



Update & Comment

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Are We Facing a Drought of Workplace Trust as well as Water?

Challenging Times

You might be forgiven for thinking things are turning a bit, well, *biblical*. Sure, there aren't swarms of locusts or plagues of frogs, yet - but with the mercury soaring and wild fires in some areas of England, things don't feel quite right.

A similar scenario seems to be playing out in public sector workplaces. Mick Lynch is a household name as he rallies his RMT troops in their demand for a real-world increase in wages. There are numerous other disputes in the pipeline, we are told. There is also what appears to be new a political movement



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starting to emerge - Enough Is Enough, with its seductive if rather threatening demand that we 'turn anger into action.'

If this is not biblical, then surely there are parallels with the 70s. Arguably, we've gone back in time to a point in our history before we joined the EC (as it was then) and when the economy was sinking, household incomes were falling and widescale industrial unrest was a very real possibility. Best get out those flairs!

The Problem

The sad thing however is that this is of course entirely predictable. It is merely symptomatic of trust between those in authority and the wider population being eroded. Never in recent times have politicians seemed so incompetent and removed from the people they (supposedly) serve. They are viewed as corrupt and self-serving. Never have the institutions of the State seemed so fragile. Without stating the obvious - this is not good!

So what about your business? The public sector has always had 'a problem' with unions, right? At least the Government is talking about cracking down on union power and that will make everything ok? Well, no. The problem with trust is that it is an emotional bond. More specifically, within the employment relationship, it is the cement that binds the employer and employee together. Outlawing trade union activity won't build trust; quite the reverse. Absent that mortar, and the whole house falls down. This is what we risk now. If we allow distrust to take hold - or the prevailing cynicism to become habitual - then businesses large and small will start to stutter and fail. Think British Leyland if you need an example.

There is an irony here. The media and politicians who are waging their culture wars spend endless time and newsprint pointing out and blaming others for the very problem they have created & will make worse.

The Solution

So, are we met by imminent industrial disaster? Well, not quite. In fact, if we were then there would be little point you reading this article. You would rightly lose trust in anything I had to say.

Perhaps the greatest investment you can make at this juncture is to protect your business by engaging with your staff. Do this in the following ways:

- Reinforce the relationship you have with them, taking the time to listen and understand their concerns.
- Show solidarity with them and seek solutions which work for you all. In other words, promote the trust that you may well assume is there, but which your staff might not necessarily feel.
- Give them no opportunity to consider you as the problem. Emphasise that you are facing common challenges.
- Be honest in your appraisal of the situation and of their contribution. Take staff into your confidence by sharing information about how the business is doing. If you don't, staff have a tendency to join the dots (incorrectly) and assume the worst of you.
- Be consistent in your approach to staff, acting fairly throughout, without being taken for a ride.
- Look out for their physical and mental health.

It goes without saying that our political masters (of all colours) should be defusing these areas of tension. Sadly, more votes are seen as up for grabs by fanning the flames of discontent. Don't let your business become a victim of that approach.

For more information on how APERS can help your business navigate such issues in practice, visit www.apers.co.uk or give us a call on 07419 285214

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