

The Effectiveness of Trade Unions

It is standard that established organizations have a vision and mission statement, and specific aims and objectives which informs of the goals set by individual organizations. It is to be expected that the goals set are not idealist or unrealistic. It is for each organization to develop a mechanism as a means of measuring its productivity and effectiveness of its delivery and achievements.

Trade unions are best known for the role they play as the representative voice of labour, An expectation of this role, is that trade unions would have a say in decisions that impact on or affect workers. The role as we know it also includes that of negotiation and collective bargaining. The performance and productivity of trade unions can be measured on the basis of their organizational effectiveness. What therefore are the basic things that can be used to measure these? First and foremost, it is of prime importance that trade unions win the respect of the individual employer, as this defines the extent to which they are to be taken seriously. Inasmuch that they have a responsibility and a commitment to represent the interest of their members, unions should concern themselves with how efficient and effective they are in the delivering of services to their members; including that of responding to members' complaints and problems, communication and sharing of information with its members, employers and other stakeholders.

As it specifically relates to their performance, trade unions can easily be the biggest threat to themselves by failing to meet the expectations of their members. The performance of the trade union can contribute to a decline in the membership, and could served to dissuade persons from joining into membership. The performance of trade unions hinge on the exercise of the collective bargaining power which lies within a bargaining unit, the minimizing of discrimination at the workplace, the promotion of equality of treatment, the providing of the opportunity for workers' participation in the decision making process, and the promotion of means that lend to job satisfaction. Over and above these is the influence trade unions bring to bear on the introduction of and formulation of new labour legislation and policy decisions.

As responsible organizations there are several expectations of trade unions. For example, there is the view that trade unions help to play a role in the accelerated pace of economic development. They may contribute to this by promoting a peaceful industrial relations climate, contributing to maintaining a disciplined and productive workforce, helping workers to adjust to the changing trends and demands of the labour market, and promoting a workforce culture that identifies with observing standards and following best practices.

One way of assessing the productivity and effectiveness of trade unions is to examine what are the limitations and/or draw backs that impinge on the attaining of desired outcomes. This assessment can only be completed with answers being provided to some basic questions. Are unions offering the services members require? Is the quality of service which is being provided meeting with the satisfaction of the membership? Are members being consulted and involved in the decision making process? Is there accountability and transparency being reflected by the

leadership? Is there information sharing and effective communication with the membership? Is there the financing available to enable the delivery of service, projects and programmes?

Positive answers to these questions would lend to the continuous development of trade unions, as this would lead to a better understanding of the strengths, weakness and/or deficiencies within the leadership, management and operations of the organizations. It therefore affords the opportunity to plan and re-strategize. The internal examination and the outcomes of it are important to trade unions maintaining and cementing their presence, and preserving a balance of power in the work place, so that they can make a difference to employer's decisions. The bottom line is that the influence of trade unions will be felt where there are strong workplace structures, which provide for regular contact between union representatives and members.

In giving consideration to the questions posed, it should become obvious that there are some things that trade unions should not take for granted, ignore or deemphasize in the management of their affairs. Where this occurs it means that trade unions can stand accused of not meeting the expectations of their members. Having addressed what may be seen as some of the obvious things that trade union leaders should concentrate on doing, it is also good to take on board an academic perspective, which puts into context the importance of trade union productivity.

Freeman and Medoff (1984) argued that the union voice can be productivity-enhancing where voice costs are lower than the costs of dissatisfied workers quitting, and where lower quit rates encourage firms to invest in human capital, resulting in a more skilled and productive workforce. Union voice may also provide management with information that improves the quality of decision making. Unions may also reduce the transaction costs that employers face, for example, by enforcing and monitoring contracts (Booth, 1995; Kaufman, 2004; Kaufman and Levine, 2000.