

## XV

### EMPLOYEE IDEAS

THE FLOW of information from management to worker has received concentrated attention for several years. Current studies are dealing with the broader concept of communications in general, some of the studies treating the entire field, others treating phases of the problem which previously have received less than their proper share of consideration. In terms of content, the broad concept includes information of almost any kind, communicated for many purposes, and such specific items as instructions, rules, orders, reports, complaints, forecasts, plans, program changes, process changes, organization changes, special projects, suggestions, training opportunities. In terms of what may be called location and direction, it includes the relatively familiar topic of communications from management to line supervision and to employees, with belated attention to the newer problems of horizontal communication at the supervisory level, and between staff and line, from supervision to higher management, between management and stockholders. It gives new and special emphasis to communication from employees to supervision and management. The comprehensive studies naturally deal with the various forms or media available for communication in each of the directions suggested, and in each of the subject fields.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore communications in the single direction from employees to supervision and management. The exploration is further limited to the relation of collective bargaining and its consequences, to this particular flow of information.

The growth of large units of employment had the effect

of separating employees from the central management, both in physical distance and in fields of interest. It might seem that no separation was necessary between the worker and the direct line supervisor, but it is well known that in many industries the final supervision unit was so large that there was an effective separation. In any industry there was a tendency to limit the nature and scope of contacts between workers and the direct supervisor, by the progressive removal of functions from the supervisory job. In most manufacturing plants, the foreman has lost, in succession, most of his responsibility for hiring, firing, training, and even discipline. These losses of functions (and consequently, of status) have occurred both where the supervision unit became absurdly large, and where it was held at a normal and effective size.

Management kept pace with this gradual separation reasonably well, in the single instance of communicating orders and instructions. In fact, the growth of the plant actually made it easy to adopt systematic methods for transmitting orders. These methods frequently became so systematic that they emphasized and increased the separation between management and employees. The easy, prompt way of passing instructions by word of mouth, from front office to superintendent to foreman to machine operator, could not be tolerated. It was superseded by a slower but more accurate job done on paper, frequently with copies radiating in several directions, to material storeroom, technical control department, crate shop, shipping room, and traffic desk, so that each might have direct and original notice to do his part. The occasion might be merely a routine order for the product, a shift shutdown for special maintenance work, the application of new colors to the chemical and stock pipelines, a tie-in to an extension of electrical service to a new residential area, a general curtailment of operations, or the addition of an extra shift in the foundry. In the large establishment, management usually met the need by a well-planned multi-copy

production of orders, instructions and "for information only" copies.

Necessary as it is, this systematic method carries a subtle reflection upon the individual person who functions at any desk or station where the multi-copy order arrives. There is the implication that he cannot be trusted to receive instructions verbally, to understand them, and to assume responsibility for them. There is at least a suggestion that the office, the man, or "the management," which gives him his instructions, is protecting itself by the written record; protecting itself against his possible forgetfulness, lack of understanding, or inclination to alibi later by claiming that the instructions were not clear or were not delivered.

This particular reaction to the systematic transmission of instructions in writing is almost never heard, after the system is established as a part of the daily working routine. It is frequently heard when such a system is first established. The vague resentment is probably not entirely removed from the subconscious mind, although the expression of it disappears. It has remained audible in some establishments where the implications of the written instruction memorandum were overemphasized in the document itself. For instance, some establishments use a form for incidental instructions which carries only the heading, in black-face type, "Verbal Orders Don't Go." This subtle reflection upon the intelligence or memory of the supervisor is not sufficient reason to abandon the organized transmission of information in a large organization. It is interesting as a possible negative influence on the free flow of other information which we are discussing.

Even where management has done an intelligent and satisfactory job of developing a satisfactory flow of instructions and orders, it has frequently overlooked the flow of other information, from management to supervisors, and through supervisors to employees. This is the particular subject of the preceding chapter on "Information." The reference is re-

peated here because of its relation to the flow of information from employees. Where there is no natural, informal, spontaneous flow of information through supervisors to employees, there is very little prospect of generating any such flow of information from employees to supervisors, and through supervisors to management.

The freedom of communication from employees to management is important in many respects. The first element of stable and satisfactory employee relations demands an open channel for the presentation of employee complaints and grievances. The retention of desirable workers, and the enlistment of their willing co-operation in the work itself, require that management know the basic desires of employees as to wages, hours, and working conditions. It would seem that collective bargaining furnished the adequate channel for employees to communicate with management in these particular subject fields. Experience proves that whenever the collective bargaining relationship is as good as it should be, a great majority of the complaints and grievances never become a load on the formal channels provided by the contract. The existence of those channels, and their full acceptance by management, seem to help in the handling of the average grievance, without resort to the formal procedures. Typical case histories indicate that approximately ninety per cent of the grievances initiated by individual employees are satisfactorily settled at the first and informal step of the procedure, that is, by direct discussion with the supervisor concerned. It is true that a union officer, or a grievance committee member is frequently included in such discussions. But it is significant that a good collective bargaining relationship promotes direct contacts between workers and their immediate supervisors, and that these contacts are usually sufficient to clear up the great majority of the expressed dissatisfactions.

In the absence of collective bargaining, there may be a

dangerous barrier against the expression of such grievances and complaints. In thousands of cases, this barrier has become a dam, behind which a great reservoir was filled with the accumulated dissatisfactions and grievances, which either were denied expression, or were denied adjustment if expressed.

It is fair to say that the bona fide employee-representation plans provided a somewhat adequate opportunity for expression and adjustment. The representation plans where good faith was not the foundation, or where the principal objective was to forestall unionization of the employees, usually did not furnish a satisfactory channel for this kind of information from employees. In both the genuine and imitation employee-representation plans, as pointed out in chapter v, there was a lack of definite power on the part of employees to require the creation and maintenance of an effective outlet for employee grievances.

Collective bargaining may properly be credited with either creating or crystallizing a channel for employee ideas on wages, hours, working conditions, and daily adherence by management and supervision to the terms of a contract. Assuming this credit, we rarely find a union contract providing, in its own text, any channel for conveying other employee ideas to management. An exception appears to be the second clause quoted in chapter viii. This clause, after reference to economy of operation, safety, and goodwill, goes on to say, "Each mill will entertain suggestions made by the union for working out the above objectives." The clause expresses a commitment on the part of the union to work for these objectives, and an apparent commitment by management to look upon the union as the source of suggestions for attaining these objectives. Such a clause is not common and even this clause does not attempt either to block or to stimulate the flow of ideas and suggestions directly from individual employees to supervisors.

Aside from such an exceptional clause, collective bargaining agreements generally do not concern themselves with the flow of employee ideas toward management. They do not interfere with the normal daily conversations, in which individual employees give the foreman bits and pieces of information and suggestions which can add up to important decisions, changes in methods, and even changes in policy.

Management has become more and more conscious of the need for, and the value of, employee ideas. The spontaneous communication of those ideas by employees is the ultimate expression of co-operation in a working relationship. It is an assurance of the interest of an employee in his work, and of the satisfactory freedom of his personality.

Aside from these subjective values, the free flow of employee ideas has an objective value which can be measured in quality and quantity of output or in dollar costs, either directly or through improved facilities and methods. It is the mark of difference between the hiring of the time, physical strength and manipulative skill of a human being, and the engagement of his interest, his thinking ability, and his enthusiasm.

Collective bargaining does not normally supply the channel for such ideas, suggestions, and information. Nor does it normally offer any obstacle to the creation of an appropriate and effective channel for this purpose. A bad collective bargaining relationship might increase the difficulty of generating the flow of ideas from employees. In such a case, the system of collective bargaining can seldom be charged with this result. The general relationship which made collective bargaining difficult, militant, and bitter, is almost sure to have prevented the co-operative exchange of ideas, before the union entered the picture. A sincere and patient effort by management to provide effective channels, and to draw out employee ideas which are constructive, can be one important step in improvement of the general relationship, and conse-

quent improvement of the collective bargaining relationship.

It is a mistake to identify this flow of employee ideas with the formalized "suggestions" for improvement of methods, reduction of costs, increase in quality, or reduction of accidents. For this type of idea, many formalized suggestion systems have provided a reasonably satisfactory channel. They are not universally accepted or approved by management, nor by students of human relations. They have the practical advantage and the theoretical disadvantage of appealing to the acquisitive instinct—"turn in a good suggestion and get some extra money." Aside from their value as a systematic method for receiving and considering the suggestions, they are sometimes valuable as evidence that the employer has a policy of sharing the benefits of good suggestions with the employees who originate them.

One of the limitations, and possible dangers, in the organized suggestion system is the fact that it concentrates attention upon ideas which have to do with cost, quality, and safety. Even within the definition of the word "suggestions," there are many other ideas which are important, and which cannot be valued in money, or even arbitrarily rewarded by a cash payment. Many employers feel that suggestions which contribute to the safety of workers, either applying to physical equipment or to methods of work or to safety education and enlistment, should not be treated as competitive efforts to "win a prize." Many establishments have been able to stimulate a flow of such suggestions and still maintain the policy that they cannot be valued or paid for in money.

In this class of suggestions which need not be the basis of money awards, which cannot be satisfactorily handled through a formalized suggestion system, we find some of the most important opportunities for management to benefit from the ideas of employees. The psychological value of the change in the color of uniforms or aprons has frequently been realized. The idea of an employee, or a group of employees, that

“we would like” a different color, is the kind of idea which management needs to receive, and to which it needs to give consideration. The idea of employees that they would be better pleased with an additional ten minutes at lunch time, offset by ten minutes additional work at the end of the day, may be the basis of a change which will greatly increase productivity. The reverse suggestion that the lunch period be shorter, and quitting time earlier, so as to make better use of transportation facilities, may represent an important factor in the convenience and consequent satisfaction of employees.

The expression of the interest of employees in organizing a bowling league or soft-ball league or a fishing derby, and the invitation to management to help sponsor or support the idea, has frequently furnished a priceless opportunity to demonstrate a co-operative management attitude and to build goodwill. The desire of employees to have access to a supply of some company product which is commonly used, and which is not readily available in the local stores, is one which should be welcomed by management. The report by employees that the local stores are not giving sufficient attention to the products of the local mill may not be of particular value in the merchandising program, but the reception, welcome, and consideration of the idea may be tremendously important in encouraging the interest of employees in the problems of the establishment.

Even in a highly satisfactory collective bargaining relationship, management needs to go beyond that relationship, to create both facilities and atmosphere which will stimulate the free flow of employee ideas.