

Human Resources Management

Fred Emery, July 1990

“Much more efficient use must be made of this country's resources above all its human resources, which up to now, as everyone knows, have been scandalously underemployed.

It will be the task of any modern Government to ensure that the human plant available is thoroughly modernized, by:

- (i) introducing more competition into the people market.
- (ii) insisting that human beings are operated on a strict cost efficiency basis.
- (iii) getting the maximum output from each unit, consistent with proper servicing and repairs.
- (iv) making provision for early scrapping and replacement as new models come into production.

Mankind represents an enormous reservoir of potential wealth, which has never been fully exploited up to now”.

If you thought that this statement on human resources emanated from one of today's hard headed gurus of Human Resources Management you could be forgiven. If you sensed that it was a put down you would be quite correct. The words were penned by the arch English satirist, Michael Frayn, in his column in the Guardian, 20th March 1966. Frayn was satirizing the systems theorists who were planning for a man on the moon and believed that their techniques would solve the social problems of efficiently mobilizing human resources. To fit human resources into their mathematical models, the planners had to reduce the qualities of those resources to a common dollar measure. Thus human resources entered their models as costs for recruitment from the market, training, maintenance and replacement. Their morale, creativity and co-operativeness were not representable in the models except possibly as estimated costs of labour turnover, absenteeism, time and materials wasted on the job.

As we enter the 1990's we seem to have come full circle to once again thinking of human resources as we would think of mineral, financial or technical resources. I suggest that we are misguided if we accept this appearance at face value. Over a period that reaches back to well before the 1960's managers have come to realize that human resources are mere potential unless those humans accept some personal commitment to the achievement of the objectives of their employer. It has also been recognized that contractual deals relating pay, perks and promotion to level of commitment are next to worthless when it gets down to the day to day realities of working life. It is at that day to day level where people form judgments about whether their contribution is valued and their efforts respected.

The history of bureaucracy and traditional labour management proves that 'reliable systems can be made from unreliable parts'. Well, fairly reliable, and only if the parts are so cheap and easily replaceable that high levels of wastage are tolerable.

If an enterprise for its purposes, needs human resources that are expensive and not easily replaceable then it needs reliable people, and such an organization cannot afford to go down the traditional track of people management. Reliable people in this

context are people who can be relied upon not just because of the skills and knowledge that they can bring to bear but because of their personal commitment to seeing that jobs get done properly and efficiently. This principle is simple and straight forward. Translation of this principle into organizational practice requires two steps (at least):

- personal commitment has to be created,
- the person has to know what jobs are important, at what times.

I think we know some of the solutions to making the first step.

However, we should perhaps first review our hard earned knowledge of 'solutions' that have proven useless. When we are talking about the sort of personal commitment that carries over to the daily activity in the workplace then we can place into the waste basket such things as exhortations and glossy communications from on high, profit sharing and advisory bodies such as joint consultative committees and Works Councils. Schemes for worker representatives on corporate boards deserve a special place near the bottom of the waste basket. These things might all serve to convey messages about togetherness or mutual distrust but they neither create nor sustain personal commitment on the job.

In ordinary circumstances people will take responsibility for seeing through to completion courses of action that they have chosen, or have had a significant say in choosing. If pressured to pursue a course of action of someone else's choosing they will seek the easiest way of appearing to meet the other's demands, or some excuse for not being able to do so. The obvious solution to creating committed employees is to involve them, as far as is possible, in the setting of task goals and in deciding the courses of action. This is quite a radical way in which to approach the design of jobs. It is diametrically opposed to the principle of locating goal setting and decision making at least one level above that of the 'doers' (which must be done to make a 'reliable system from unreliable parts').

The second step bridges the gap between theory (principles) and the concrete organization. This step places the principles in the context of the enterprise that maintains special forms of interdependence with particular parts of its environment by organizing the activity of particular kinds of people around particular material means and inputs. Only 'open sociotechnical systems' theory provides a systematic way of defining this sort of context and hence of placing 'human resources management' into a practical context. Sociotechnical systems can be studied from their economic and political aspects but such studies cannot encompass the concrete realities of substantive sociotechnical systems. The social and technical systems can be considered separately if our prime concern is with some or other of their subsystems, e.g. a grievance procedure or a boiler house. It is, however, only in consideration of how we can achieve joint optimization of the directly correlated sociotechnical system that we can decide what tasks have to be carried out, in what order and with what priorities.

What I am saying is that 'human resources management' is a subclass of the problem of co-ordinating social and technical systems to yield viable productive enterprises (or, as the military prefer, 'viable destructive enterprises'). By implication 'human

resources management' cannot be subsumed as 'just economics', 'just politics' or 'just psychology'.