



Having It Your Way

Insights

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Burger King is not necessarily the only place you can get it "your way." We believe that it's possible to have a more productive and committed work force and no union at the same time. It definitely is not a case of "either . . . or." And you can do it without fighting and conflict. Indeed fighting and conflict are generally counterproductive to the effort to remain union free and often cause employers to lose their focus on the only objective that really counts – employees.

Fighting . . .

Fighting and conflict have very little positive impact on an employer's goal of remaining union free. Fighting all by itself will not work and we believe that, if you have to fight, you are at a disadvantage, simply because unions are used to fighting and want to fight with you. They are generally good at fighting. That's what they know. Unions are good at striking and working up a crowd with the rallying cry that individuals are being treated unfairly and being taken advantage of. Where unions can act like they are fighting for your employees, they have a chance of winning.

But where unions cannot pick a fight, where they cannot find employees unhappy with their conditions, where they cannot offer a realistic prospect of improvement, unions have nothing to sell – nothing to offer. And frequently they move on to look for a workplace where they have a better chance of making a quicker sale of their product.

And what is it that unions are selling? At its essence the union's product is protection – protection against the unknown, protection against unfair policies and supervisors, protection against poor wages and benefits. Unions tell employees that they can protect them from arbitrary mistreatment, from fear of want and unfairness, from fear of the unknown, from fear of weakness. Of course, unions can't guarantee all the protections they promise, but that doesn't stop them from promising, nor does it stop some employees from believing that unions can get it all for them. The union basically follows Henry Kaiser's advice: "Find a need and fill it."

. . . Versus Talking

There's nothing wrong with the idea of identifying or creating needs and then satisfying those needs. Much of our free-market entrepreneurial system is built on just that premise. It is the effective employer's job to ensure that there are no major needs in its work place that the union can use to further its own sales campaign.

The effective employer does not really defeat a union. The effective employer through its communications with its employees, through its policies and procedures, through its treatment of employees, renders the union irrelevant. The effective employer makes the union's sales pitch immaterial. When the union says "We'll get you more money," employees think "I'm already paid fairly." When the union says, "We'll make sure you won't be unfairly fired," employees think "That's not an issue for me." When a union says "we'll get you better benefits," employees think, "We're getting about as much as the business can afford in today's environment." When a union says, "We'll guarantee you job security," employees think "Sure, just like the union did for employees at GM and Chrysler."

These hypothetical optimum responses don't happen by accident. They happen because a company has taken pains to examine itself and its relationships with its employees. It happens where the employer has determined a course of action which puts employees first and where it has effectively communicated to employees that they are truly important to the company; and, most importantly, where it has shown employees how important they are to the company's success.

Let's Get Real

Right about now the realistic employer may be thinking that all of the above sounds good. But in today's climate we're just trying to survive. We have never had business conditions as bad as they are now. There is competition on every side, our margins are almost nil, our sales are down and there are no realistic prospects that there is going to be a major turnaround any time soon. We're just trying to hang on and we're asking people to do more with less. There isn't any real job security because we've had to cut employees, and may have to cut more. There aren't any ways to give employees more right now.

So what do you do? Give up and wait for the friendly union organizer to fill your employees' heads with visions of sugar plums? There are other choices. The current conditions actually do offer employers certain "advantages" which did not exist before the recession.

Job value – employees today look at jobs differently than they did two years ago. Jobs have a new meaning they didn't have before national unemployment figures reached 10%. Jobs are more valuable now than they ever have been in recent memory.

Employee awareness – with the almost instantaneous spread of news, employees know about the economy. They experience the bad effects of the economy everyday in their personal lives. They understand on an intensely personal level that things are tough.

Lowered expectations – employees see stores and businesses close, and they read about or experience people losing their homes. They hear of long-established corporations declaring bankruptcy.

There is a new air of realism in the country, a new awareness of the fragility of our system and of the uncertainties we are all facing. The opportunity we see in all of this is the chance for the employer to

uncertainties we are all facing. The opportunity we see in all of this is the chance for the employer to make use of this new level of awareness in employees to communicate realistically to employees the challenges and obstacles the business is facing and the steps the company is taking to deal with the current and foreseeable problems.

This isn't the time to sugarcoat reality but rather to tell employees the problems and challenges and to enlist their support and help in meeting those challenges. Such communications send an unmistakable message of respect to employees. It tells employees that they are important enough to have these very important matters shared with them. Effective communications also enlist employee suggestions and understanding and ensure that employees understand the business's strategy and the anticipated way forward. Employees now have the ability to buy in to the plan and to do what they can in their own area of expertise to forward that effort.

Making It Count

Don't misunderstand. By these recommendations we're not urging that management immediately schedule a meeting to get all of this done and check Employee Communications off the old To Do list. We all know, but regularly lose sight of the fact, that effective communications is a process and not an event. The message we are envisioning cannot be delivered in one well-crafted speech, no matter how eloquent the speech writer or how gifted the speaker. Communicating important messages to employees cannot be a one time event, any more than listening to employees is a one time event. In order to be effective, an effective communications process must be an ongoing back and forth process, not a hit or miss or a one time occurrence.

Furthermore, if as we predict, employers are likely to have much less time to communicate with employees in future union-organizing campaigns, the prudent employer will ensure that communications with employees are a regular and on-going process, not an occasional indication that there is some new crisis brewing. In the new world, employers had better start communicating like crazy – not just about unions but about the business, about issues of importance to employees, about all aspects of the business and about the relationship.

We also urge that employers look carefully at their business and consider a communications program which will fit their unique circumstances. There is no one size which will fit all and an effective communications program can and should include a number of methods such as periodic meetings at all levels of the organization, regular employee updates by a senior management official, employee newsletters, video clips of important communications, and routine small group meetings with employees to answer their questions and to communicate matters of importance. The communications program needs to be tailored to your company, as well as to each facility within the corporation.

The one absolute that we do offer is that it is urgent that every employer in America look at its communications program and get busy communicating effectively with employees and, equally importantly, listening carefully to employees. It makes no sense to give the other side a huge head start in the race for the minds and hearts of employees.

