

Managing industrial unrest: a Caribbean conundrum

TEACHING NOTES

Synopsis of the case

On 10 September 2000, Michael Adams, the General Manager of Mesopotamia Brewery Ltd, was convinced that he had serious industrial unrest on his hands. Adams was especially concerned that, after two decades of being non-unionised, several of his monthly paid workers had opted to form themselves into a trade union and had secretly planned to shut the company down in order to achieve their demands for increased pay and benefits. The situation had emerged after the Production Manager, Daniel Stapleton, had written to his senior supervisor, Thomas Williams, informing him that he had been displeased with his poor performance and lack of attention to detail. His negligence had resulted in the company's missing deadlines for shipping products to several of the neighbouring Caribbean islands. This had embarrassed the company and had resulted in the loss of profit on cancelled orders. He was convinced that many of the experienced and generally responsible supervisors engaged in the exercise were unaware that Williams, who was instrumental in the union's formation, had not informed them that he had received memos from his immediate boss indicating the deficiency in his quality of work. Adams' major challenge was how to ensure the well-being of his employees while simultaneously averting the likely loss of market share and profit should the industrial action result in a general strike.

Teaching/learning objectives

- The value of effective vertical and horizontal communication;
- Effective decision-making process;
 - Avoid making decisions based on emotions (versus facts);
 - Seek to secure the facts surrounding the events before embarking on a particular course of action;
 - The importance of asking the right questions when being motivated to take action; and

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- Ensuring that proper procedures are followed when engaging in industrial action.

Immediate issues

The immediate issue in this case surrounds what the General Manager is required to do following a strike by members of his salaried workers. He is required to decide how best to handle an already explosive and sensitive issue related to staff members who had decided to withdraw their services to the company. The General Manager must make certain key decisions being cognisant of their likely impact on the employees and the implications for the company's shareholders should the strike action escalate.

Additionally, he must seek to ensure that the "unrest" at the company subsides in a speedy manner.

Basic issues

Workplaces will continue to be challenged by issues that revolve around human resource development and human resource management. Invariably, there will be situations in which individuals may be encouraged to make important decisions without ensuring that they procure enough background information to make an informed and/or objective decision.

This case unearths such an issue and highlights the importance of learning to ask the right questions in an effort to ascertain the accuracy of information that is relayed.

Suggested student assignments

The students should be required to read the case and the articles listed below prior to engaging in the class assignments related to this case.

Suggested additional reading/data gathering

Blanchard, Ken (February, 1992), *Crucial Communication Skills*, Executive Excellence Publishing.

McNeil, Art (July, 1988), *Containing Chaos*, Executive Excellence Publishing.

Oncken III, William (October, 1998), *Communicating in the Same Language*, Executive Excellence Publishing.

Assignments/questions

1. With the other workers having returned to work on the third day of the industrial action, how should the seven employees seek to resolve the dispute?
2. What is your assessment of Michael Adams' handling of the challenges highlighted in this case?
3. What actions should Michael Adams take in the short, medium, and long term? Should he consider encouraging the seven employees to return to work as part of his strategy?

4. Do you consider the verbal and written communication within the organisation to be effective? Give reasons for your response.
5. What advice would you have given to Brian Mitchell when Williams encouraged him to be the Chairman of the Core Unit?
6. Provide comments in relation to the memo exchanges between Williams and Stapleton. Would you have written them differently? If so, what would have been your approach?
7. Do you agree with the approach taken by the union in relation to the sick out? Please provide reasons for your response.

Case analysis

This case provides opportunities for analysis related to conceptual (theoretical) and analytical dimensions. This case may be especially useful for students who will be required to engage in management responsibilities in general and of manufacturing operations in particular.

Suggested time plan (case teaching plan)

1. The students should be required to read the case prior to coming to class.
2. Meet in small groups of five. Each group is to be assigned one (or two) of the questions listed at the end of the case. They are required to spend 20 minutes discussing the scenarios related to the respective questions. They should also select a spokesperson to present the group's position when they return to discussions in the large group session.
3. The large group session will require at least 45 minutes.