The influence of cooperative labour-management relations on union leader roles

Mario Roy, Ph.D.
Directeur, CÉOT

Denis Harrisson, PhD.

Victor Haines, Ph.D.
PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Labour-management partnerships
- Previous investigations
- Evolving roles
- Research objectives
- Methodology
- Overview of partnership experiences
- Results
- Conflict prevention strategies
- Conditions for success
- References
Labour-management partnerships are defined as temporary social arrangements that involve several actors working together to achieve a common goal that requires sharing resources, ideas and social relations (Easton, 1992).

Labour-management partnerships are defined as all cooperation or collaboration activities or processes between parties intended to ensure organizational success and secure stable quality employment (Roy, Harrisson et Haines, 2004).

Quebec unions who generally support the adoption of Labour-management partnerships view them in the context of the democratisation of work (CSN, 1995), (FTQ, 1997), (CSD, 1997).

The transition to more harmonious labour relations requires changes in the way work is organize.

While labour relations and the organization of work are separate social interaction systems, they are connected.
PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

- Rational for strategic partnerships (Applebaum and Hunter, 2003)
- Prevalence of labour-management partnerships (Gray, Myers and Myers, 1999)
- Mutual gains, extent of implementation of partnerships (Roche, 2000)
- Key conditions for successful labour-management partnerships (Chartrand and Ward, 2000)
- Trust as a critical condition to cooperation in labour-management partnerships (Harrisson, 2003)
- Different configurations of labour-management partnerships
- Labour-management partnerships and new work arrangements (flexibility, adaptability, social innovations)
- How Labour-management partnerships impact labour relations, job security, organizational performance
EVOLVING ROLES

- Few studies investigate the roles of union and management representatives in Labour-management partnerships.

- Our hypotheses hold that labour-management partnerships foster:
  - Role transformations
  - Challenges in adapting to those new roles
  - Role conflicts for union representatives
  - A lack of preparation of union and management representative (both old and new)
Describe new roles

Better understand the challenges involved in adapting to those new roles

Identify effective strategies to address the challenges involved in adapting to those new roles
METHODOLOGY

- Exploratory interviews in two organizations (union & management)
- Workshop (8 organizations)
  - 8 union representatives
  - 8 employer representatives
- Two case studies
  - Convenience sample of respondents
  - Union and employer representatives
  - Individual face to face interviews with more than 20 respondents from each organization
  - Validation
- Additional interviews in three other organizations
- Meetings with the Quebec Ministry of Labour
OVERVIEW OF PARTNERSHIP EXPERIENCES

- Critical preconditions that typically activate the need for partnership:
  - Shared realization that current labour relations are conflictual and dissatisfying
  - Economic challenge that threaten the organizations survival (current or projected crisis)

- Purposes
  - Involve employees and develop flexibility
  - Make work more interesting
  - Develop skills and knowledge
  - Adapt to new production processes (automation)
  - Increase productivity
  - Ensure stable quality employment
  - Improve labour relations and work climate
Somewhat unexpected findings with regards to roles

1. No obvious role transformation
   (everyone needs to know that the institutional role is unchanged)

2. However, role is addressed differently
   (union representative have more power and influence)

3. Different types of relationships
   (more personal, informal, based on trust as opposed to institutional,
   formal and based on structure)
Challenges involved in adapting to a new relationship

- Personal change
  - Values, beliefs, principles, attitudes
    - Try to be more open, honest, and committed to the extent of putting job on the line

- Adapt to new relationships based upon trust towards the other person and learn to address concerns and listen

- Integrate a different problem-solving approach
  - From a philosophy of confrontation to one of collaboration
  - Find solutions rather than objections
  - Adopt the other person’s view
  - Integrate different perspectives into solutions
  - Be objective, impartial and rigorous (facts)
Challenges involved in adapting to a new relationship (continued)

- Accept the scope of role
  Influence and not co-management

- Potential for tensions between union representatives and union members
  Union representative perceived as being too close to management and therefore “who is protecting our interests”?

- Efforts involved in maintaining member commitment and support for the labour-management partnership

- The ability to control those who oppose the labour-management partnership (the resistors)

- Implement practices that foster interaction and conflict resolution rather than reliance on grievances and disciplinary procedures
Examples of such practices:

- Harmonisation committees
- Upper management involvement in unresolved cases and continuously address dissatisfactions and problems
- Joint union-management problem-solving training
- Joint union-management meetings to inform employees of important changes and to ensure clear communication (no ambiguities)...
CONFLICT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Share information and make sure it is communicated to the union.
- Do not lose sight of each party’s interests and make frequent reference to shared interests.
- Adopt a common framework relative to roles and responsibilities.
- Demonstrate respect towards the union leadership and do not challenge its credibility.
- Work to improve relationships between line managers and union representatives.
CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Strong mutual commitment from both management and union
- Strong leadership from representatives from both management and union
- Shared values that involve respect, openness, and honesty
- High trust based upon quality interpersonal relationships
- Quality of communications
- Respect of collective agreement
- All line managers and union representatives highly involved and committed to the partnership
- Willingness to agree and freedom to pull out (rather than co-management)
REFERENCES


