

Insights and Outcomes

Case study: the claim for union representation

We present an account of the developments that followed the final ballot.

This case study highlights the consequences for management when they begin to lose touch with their employees, or, in this case, shop-floor operatives. Maintaining relationships and 'knowing' what employees feel about their jobs and employment has to be worked at; if little is done, either formally or informally, to listen to what they have to say and, wherever possible, take appropriate action, then the two parties can become 'estranged'.

The case also illustrates that when this happens, workers can look to elsewhere for protection and representation, which represents a kind of security relative to their employment interests. The situation presented shows that an interest in trade union representation is often explicable in terms of 'push' rather than 'pull' factors, which are often to do with a perception that management is in some way neglecting the employees. Negative experiences over pay, working conditions, representation, management style, etc., are often the reasons why workers seek union membership, apart from ideological/political reasons.

Essentially, the managing director (MD) had assumed that his two production managers were engaged with the shop-floor operatives and were listening to what they had to say, which was not the case generally and less so with the night shift. One of them, who prior to joining the company had been a union member and activist in another organization, began to talk to his colleagues about how the company was paying below market rates and that the absence of formal representation rights prevented them from talking to senior managers about matters that were important to them. Once the 'seeds of doubt are sown' perceptions can be manipulated and a momentum to challenge the status quo can gain strength.

In this case, the MD, through his determination to look at the views of his employees, and because he challenged many of the claims being made by the union in support of their recognition claim, was able to defuse the situation, and prove that the majority of his employees were not in favour of union membership and representation.

What he had to do, though, was to get to the bottom of why the shop floor wanted to join the union, and this led him to meet with his two production managers to discuss what had happened. From these discussions, it became clear that more needed to be done to keep the employees engaged and involved in what the company was doing.

He decided to offer his employees two options. First, he was prepared to set up a form of works council that would meet periodically and to which all staff would be invited. Given the shift patterns and different levels of interest, this perhaps was not considered the best option. The second was an offer to meet informally but regularly with representatives of the production operatives to listen to what they had to say and share information about the company and its finances. It was the second option that was chosen. Office staff had no strong views on this and did not wish to participate.

One final point: the union activist left the company shortly after the recognition case was decided in favour of the company position.