

chapter 10

employee relations and voice

HRM in practice

Creating union-free workplaces

This chapter examines some of the reasons why management introduces employee voice systems. They may be introduced as a deliberate HR strategy of union avoidance. This is achieved by establishing an employee relations system that emulates a union-based system, as this writer suggests (Knight, 2011, pp. 20–2):

There is no magic formula for keeping unions at bay ... While it is unhealthy to manage in a perpetual state of crisis, driven at all times by a fear of union organizing, it is useful to maintain a healthy respect for that possibility. To avoid this prospect, management should understand the union's sales pitch and bargaining objectives. Then, to the extent possible and always in a manner consistent with the primary objectives of the organization, management should try to replicate much of what the union would promise to employees in an organizing drive – it is difficult for a union to sell something that is already being provided by management. Some of the key aspects of a unionized workplace that non-union workplaces may strive to emulate include:

- Recognition of service or seniority as a key factor in compensation, vacation entitlement, job security ...
- A structured complaints procedure that could double as an employee suggestions procedure that ensures employees have a clearly understood and formal vehicle for reacting to management decisions, including disciplinary decisions
- An effective dispute-resolution mechanism, even if it's simply a clear acknowledgement a manager will make a final decision that will be communicated to the effected employee(s).

One of the proposed management-initiated direct employee voice systems – a structured complaints procedure – is examined in detail in this chapter. Critics tend to be sceptical of employee voice systems because of the shift from a union focus towards an individually oriented focus. Non-unionism avoids the restrictions found in a collective agreement as well as potential intervention of a third party (for example, an

arbitrator) in grievance disputes. Other critics of direct employee voice tend to be influenced by Foucauldian theory, which sees such HR practices as making workers' behaviour more manageable (see, for example, Townley, 1994).

Stop! What are the likely benefits for managers of a direct employee voice system in the workplace? Should trade unions be concerned about the introduction of an EI mechanism? If so, why or why not?

Sources and further information: The extract is taken from Jamie Knight's article 'Union-free shops strong in HR' (Knight, 2011).

See also Ackers et al. (2005) for more information.

Note: This feature was written by John Bratton.