

GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY AND ROLE PLAYING IN LABOR
RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Generated by a kind of "social conscience" industrial management has accorded increasing attention to that area euphemistically referred to as Human Relations; and, it has even seen fit to venture into fields of endeavor which it formerly considered to be foreign to its interests and needs. From its technological and mechanical orientation industrial management's emphasis has been slowly channeled into a bio-social awareness of the importance of the personal equation; that the individual and his work group are permanent and inexorable sources of both pain and pleasure in industrial life. A most interesting aspect, incidentally, about this awakening of management to the need for "humanizing" its organization along predetermined lines (paralleling technologic improvements of its operations), which can be classified as psychengineering, is the abject failure of the social organization to comprehend the nature and complexity of the problems of management. In effect, the formal organization claims the informal organization suffers from a form of "intellectual myopia," i.e., an inability to perceive the long range issues because of a limited frame of reference. On the other hand, the informal organization charges the formal organization engages in sundry acts of mental masturbation.

As a consequence neither management nor employees have found a way to successfully bridge their misunderstandings and develop an empathic response aimed at reducing conflicts and tensions. With the advent of unionism the efforts to understand one another and work in harmony has not been noticeably narrowed; and with each passing year more ways and means for formalizing the avenues of understanding and communication have arisen. And, with each new need or demand a new method, technique or procedure had to be evolved to assist both management and the union in the pursuance of their efforts to more effectively deal with one another; the individual demand has given way to collective bargaining; the informal understanding is now a written contract; the personal gripe becomes a formal grievance, *ad infinitum*.

As a direct result of union-management relations the grievance has assumed overriding importance as a powerful instrument in labor relations. Unfortunately, it has also become a means whereby it has been used both injudiciously and with malice as often as not. With an increase in the volume of grievances, concomitantly management has had to increase its labor relations staff as well as continually train them in the fine art of effectively disposing of grievances.

There are an estimated 100,000 collective bargaining agreements in force today (1). These agreements, with their built-in due process machinery—the grievance procedure and arbitration—protect the personal rights of each worker just as the due process clause and the other articles of the Constitution of the United States protect the personal rights of every citizen. Since a grievance can generally be defined in terms of anything related to the job situation which an employee thinks or feels is wrong—be it either real or imaginary—the grievance machinery is essentially designed to answer problems once they have occurred (6).

CASE BACKGROUND

A large steel company with a long history of labor unrest—work stoppages, work slowdowns, and strikes—found itself facing an increasing number of grievances with each passing year since the war. The past year was an especially turbulent one which eventually culminated in a two week strike because the union claimed over 1000 of their grievances were not satisfactorily disposed of. (Actually, some 600 grievances had been resolved, albeit not to the complete satisfaction of all union officers, with another 400 grievances being in the various steps of the grievance machinery. Nevertheless, 400 grievances is a sizable number to cope with particularly in view of the fact a sister company with the same labor force had less than one-tenth of that number over the same time span.)

Over the previous four years top management had been changed three times in an effort to find an effective team which could make plant operations profitable and straighten out its labor problems simultaneously. Also, during this period the Labor Relations Director and his staff of ten supervisors conscientiously sought to improve their skills by undertaking both formal and informal means of self and group improvement. Apparently, in spite of all efforts, labor-management relations deteriorated steadily and the labor relations supervisors were being “swamped” with grievances. Each labor relations supervisor was assigned to a given mill and he was fully responsible

for handling all grievances which arose in his bailiwick. The work load became unbearable; it stretched from a 5-day work week into six, and from 40 hours to 60 hours per work week.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES AND METHODS

A meeting with the industrial relations executives led to a decision that a new, radically different approach was needed to assist the labor relations staff out of their dilemma. It was determined we had to work with the attitudes and psychodynamics of each supervisor's *modus operandi* rather than concentrating on the mechanical aspects. Such a course of action necessitated two operational procedures being applied: (1) initially setting up a non-directive, permissive climate of self-examination and self-evaluation, and (2) moving into a more directed, critique-centered direction geared toward re-orienting each supervisor's skills and capabilities. Inherent in these procedures is an application which pertains to education as well as other fields of endeavor: there is a need to build and build upon a solid foundation. If the foundation is solid the superstructure will be secure; if it is weak it cannot adequately support the structure built onto it.

One of the essential tasks therefore is to acquaint the supervisors with the manner in which they think, feel and behave; then, by means of group discussion and evaluation, to develop insights and awareness into what they do and how they do it so they can take corrective or remedial steps to alter (and improve) their own methods in handling grievances. Once this foundation of how they feel, perceive and react to persons, places, and situations is examined and evaluated the next step is to move in the direction of strengthening the mechanics of how to both effectively and efficiently operate in handling grievances.

The central problem to be faced here is one of having a person learn about himself not as he sees his action but as others do. We do not see things as THEY are but as WE are! This usually involves having the person unlearn something and training or retraining him before a difference in behavior comes about. Furthermore, it is felt a more expeditious and beneficial therapeutic effect would be evidenced if one's peers acted as the primary agents in propagating change rather than an outsider.

Two weeks prior to the first meeting the Labor Relations Director informed the ten Labor Relations supervisors that a new series of special meetings was to begin and that each man was to come prepared to fully present and discuss a current grievance or one which he has recently handled and is still in the process of being adjudicated. These meetings were to be

of two hours duration, after regular working hours, and to be preceded by a dinner in the company dining room.

At the initial meeting the author explained the aims and purposes of the forthcoming series of meetings, together with outlining a general description of some of the techniques and procedures to be utilized during the course of the meetings. The group was asked *for permission to tape record each meeting so each could be used to review and evaluate the entire meeting after which the tape would be erased. The training group normally consisted of the Labor Relations Director, the ten supervisors, and the two heads of the Industrial Relations Department.*

Basically, a less intensive form of group therapy than is conducted in a normal clinical session was called for inasmuch as these supervisors were not disturbed or neurotic. The primary aim of these meetings was to critically examine the skills and capacities these supervisors used in the normal conduct of their affairs, and to suggest remedial and corrective measures which will make the supervisors personally more effective. Such a scope of applications in an industrial environment is almost a rare happenstance as a search of the literature will reveal (2, 3, 4, 5).

After the initial briefing then the author arbitrarily called upon one of the Labor Relations supervisors to stand before the group near a chartpad (which could be used to provide visual assistance in whatever manner the supervisor saw fit), and make his presentation. The room arrangement was such that all participants were seated in a semi-circle with the person making the presentation at the open end of the semi-circle. The time it took to make a complete presentation of the facts behind a grievance together with the supportive evidence, which included records, statements from the principals, work samples, etc., varied with the nature of the grievance, but the mean time was 45 minutes.

After the presentation was concluded each participant was allowed, in turn, to first ask questions and second suggest alternative courses of action, procedures or methods to be employed. (It was agreed by all participants no interruptions would be permitted during a presentation, but a question could be asked which served to clarify or explain an obscure, unusual or involved point.) Questions were asked of the supervisor making the presentation in order to obtain information or raise questions pertaining to: (1) unanswered or unclear problems or statements germane to the handling of the grievance; (2) new interpretations or ways of looking at the grievance and what is involved in it; and (3) tying up loose ends or flaws which require additional attention and/or consideration.

After each participant had asked his questions the next step centered about suggesting different methods or means for handling this particular grievance. If any differences occurred in this step, role-playing was utilized in an effort to secure a more realistic understanding rather than a mere recital of one's convictions or hunches.

The following phase in the procedure was one of extreme importance because it aimed at crystallizing the entire presentation and discussion into three salient problem areas which were to be answered on the basis of the accumulated fund of information: (1) what are the key issues involved in this grievance and why? (2) what is or should be management's position with respect to these issues and why? and (3) what does the union expect to gain by this grievance, and what implications does it hold for management? In most instances little disagreement was evidenced in conjunction with the first two problem areas, but the third one oftentimes proved difficult to answer. It was at this juncture that one's empathic ability was truly tested by a series of role-playing scenes (7). Those role-playing experiences proved most enlightening and valuable from two standpoints: (1) it revealed the inflexible, obdurate orientation of some of the supervisors, and (2) it opened up some supervisor's eyes to the covert purposes which often underlie the filing of grievances under various sections of the labor contract. (Another interesting finding which was uncovered and which paralleled what actually occurred in grievance hearings was the withholding of facts at the first step by the union.)

Up to this point the entire proceeding has been problem-centered with little attention paid to the personality dynamics of the supervisor making the presentation. Therefore, the next order of business was to view the presentation in terms of the personal make-up of the supervisor, and to relate his actions or inactions against a background of his intellectual, emotional and behavioral traits. Here the entire group discussed and evaluated the presentation as to the soundness of the investigation, validity of the evidence, reliability of the witnesses, the feelings and attitudes of the labor relations supervisor, and the like.

From this sort of a personal evaluation a constructive list of the shortcomings of the supervisor and the way he handled the grievance was made, together with follow-up action to be taken, corrective action to be made in view of one's personality failings, and a follow-up report on the nature of improvement made. Finally, the entire meeting was summarized by the author with special attention being devoted to the assessment of both the

supervisor's strengths and weaknesses relative to the grievance and his own psychodynamics.

Before the next scheduled meeting the tape recording of the previous meeting was played back by the author and reviewed. This proved to be a most helpful procedure because these playbacks often led to the isolation and identification of other personality and mechanical shortcomings in the presentation. The presentation of Supervisor Einer provides an excellent illustration. A careful study of his recorded presentation revealed the following findings which were missed by the group, and which were "news" to the supervisor himself: (1) of the 39 questions which were directed at him, he never allowed any of the supervisors to complete their questions before he began to answer back; (2) he invariably reacted to certain key words with alacrity, e.g., "you didn't find out . . .," "shouldn't you have . . .," (3) he referred to the union or union representatives with the adjective "damned," e.g., "that damned steward," or "this damned union"; (4) his manner in dealing with line employees was always deprecatory and sardonic; and (5) in response to asked questions, he often times allowed his answer to be both discursive and desultory, seldom getting at the crux of the matter.

CONCLUSION

The use of group therapy approach and the utilization of role playing in the attempt to understand the relationship between one's personality dynamics and the manner in which he wrestles with job related problems is finding a gradual acceptance in industry. Inherent in this acceptance is the belief that a problem situation can not be parcelled out from the person(s) involved in it. This rationale was tested in a series of meetings with labor relations supervisors in an attempt to cut through a heavy work load of grievances, and after a half year training program the personal effectiveness of supervisors was increased as measured by the rate of grievance disposition which was nearly doubled over an eight-month period.

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