

The Trade Union as a Business

Business is described as an economic activity which concerns itself with continuous and regular production and distribution of goods and services for satisfying human wants. Based on this, it makes for an interesting debate as to whether the trade union can be considered as a business. The argument can be advanced that inasmuch a trade union undertakes to satisfy human needs, it meets the criteria which qualifies it as a business operation.

One of the fundamental things required in the quest to satisfying human needs is the promotion of customer satisfaction. The fact that the two main functions of a trade union are to represent their members and to negotiate with employers, underscores the importance attached to maintaining customer satisfaction. This places an awesome responsibility on the leadership and management of the trade union to meet the expectations and demands of the membership. Many might ponder as to why this is so. It may be easy to reason this out, by simply examining how a trade union as a business is structured.

As it stands, a trade union is an organization which is formed, financed and run by its members in their own interests. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the trade union takes on the face of a modern businessman, who is forever conscious of their social responsibility. The trade union falls in line with the principle and practice of today's businessman, who understands the importance of being service-oriented rather than strictly profit driven. In the main, it ought to be recognized and understood that the focus of the trade union is not necessarily that of being profit oriented. It can certainly be said that the trade union is more result oriented, where through the collective bargaining and negotiations process, the wishes and demands of the membership are met.

Using the collective bargaining and negotiations process, the trade union seeks to lobby for better working conditions of workers, improve social security benefits and services, job creation, job security, protection of workers' rights and improved or new labour legislation. Combining these, the picture is painted of the trade union working towards satisfying human needs and discharging its social obligations.

It is well known that if a business is to be successful, it must be efficiently and effectively managed. It must be able to remain viable by demonstrating its ability to meet its targets, and satisfy its mission through attaining both the aims and objectives set. No business can sustained itself without completing some form of routine evaluation, assessment or analysis, so that it can identify its strengths and weakness, and where necessary, re-strategize in order to survive or surpass desired expectations.

It is for this reason that the trade union must begin to come to grips with some of the changes, which are currently impacting on its business operations and success. Two critical elements which are of immediate cause for concern are the decline in union membership and the quality

of leadership. Whereas leadership is a defining and critical factor, the loss of union membership is more severe and detrimental to the business of the trade union.

It is important that the issue of organizing is put on the front burner of the trade union if the decline in union membership is to be addressed and arrested. The contraction of the workforce is an obvious factor, but it cannot be used as an excuse for not organizing those unorganized workers. The trade union now has to aggressively recruit those part-time, temporary, self-employed, contract and seasonal workers who believe that there is no real need for a trade union. There is a need for the trade union to capture the attention of new public officers as they enter the Public Service.

It is beyond question that the trade union takes on the face of a business entity. Like the private sector and government, it shares the core business characteristics. Leadership, management, planning, organizing, budgeting, financial management, the taking of risks and making investments amongst other things, are all aspects of business which concern the trade union. Since this is the case, there is ever good reason for the business side of the trade union to be advanced.

It is advisable that trade unions pay more attention to improving their finances by identifying well designed recruitment strategies. They should also pay more attention to the marketing of their services, and look to introduce other services and programmes that will capture the attention and interest of the members and prospective members.