

Unit 6

Maintaining effectiveness

This unit suggests some general lessons that will help to maximise the effectiveness of information and consultation arrangements, stressing the importance of the following:

- basic essentials - including training and regular review
- key behaviours such as openness and honesty

Basic essentials

Management and employees have a mutual interest in the effectiveness of their organisation's information and consultation arrangements. It is a reasonable assumption, therefore, that most will not just be interested in learning what they have to do to cope with the demands of the ICE Regulations. They are likely to want to know whether, even if a common template is inappropriate, there are general lessons that can be drawn from good practice that will help them to maximise the effectiveness of their arrangements. The recent and increasingly documented experience of Acas and other organisations in the field, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Involvement and Participation Association, suggests that there are.

For a start, there are some basic essentials:

- *A clear understanding of how consultation will contribute to improved organizational performance.* If consultation is simply about token things like 'tea and toilets', it will not have any credibility in the eyes of managers or employees.
- *Effective meetings.* Consultative meetings need to have meaningful agendas, professional preparation, chairing and follow-up, plus well-worked out arrangements for reporting back.
- *Extensive joint working and problem solving.* Simply meeting regularly in a committee is unlikely in itself to make a great deal of difference; working

together to resolve real problems that concern management and employees is the only way of building trust.

Adequate time and resources for employee representatives to fulfill their responsibilities. The role of the employee representative in effective consultation is a very challenging one and the people who do the job need as much practical help and support as they can.

Two 'essentials' need special emphasis:

The need for training

One of the main barriers to effective information and consultation is lack of knowledge and skills.

Employees and their representatives need training to make sense of the business information disclosed to them and to be able to contribute to decision making. Both employee representatives *and* managers need an understanding of the concepts, processes and mechanisms of information and consultation, along with training in such basic behavioural skills as public speaking, making presentations, 'brainstorming' and diplomacy. If possible, the training should be joint, which will help to improve mutual understanding. It should also be participative, with people being encouraged to exchange views, take part in discussions and share ideas and experiences. This will

help to develop the behaviour that effective information and consultation require.

Training is particularly important for first line managers and employee representatives, both of whom have pivotal information and consultation responsibilities, but often limited experience.

Training can enable them to:

- become more aware of the importance of good information and consultation practice
- understand their roles and responsibilities as communicators
- support those who are less outspoken and improve their ability to communicate.

The need for regular review

Regular monitoring of practice is also strongly recommended. Not only will this enable managers

and employees to assess whether information and consultation practice matches policy. It will also

provide the basis on which to refresh and renew arrangements in the light of changing circumstances.

In particular monitoring should ensure that:

- The arrangements match the structure of the organisation
- There are clear objectives and a shared understanding of them, including the boundaries between information, consultation and negotiation
- Key roles of senior managers, first line managers and employee representatives are clearly defined and understood, with appropriate training and resources
- The subjects of information and consultation are central to the needs of the organisation and meaningful and relevant to the needs of employees, with issues dealt with at the right level
- Information is clear, timely and provided on a regular basis, with opportunity for feedback and employee questions
- Consultation takes place early and before key decisions are made, with employee 'voice' heeded as well as heard
- There is effective feedback from consultative meetings to employees
- There is an appropriate 'fit' between information and consultation and other practices such as appraisal and reward systems

A regular review is also an occasion to check for two other things: whether a regular assessment of training and development needs and action taken to meet them is taking place; and whether everything that can be done is being done to promote the key behaviours discussed below.

Employees and managers working together can do such a review. Or they can involve a third party to help identify improvements, with other organisations being used to benchmark performance.

The results should be discussed with employees and, where appropriate, their representatives. So too should any remedial action the review suggests. In practice, such monitoring will largely depend on feedback from managers and employees.

There are other indicators of the effectiveness of information and consultation, however, including:

- quality;
- productivity;
- absence;
- labour turnover; and
- overall employment relations climate as measured by attitude surveys

Key behaviours

Last, but by no means least, it is important to recognise that there are also some key behaviours that really make the difference:

- *Openness and honesty.* Perhaps the most powerful lesson is that effective communication and consultation arrangements are most likely to develop where there is a culture of openness and honesty.
- *Mutual support and learning.* People need to feel that they can talk confidently about their work and learn from both successes and mistakes. Information and consultation arrangements are unlikely to be effective where there is a 'blame' culture and people are primarily worried about making mistakes.
- *Top management commitment.* Senior managers not only need to play high profile roles, such as making presentations and chairing meetings, but also *demonstrate* commitment day-in and day-out by sharing information themselves, consulting early, listening to contributions and explaining final decisions. If they don't, they cannot expect managers to do anything but follow their example – example is the most powerful form of communication there is.
- *Patience.* Mutual trust is a precondition for effective information and consultation. But this may take time to develop, especially where there is little or no tradition of informing and consulting with employees or where employment relations has been adversarial. Very clear is that working through difficult issues together is the best way of building trust. People too often give up too quickly.

Those directly involved in helping organizations to introduce effective information and consultation arrangements also agree on a final fundamental point. The process needs to produce early 'wins' to demonstrate what can be done. This means starting as you should carry on, i.e. by adopting a strategic approach to information and consultation reflecting their importance as core business processes.