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Description:

In recent decades, the combined impact of free-trade, market globalization and the advent of new information technologies stressed the need for more flexible organizations able to adapt quickly to changes. Meeting this need for flexibility required major shifts in work organization that could not be achieved within the restrictive framework of the traditional model of labor relations inherited from Fordism, which is characterized by conflicts between interests and parties.

In the 1980s and 1990s, various employee involvement and joint union-management initiatives were introduced, across a variety of industries such as aeronautics, mining, pulp and paper, steel, and telecommunications in order to improve management relations and effective conflict resolution in a timely and flexible way. Although numerous studies have investigated different aspects of such innovations in labor-management cooperation (Gray, Myers, & Myers, 1999), how such arrangements impact union representatives and leaders remains largely unexplored (Rubinstein, 2001b).

While joint partnerships may offer significant opportunities for unions, they also appear to present new challenges as they “try to balance their ongoing responsibilities for both collective bargaining and individual member representation with new roles involving managerial decision making” (Rubinstein, 2001a: p. 164).

In this study, we investigated the impact of labor-management partnerships on the role of union representatives. We conducted a qualitative study of about a dozen Canadian businesses in various industrial sectors where we found different types of partnerships. Our data collection strategy involved a variety of methods (discussion workshops, document analysis, in-depth case studies, and semi-structured interviews) and a range of information sources (labor and management representatives, managers and employees, union advisors, and representatives of Canadian and Quebec departments of labor concerned with partnerships).

Contrary to our expectations, results suggest that union leaders' role and duties were not perceived as significantly different under such labor-management partnerships. Moreover, respondents considered that they should not change. Instead, it is the way they play this role that is altered significantly on the basis of shared values of respect, transparency, honesty, commitment and cooperation. Relationships between parties were governed by personal (person-to-person) considerations far more than by organizational (role-to-role) policies or structures. The partnerships we investigated were perceived as fragile and based upon the willingness of union representatives to change the way they play their role in

order to achieve common goals or projects. Change was reflected in three main ways: (1) Relationships between parties become characterized by openness and trust, (2) problem solving and decision making come to be based upon cooperation and the search for consensus, and (3) union constituencies strive to find a new balance between the interests of labor and management.

Partnerships are a new form of interaction between parties that build on the traditional approach without eliminating it. When partnerships are not feasible or dysfunctional, parties can revert to their usual institutionalized ways of interacting, which continue to exist.
