breaks, you know, people chatting. Some of the trade union reps I don't think had ever been in anything other than a conflict situation with an HR person, because I sat back to a certain extent and watched at the final session and you heard people sort of saying 'oh she's alright her really isn't she', and it's just that human contact ... certainly relationships have massively changed." **Head of HR**

Overall, there was broad agreement between all those interviewed for this case study that the organisation had travelled a considerable way in terms of the basic relationship between the HR function and the trade union representatives. At the outset, the relationship was seen to be relatively poor, characterised by low levels of trust and preconceptions about the 'other side'. Trade union representatives felt that the HR function did not understand how they worked, or the industrial context in which they worked, due a lack of knowledge and experience. They were also frustrated at what they perceived to be delays in how the HR function was dealing with a range of requests from the trade unions. From the HR function point of view, there was a feeling that the trade unions did not understand them, the pressures they were under, and their role in general.

After attending the three workshops organised by Acas, both sides felt that the relationship had improved considerably, in terms of understanding and the attitude of both sides towards each other. The HR function members found that the trade union representatives could be a good source of knowledge and information and were now more willing to go and consult them about a range of issues, sometimes in order to 'test the temperature' of the workforce. Conversely, HR managers reported that trade unions would now come to them to warn them that a particular situation might be developing. There was also a general feeling from the HR team that HR and unions were working together on specific issues rather than representing opposite sides.

For further information on Acas services and publications see the Acas website www.acas.org.uk or contact our helpline 08457 47 47 47.

For further details on this case study please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at research@acas.org.uk

