

## STUDENT SUMMARY NOTES

# chapter 10

## employee relations and voice

### Chapter overview

The focus of Chapter 10 is on the relationship between individual employee and the employer or management, and the quality of that relationship in terms of communications and employee voice in day-to-day decision-making. The chapter puts forward a theoretical model for analyzing employee voice (EV). Greater EV has been identified with the 'soft' developmental HRM model, business re-engineering and changes in job design. Managerial disciplinary action is also examined as a way to moderate and control employee behaviour in the workplace.

#### Chapter objectives:

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Appreciate the importance of employee communication in managing people
2. Define employee voice and explain the context in which employee voice has changed over time
3. Explain the types of employee voice mechanisms used in practice, why managers might want to increase their use and the potential impact on organizational performance
4. Identify some ethical issues and their relevance to employee relations
5. Describe the major issues relating to sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace and the implications for managing employee relations
6. Explain the concepts, values and legal framework that underpin workplace grievance and disciplinary processes.

### Introduction

Employee relations affect the day-to-day relationship between managers and non-managers in the workplace and the term 'employee relations' denotes an assortment of employer led initiatives for improving workplace communication, for engaging employees either directly or indirectly in

decision-making and for securing employee compliance with management rules through disciplinary action.

In some HRM models, employee relations contribute to enhancing employee commitment.

## The nature of employee relations

The assortment of employer led initiatives that constitute employee relations – communication, employee voice, rights and discipline – is shown in **figure 10.1** (p. 334).

The antecedents of managerial leadership behaviours and the focus on LM and employee reciprocal exchange as it applies to the HRM-performance debate underscores the importance of workplace *communications* and *employee voice* mechanisms.

A set of individual employment *rights* affects the nature of employee relations, e.g., the right to be treated fairly and equitably is embedded in UK and EU legislation.

Employee *discipline* is the regulation of employee behaviour designed to produce predictable and effective performance. A framework of legal rules and procedures surrounds the disciplinary process.

## Employee communication

Communication is central for the process of decision-making, management control, leadership, and power. Communication is an important managerial skill for “getting things done” (see **Figure 1.2** in chapter 1).

### Study tip:

Look at the interview from *HRM As I See It* (p. 338), which features a HR professional, Keith Hanlon-Smith, discussing changes in employee relations.

To be effective organizational communication must be regular, two-way, and include entire management team.

Key issues related to workplace communications are shown in **Figure 10.2** (p. 340).

Three major perspectives for understanding and studying organizational communications are discussed: functionalist, interpretivist and critical.

- a) Functionalist - organizational communication is viewed as a conduit through which information is transmitted between sender and receiver.
- b) Interpretivist - an approach that recognizes that organizational members interpret identical information differently and hence the problem of predicting.
- c) Critical/Radical - a perspective that examines myths, metaphors, and story telling as a source of management power and control over subordinates.

Communication theorists have identified a number of challenges when designing a communications system, including:

- Disparate geographical locations
- Large variety of skill groups
- Cross-cultural communications
- Gendered communications
- Employment arrangements
- Financial constraints

Two-way communication – functionalist theory emphasizes downward, upwards and horizontal communications.

**HRM in practice 10.1** Ryanair accused of ‘management by fear’.  
This example (p. 339) examines labour and employee relations in a European airline company.

**Table 10.1** (p. 342) lists frequently used direct communication methods reported by 2011 WERS.

## Employee voice

Employee voice involves employees exerting a countervailing and upward pressure on management. It is the current fashionable term to use to describe a range of HR practices that are often labelled ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ employee participation or involvement.

Employee involvement is perceived as a ‘softer’ form of participation and is alleged to be more flexible and assumes a commonality of interests between management and employees.

**HRM and globalization 10.1** A warm welcome to the kooky and the wacky

This example (p. 345) discusses employee involvement policies in an American firm.

Methods of employee voice show a continuum. From information to communication, problem-solving groups, teams, consultation, worker directors and European-style works councils (see **Figure 10.3** p. 347).

Figure 10.3 provides a framework for examining different forms of employee voice:

- The *form* of voice – direct and indirect
- The *level* of voice within the organization
- The *degree* of employee voice
- The *influence* of employee voice on decision-making

**Study tip:** You can supplement the textbook with Johnstone and Ackers's chapter (2015) 'Introduction: Employee Voice' in Johnstone & Ackers (eds) *Finding a Voice at Work?* (pp. 1-17), OUP.

## A general theory of employee voice

A general theory of employee voice is offered in **Figure 10.4** (p. 348).

Employee voice aims to influence employee behaviour and change organizational culture. The involvement-commitment cycle is presented as a general theory to explain why work organizations introduce EV schemes.

Management theorists put forward three reasons why management introduces EV: moral, economic and behavioural.

## Indirect employee voice

Joint consultation and indirect employee participation acknowledges the potential benefit of employee voice in the decision-making process. In its simplest form, joint consultation takes the form of an informal exchange of views between a group of employees and their line manager.

## Joint consultative committees

Joint consultation committees (JCCs) are workplace-based committees of managers and other employees that meet to discuss and consult, rather than negotiate, about workplace change. **Table 10.2** (p. 350) shows the incidence of JCCs 2004 and 2011.

Joint consultation versus collective bargaining, 'Revitalization' versus 'Marginality' models is discussed. WERS 2011 data show extent to which managers inform, consult or negotiate with employee representatives.

## **The structure and operation of joint consultative committees**

The structure of a JCC is guided by the organization's strategic goals, management philosophy and HR strategy.

The diagram (see **Figure 10.5** on p. 352) illustrates that in a unionized environment communicating, consulting, and negotiating can be closely linked together in the handling of employee relations.

## **European Works Councils**

European Works Councils, unlike JCC, are mandatory consultative committees. EWCs functions are:

- Establish 2-way communications
- Maintain peaceful and cooperative relations
- Provide training

Two major impediments to EV

- a) Trade union attitudes - Refer also to the discussion on trade unions and HRM (Chapter 9), and
- b) Management attitudes - resistance to EV schemes is reported from first-line managers.

## **Employee voice and paradox**

Four main types of EV paradox are examined: structure, agency, identity, and power. A key question posed is whether creative thinking and innovation can emerge from these EV paradoxes.

## **Employee rights and grievances**

### **Employee rights**

The equality of employee relations is a function of organizational values and culture; in addition, individual rights that are designed to protect employees against inequitable managerial behaviour buttress it.

Sexual harassment as an employee relations issue – different forms of hostility and misogyny towards female employees, particularly sexual harassment, has received attention from the courts and researchers.

**Figure 10.6** (p. 356) shows EU Code on Sexual Harassment.

## Employee grievances

A grievance is a complaint by an employee that the behaviour of another co-worker or LM has been unfair or damaging to her or him. A grievance procedure plays an important role in introducing democracy into the workplace.

Non-union models of grievance handling vary widely. At a minimum, a grievance policy should:

- Investigate the complaint
- Take appropriate action
- Resolve the grievance

## Sexual harassment as an employee relations issue

Sexual harassment and misogyny creates a toxic workplace and has negative consequences that extend beyond the individual target to include co-workers, groups and the whole organization.

**HRM and globalization 10.2** Sexual harassment as gender-based violence in a BRIC economy  
This example (p. 357) examines how organizations deal with gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

Cyber bullying is a new form of bullying and harassment in the workplace, See *Taggart v. TeleTech UK Ltd.*

## Employee discipline

When employee 'voice' mechanisms fail to create desirable workplace behaviours, managers can resort to disciplinary action.

We define discipline as the process maintaining compliance with the rules that regulate employment in order to produce a controlled and effective performance.

**HRM in practice 10.2** Bullying at work: 'My life became a living hell...'

## Disciplinary concepts

Every formal organization has rules of behaviour in the workplace. The purpose of discipline is threefold:

- Improvement
- Punishment and
- Deterrent

The employer can impose penalties for infractions, such as: rebuke, warnings, transfer or demotion, suspension and dismissal.

Formal disciplinary procedures are the norm even in workplaces with relatively few employees. Four key features of a disciplinary are examined:

- Fairness
- Facilities for representation
- Procedural steps
- Management rules

The UK ACAS Code of Practice on discipline at work provides practical guidance to employers.

## Engaging in critical thinking

### Chapter case study: Bullying at Fresh Supermarket

This case requires you to demonstrate an understanding of the toxic impact on employee performance and the workplace that arises from bullying and the role of disciplinary action to change employee behaviour.

### Reflective question/essay question

In what ways might employee voice improve organizational decision-making and performance?

**Tip to students:** One way to answer this question is for students to first define EV, and then proceed to explain the potential outcomes of EI initiatives. It is claimed that EV improves the quality of decision making because of (a) synergy and (b) individual biases and limited information held by individuals are corrected by the collective involvement in the process. EV also assists in decision implementation because EV increases commitment to the decision. Reference may also be made to the several studies that report EV improving organizational performance. The answer should however explain the challenges researchers face when attempting to measure the precise EV-performance link. See Chapter 3 for a discussion on this point.