

To: Yunuen Tristin (Software Engineering & Technology Manager)
From: Ruchit Bhardwaj (Software Development Intern)
Subject: Employee Activism: Views with Recommendations
Date: July 2, 2022

Purpose & Summary

Employee Activism is creating a new climate for business as this allows employees to use their voice to influence the company that they work for. Gone are those days when an employee was only hired to do their work. With diversity being an important part of the work ethic nowadays, companies cannot expect their employees to not voice their concerns, if any. It has been proven by historical examples that majority of the company walkouts have largely been due to issues like climate change, immigration, certain strategic investments, sexual harassments and unhygienic working conditions in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, integrating employee voices into a company's stakeholder processes, is a really important thing to do.

Discussion

Amazon is the largest online retailer store in the world and maintaining that for years together is no small feat. But, in order to achieve this, a mammoth group of employees work tirelessly each day, so that a parcel can be delivered to the customer in the shortest time possible. It is not a hidden fact that to make sure demands meet, there are certain measures that are taken in these humongous Amazon warehouses and given the sheer scale of business that Amazon handles, it's safe to assume that not all these measures would be 'employee-friendly'.

Amazon has been under the public eye along with being under the political scrutiny for its unsafe working conditions in the warehouses across the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation further, so much so that Amazon employees had to raise concerns regarding the unsafe working conditions for the warehouse workers during the COVID-19 pandemic – in what could be considered as the most recent case of employee activism in Amazon.

Since the early stages of the pandemic, Amazon had introduced various safety measures in its warehouses such as provision of masks, setting up hand-sanitization stations as well as mandating temperature checks before entering the facility. But the question that arises now is whether these safety measures were only on paper, or were they being implemented and were they actually being practiced – and this is where anecdotal evidence shed some light. One worker at the fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York states that air filters that had gone dirty had not been replaced, and people who did pass the mandatory temperature checks fell ill in the facility restroom. Although the company has issued guidelines mandating 6 feet distance between workers, in reality, everyone was standing close to one another while they were waiting for their shift assignment.

This is just one of several other similar counts that have emerged from workers who are employed at the Amazon fulfillment centers. Worsening working conditions are giving rise to mass unrest, internal scandals, employee protests and public petitions and due to the scale at which Amazon operates, this has also been noticed by some of the top political officials over the company's labor practice and it has definitely been a huge blow to Amazon's public reputation.

Amazon knows this. Externally, Amazon has released many short advertisements and documentaries, highlighting the efforts that it is taking to ensure the safety of its workers during these trying times but internally, worker complaints are met with a blind eye, and defaulters are often fired, citing violations of internal policies such as internal communications, social distancing or conduct with colleagues.

When instances like these keep on repeating, one thing that is bound to happen is the effort of unionization. A union is a small group of the organization that share a common interest and creation of unions can be an effective way to hear the voice of more employees. Each pain point can be spoken for, by a union leader rather than hundreds or thousands of people protesting in public. This can be beneficial for both the company and its employees. According to a 2018 interview with CEO of Axel Springer, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos said that Amazon does not believe that unions are necessary to be intermediaries between the management and the employees, but he also stated that at the end of the day, it was the employee's choice. But the fact that Amazon US facilities till date remain union free, speaks for the company's stand on unions.

Recommendation

Kevin J. Mulcahy, a partner with Future workplace, says that if you are not thinking like a workplace activist meaning that if you are not advocating for a change that you want to see, it means that you are not going to be in-charge of the change that is going to happen. So, either, you can be a part of the change, or you can be the consequence of the change. This goes to show as to how important it is to be a part of employee activism. One way that organizations can support societal concerns while at the same time, pursue business opportunities is to pick up a point that is most relevant to the people during that time, publicize a detailed plan of action of how the problem will be tackled and then let the employees decide on whether they are comfortable with the steps or would they want to change anything. An important factor to ensure organizations peace is to also be open to change. Hence, I believe that employee activism is an essential ingredient to any successful organization and workplace.

References

- 1) Ghaffary S. & Del Ray J. (Jun 29, 2020). The real cost of Amazon. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/29/21303643/amazon-coronavirus-warehouse-workers-protest-jeff-bezos-chris-smalls-boycott-pandemic>
- 2) Jessen R. (Nov 29, 2021). Amazon Covid Settlement Spotlights Board Focus on Workforce, ESG. Bloomberg Law. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/esg/amazon-covid-settlement-spotlights-board-focus-on-workforce-esg>
- 3) Palmer A. (May 9, 2022). Amazon fires two employees tied to Staten Island union effort. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/09/amazon-fires-two-employees-tied-to-staten-island-union-effort.html>
- 4) Perkins Miller K. (Jan 29, 2020). Employee Activism strikes again: Amazon workers violate corporate policy to speak out on climate change. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathymillerperkins/2020/01/29/employee-activism-strikes-again-a-generational-clash-at-amazon/>