

## Trade Unions Values

Trade unions are known to promote the principles of fairness, equity, non-discrimination, respect and natural justice. These are all honourable ideals that ought to be practiced within the employer–employee relationship. It is the common view of researchers that the values which trade unions identify relate to the protection of bargaining rights, promoting freedom of association, promoting the principles of democracy, upholding of workers’ rights, the payment of decent wages and salaries, access to secure employment, good and safe working conditions, protection against unfair and wrongful dismissal, discrimination and prejudice.

It would be expected that since these values are important to the outcomes of the work of trade unions, the leadership ought to be in the vanguard of observing the principles they espouse. There is every good reason to believe that most trade union leaders would act accordingly. As in the case of other areas of life, politics and business included, some trade union leaders may, by their actions and deeds, tend to compromise themselves and hence undermine the values they are expected to promote.

Trade unions have always had to demand respect. This seems odd, since one of the principle values of trade union is the promotion of solidarity. The solidarity promoted by trade unions and by extension the labour movement, provides a power base, which ought to be enough to cause both government and the private sector community to treat favourably and not disparaging to labour. There is value in the adage that respect is earned and deserved. If it is that trade unions are now having to demand respect instead of earning it, it simply means that something has gone wrong. It is of concern that trade unions which were considered as powerful institutions should now be constantly crying out to be given respect. The message this conveys is that trade unions are losing or have lost their way.

Where there is concern of a loss of respect within the organization, it begs the question as to whether the members of those trade unions are at odds with the leadership. Is it a case that the organization’s vision has been derailed and that the leadership is considered as self-serving, or that there is a general loss of confidence in the organization to execute its expected role? If these questions can be positively answered, then it can be red flagged that the respect which trade unions expect to earn, is slipping away.

Research findings drawn from the Journal of Business Ethics (2006), Rosaria Burchielli in the article sectional values or represent a watering down of values (Crouch, 1982 headlined ‘The Purpose of Trade Union Values’, captures how these and other factors can negatively impinge on the values of trade unions. The point was made that “These tensions can lead to power struggles and changes of leadership in unions (Cole, 1982; Undy et al., 1981) or they can result in outcomes which only reflect; (Frenkel and Coolican, 1984; Prin-gle, 1988). Sometimes unions are observed pursuing a “strategy that no one wants” and the outcomes are not what the union prefers, but more a case of what was available; the “results of the clash between what they wanted and what they were able to get, given the preferences of employers and the available structure of negotiation” (Crouch, 1982”.

This brings us to the question of what is required to promote and maintain trade union values. First and foremost, trade unions must recognize their own importance within the work environment and the wider society. This means that they must work to uphold the dignity of labour and demonstrate a commitment to strengthening and protecting human and trade union rights. The organizing of membership, treating to the wellbeing and education of the membership, added to the promotion of industrial peace and harmony, must be pursued as matters of priority. The establishment of a positive working relationship with the social partners and civil society, is critical if the building of alliances and earning respect is to be achieved.

Where upon trade unions recognize that the promotion of unity is fundamental to their existence, then there is the sure understanding that this is the key to them being the powerful and collective voice of workers, which neither government nor the private sector will ignore.