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| HUMAN RESOURCES |

# ■ HR's Diary ■

## ● "Group Briefing

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**T**ime flew rapidly; Zahid became too busy keeping the pace. Success in rolling out the group working concept although as a pilot project grew in him tremendous amount of confidence. It also gave him the impetus to trying out newer things. He was not exactly in the limelight but it definitely raised his visibility. He remembers now his next 'try-out' was Group Briefing, but this time it was a companywide project.

The need for establishing direct communication with the workforce was felt acutely by the management for taking forward different management initiatives. Unfortunately an unwritten process was established over the years that no direct communication was to be made with the workers without informing the CBA. So, many new initiatives simply could not take off as CBA failed to or did not want to communicate to the workers. Also, they did not allow the management to brief the workers directly on the merits of those new initiatives. This practice was viewed as a major impediment to improving the work process and the resultant productivity. Besides, numerous IR situations cropped up due to both misinformation and disinformation by the unions.

There was a brain storming session held by the management on how to come out of this situation. Zahid attended the session and participated quite actively. A consensus was reached and the outcome was the launching of 'Group Briefings' throughout the company. The whole company was to be divided into a number of briefing groups having 5 to 15 members in each group with a briefing group leader from line management. Briefing would take place once a month and the topic would be on one or two issues faced by the company. The briefing was a two-way communication process, meaning the group leader would brief the group on those topics that are on chosen central as well as local issues and invite suggestions from the group members on how to overcome those. The group reaction along with the suggestion was to be compiled centrally and presented to the top management. Any follow-up actions on the suggestion would also to be conveyed to the groups in the following month's group briefing session. That would complete the cycle. Zahid was given the responsibility of working out a mechanism for rolling out the process.



Zahid spent some time in researching out the concept and found out the 'Metaplan' method - facilitation of groups with a disciplined approach, moderators and practical communication tools.

"This technique from Wolfgang and Eberhard Schnelle can be used as facilitation method for groups and as a communication model, in which opinions are developed, a common understanding is built and objectives, recommendations and action plans are formulated to focus on a problem and its possible solutions. "Moderators" (a kind of facilitators) administer the groups and ensure that good communication, cooperation and high level of understandings are achieved. Their objective is to provide the groups with the right sort of communication tools at the right moment. In this way the group can get successfully and efficiently to the bottom of the matter."

Zahid took cue from this tested method and developed a group working procedure aligning with the prevailing environment and expected end-state. He first asked himself the basic question, 'Why the management communication through group briefing would matter?' He analysed the events that he witnessed during the last couple of months experiencing the frustration and inefficiency caused by the failure to communicate with the workforce effectively. He was fully convinced about the intended objectives and started the whole process with firm conviction.



Zahid considered all the ground realities and developed the group briefing method and got the same ratified by the management successfully. The group leaders were nominated and extensive training was arranged for them so that the group briefing was done in a uniform manner and sustained over time. The following were achieved having positive eventualities.

-Managers' role: As a manager or supervisor the tasks got achieved through those people who worked for them. Therefore, it was their job to ensure that their staff understood the tasks they had to do. To be most effective in achieving that task, the managers required not just the obedience but their cooperation and commitment.

-Employees could not cooperate fully unless they knew what was required of them and why it was so important.

-The most effective proven method of moulding individuals into a group was to talk to them as a group, about group's goals, successes and failures.

-The leader briefing the group found a practical and effective way of clearly showing who in-charge was and so strengthening the position of the leader. This curbed the monopolistic attitude of the union leaders on their leadership over the workers they represented.



-How the group briefing was done: The group briefing were based on the following six basic principles:

-Face-to-face: This allowed question and answer, both of which were vital to understanding and ensured the leader that the message was properly understood.

-In small group (5-15 people): It was important to ensure that the group was small enough for effective briefing. The ideal number was between five and fifteen, as this size of group encouraged constructive comments and questions. Where work groups have had common identity it was easy to ensure what communication was relevant.

-By the briefing group leader: the person who briefed was the line manager or supervisor responsible for the results of the group. Each manager was held accountable for ensuring the briefing worked in their own immediate area.

-Regularly: Briefing was a regular affair; it was done on a monthly basis. Group briefing lasted for a maximum period of 30 minutes including time for questions.

-Relevance: The group leader prepared at least two-thirds of the information that was briefed to the group. The remaining one-third information came from the employee relations' department "the core brief".

-Monitoring: Managers responsible for briefing group leaders who would go on in turn to brief their own groups, monitored their effectiveness by:

-Always checking the local information they prepared prior to briefing the them.

-Occasionally sitting in on their briefing session, but not taking part.

-Randomly checking with individuals, with groups as to the effectiveness of the brief.

-Checking their briefing folders.

Monitoring was vital to keep the system 'live' and to ensure full benefits from it.

-Making group briefing relevant: It was vital that the emphasis of the group leader's brief was on local information - items which were particularly relevant to the particular group and

were prepared by the group leader. As a guide local information took up about two-thirds of the briefing. The group leader was also required to brief information which originated from employee relations' department centrally. This had been passed down through the management line and top management meetings were timed so that this could take place.

When the briefing leader briefed the group he had to make his commitment to management decision very clear. Even he disagreed with a decision - he had to make it clear to the group that he would make sure that the decision was carried out. The leader always briefed on the central information from employee relations' department emphasizing "what it meant to them" at local level.

-Paperwork:

-Preparing briefing notes: The briefing leader prepared the local brief carefully well in advance. Well prepared notes made it easier to get across the points clearly and controlled the briefing session.

-The core brief: where central information had to be passed down, there was a duplicated core brief. This had, in note form, one or two items that were briefed throughout the company.

-Keeping records: Briefing leader had to ensure that all paperwork was kept in the folder. Old briefing notes, both core and local brief were kept for a minimum period of six months, so that the leader could refer back if was necessary.

-When the leader briefed:

-Briefed-didn't discuss: after the group leader had to prepare the local information and added the central core brief, the leader had with him the six or seven points he wanted to get over to the group members. He had to remember that he only had thirty minutes so stuck to those points. He explained them fully and answered the questions, but kept to those points. Briefing was the leader giving information - not a group discussion.

-Using examples and illustrations: the leader had to use examples to illustrate the points he was putting over. People understood much more readily from an illustration.

-Answering questions: Briefing leader had to handle questions sensibly. He encouraged people to ask questions but if those were irrelevant he arranged to answer them afterwards. If he didn't know the answer to a question he said so - made a note of the question and found out the answer. He tried to answer within the next three days. If he became involved in a contentious issue, he left it, explained why and came back to it later when he was absolutely certain of the facts and reasons.

-Checking understanding: The leader had to ask questions on the core issues so that he got a better understanding of the subject. While briefing he had to make sure members listened to what he said. This could be achieved by asking questions - he did not have to rely on what appeared to be interested faces. After the group briefing was over, he did not forget to check understanding by asking specific questions to individuals as he 'walked-the-job'.

-Handling feedback: positive comments and suggestions made to the group leader during briefing were noted, but didn't get drawn into a discussion. Those points were compiled and sent to employee relations' department along with the group briefing report.

-Briefing absentees: He noted down the names of the absentees and briefed them when they returned to work.

-Deputies: if the leader was away or could not brief for some reasons he ensured that a deputy took over his place.

Group briefing got started on simple subjects, e.g., quality, safety or simple new techniques. Major change was not tried out at the outset as that could associate group briefing with bad news. The union leaders were informed about starting of the group briefing and explained how it fitted in with the role of the union (not challenging or disrupting their role at all).

The method was developed in such a way making it very clear that the group briefing was not:

- A general discussion
- A grievance session
- Consultation
- A discipline session
- Negotiation

If the group briefing leaders kept to the items that they prepared, and firmly stopped discussion on inappropriate and irrelevant subjects, the leaders were able to control the meeting and reap the benefits.

After so many years, Zahid still feels that the group briefing had been and still is a very effective management tool in taking charge of its people, moulding them and establishing direct communication with them. The direct benefits that the management can always reap out of this:

Achieving commitment, efficiency and profitability.

Reducing misunderstanding through communicating face-to-face.

Ensuring management keeps the initiative.

Disarming the grapevine.

Improved consultation.

(This is sequence 10: to be continued)

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