SPEAK UP, WE CAN'T HEAR YOU: WORKER VOICE IN THE SMALL FIRM

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Introduction

This paper compares workers' experiences of individual and collective voice in small firms, where Moore and Read (2006) have pointed to the use of exit over voice amongst workers (further confirmed by Ryan 2010). They cite proximitous working relationships with managers and proprietors as a barrier to greater trade union organisation. The use of different forms of voice to resolve workplace grievances is considered.

Two groups of small firms are compared: veterinary practices and horse racing stables. What differentiates workers in these small firms is the existence of a representative organisation. For veterinary nurses this is the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) and for stable staff, the National Association of Stable Staff (NASS). While the BVNA has an industrial relations department to deal with individual workplace problems, the Association does not negotiate collectively on wages and tends to view itself more like a professional body. Veterinary practices are therefore non-union workplaces and veterinary nurses are more inclined to 'vote with their feet' and use exit (Hirschman 1971: Moore and Read 2006) if their grievances are not resolved. Theories of worker voice associated with the non-union workplace (Haynes 2005), also embrace such alternatives to collective bargaining as employee involvement and participation (Wilkinson et al 2007); such initiatives were not present in vet practices.

NASS holds a Certificate of Independence and is recognised for collective bargaining purposes through the National Joint Council for Stable Staff. It conducts annual wage negotiations and is clear that it is the collective voice of stable staff. It has recently affiliated to the TUC. Its members are inclined to take one of two

approaches to grievances. One approach was to use individual voice, raising grievances, only turning to NASS if matters were not resolved to the member's satisfaction. Members tended only to go straight to NASS when the problem was particularly fraught, such as a riding accident or an unfair dismissal.

Moore and Read (2006) suggest that workers are unable to identify and voice grievances because this represents too great a threat to their position in the workplace; in turn this inhibits the mobilisation of workers around grievances (Kelly 1998) and the collective identification between workers which might lead to trade union organisation. Nevertheless NASS members also gave some evidence of 'informal' industrial action over collective grievances, showing an ability to mobilise in response to immediate problems at a race meeting on an inter-stables basis. Similarly, there was some evidence from the BVNA of moves to create a veterinary union, with support from veterinary nurses, through the UNITE trade union. This paper therefore also starts to address a research gap: in what circumstances do workers collectivise grievances in small organisations?

The literature

The origins of voice as a concept are founded in Hirschman's (1970) work on exit, voice and loyalty amongst customers but he observed that these concepts could be extended to organisations which supply membership services, such as trade unions and political parties. Hirschman defined voice as any attempt to bring about change within an organisation, rather than leave. More recently, the concept of voice has been taken up in the HRM literature, reflecting the rise in non-union workplaces and concern at how and whether workers are able to voice issues of concern and secure effective resolution of workplace difficulties.

The definition of voice has been further refined, to reflect the variety of organisational settings in which voice may (or may not) be found: union voice; non-union voice; individual voice; collective voice; direct voice. While Dundon et al (2006:493) find that 'there is no consensus definition of employee voice', attempts have been made

to conceptualise voice in a number of ways. Dundon and Rollinson (2004:52) state that ‘in simple terms employee voice can be described as methods that provide for employees to have a say in matters that affect them’. This is further refined by Dundon et al (2004:1152) who propose four meanings of voice which are the articulation of individual dissatisfaction; the expression of collective organisation; a contribution to management decision making; the demonstration of mutuality and cooperation between employers and workers.

Having considered what voice might be intended to do, we need to consider how voice might be articulated. In their study of the effect of voice on labour productivity, Bryson et al (2006:439) regard voice as ‘any formal mechanism by which workers can communicate their views to management'. Dundon et al (2006:502) identify different company methods for voice which include newsletters, meetings, focus groups, individual appraisal, negotiation and collective bargaining. However, they list these in the context of research on the regulatory environment of the Information and Consultation Directive 2002, identifying an increasingly complex array of mechanisms which may meet the requirements of the Directive. Arguably, some of these methods move away from the voice mechanisms such as union voice discussed by Freeman and Medoff (1984) in their study of American unionism and further taken up by Sverke and Hellgren (2001) in the context of Swedish cooperative industrial relations. For both sets of authors, union voice is a valuable asset to employers, having the potential to improve productivity and to keep workers loyal to their employer, rather than exiting through dissatisfactions with employment practices.

However, these authors concern themselves with formality of voice, through mechanisms which are shared with the employer. Not all of the mechanisms referred to are union-dependent, of course, nor indicative of a collectively bargained employment relationship. It has been recognised that voice needs exist outside of traditional industrial relations and that the reality for many workers is that they are in

a non-union environment or one where attempts have been made to use non-union voice. Dundon et al (2005:313) examine the management of voice in non-union organisations, particularly identifying suggestion schemes and attitude surveys as ‘upward problem solving’, with representative participation represented by non-union consultative forums, partnership schemes and European Works Councils. They suggest that the existence and use of non-union voice warrants further investigation, while Butler (2005) argues that non-representative voice is ineffective. Dundon and Gollan (2007:1194) concur to the extent that the effectiveness of non voice channels is ‘questionable’.

Dundon and Gollan (2007:1182) note that increasingly ‘individual employees have to engage directly with their manager’ or turn to third parties such as the Citizens’ Advice Bureau, since trade union mechanisms do not exist for many workers. Nevertheless, where voice is heard and acted upon by managers, to the worker’s satisfaction, it will serve as an alternative to exit from that job or that organisation.

Informal voice - Dundon and Gollan (2007) define voice in terms of 'mechanisms', formal or informal.

Aim of voice from the worker perspective.

This begs the question of how effectiveness may be measured and from whose perspective. Benson (2000) for example records a higher frequency of voice mechanisms in union active workplaces but asks whether this is because of collective consciousness or because of management trying to ‘recapture’ employees by undermining union voice.

Hollow-shell mechanism. Impact of voice. However, voice mechanisms in a non-union workplace may be the ‘hollow shell’ analogy put forward by Dundon et al (2005); the mechanism exists but has no substance. This was also found by Moore and Read (2006) in their study of mobilisation in small firms.

Drawing on these studies of a variety of voice arrangements in large organisations, we now turn to the discussion of voice in the small firms sector, where the evidence often points to the fact that workers lack access to union voice, as found by Marlow and Patten 2002. Workers thus may only be able to use exit (Hirschman 1970) from the organisation to express their dissatisfaction when grievances go unresolved. Ryan (2005:211) goes further in suggesting that 'workers, who file grievances *because they want more say* in workplace decisions, are more likely to exit where voice is denied, ignored or rejected'. However, it is plain that in some circumstances workers will use exit as a marginal protest, moving between small firms in the same sector where they are just as likely to encounter the same management practices (Miller 2010) because of their overwhelming desire to undertake that form of work. Using Hirschman's terminology, there is a bond of loyalty but it is not necessarily to individual employers.

Dundon et al (2006) find that small firms utilise organic and informal flows of information, perhaps reflecting the work of Marlow and Patten (2002:29) who found a lack of union voice or formal channels in small firms for workers to articulate grievances. In their study of collective organisation and mobilisation in small and medium sized enterprises, Moore and Read (2006) point to the lack of attention to employee voice in the small firms' literature. Their research further confirms the use of exit over voice amongst workers in this sector, citing proximitous working relationships with managers and proprietors as a barrier to greater trade union organisation. Workers are unable to identify and voice grievances because this represents too great a threat to their position in the workplace; in turn this inhibits the mobilization of workers around grievances (Kelly 1998) and collective identification between workers, which may lead to trade union organisation.

Luchak (2003) Loyal employees will express voice rather than use exit. p117 'those attached to the organisation through an affective bond' are less likely to exit and more likely to use voice but direct rather than representative 9p130). Perceived

effectiveness of union voice increases likelihood of representative and direct voice. Women are less likely to speak up.

Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, Ackers (2004) Impact of voice arrangements on commitment to organisation.

Dundon, Curran, Ryan and Maloney (2006)

Cunningham I (????: 203 but IRJ) 'an issue which remains unexplored relates to the nature and extent of ideological commitment among staff to their organisation and its cause'

Smith (2006) considers exit within the context of the labour process and notes that exit has been regarded as incapable of changing the labour process and thus as an inferior mechanism to voice. He argues that, in certain circumstances, the mere threat of exit may have the effect of bringing about improvements in the wage-effort bargain, though there is insufficient evidence to be conclusive about this effect. However, the position for many workers in small firms is that they have no effective alternative. In a study of the Information and Consultation Regulations in small firms, Wilkinson et al (2007:1283) find that 'in small firms employees are less likely to trigger the process [of information and consultation] and may exit rather than try to seek voice'. Ryan (2005:210) argues such procedures are often seen as 'a vehicle for whingers and moaners to cause trouble'. He argues that workers who file grievances are more likely to use exit in small firms, when voice is ignored or denied. He defines exit as 'physical' (resigning or absenteeism) or 'mental' (lack of enthusiasm for job, daydreaming on the job).

Methodology

The research project focuses on two aspects of voice and locates these in the small firm. It took as its starting points individual formal or informal voice, and collective voice, through formal or informal means, with or without a trade union. The following four research objectives were adopted in order to operationalise relevant theory:

- When do SME workers opt to use union voice to resolve individual problems through formal mechanisms?
- When do they use individual voice, formally or informally, to resolve individual workplace problems?
- What problems do they see as collective amongst the workforce?
- What are the restraints to resolving problems collectively?

Implicit in these four objectives was the potential for workers to use exit as a further means of expressing dissatisfaction (Hirschman 1970; Ryan 2005) if problems were not addressed or resolved.

Dundon et al (1999) note lack of studies of union organisation in small firms. However, Marlow and Patten (2002:529) point out that 'Ascertaining the views of small firm employees offers particular challenges to researchers' and so it proved in this project. Taking Ram's (1999) suggestion that a range of research interventions should be adopted in the small firms setting, such as face to face interviews; attendance at company meetings; and scrutinising company documents, a number of data collection techniques were used, namely focus group interviews; individual semi-structured interviews; and an on-line questionnaire.

Access to racing employees in 2000, 2003 facilitated respectively by employers, direct negotiation with racecourses. Access in 2011 facilitated through support of NASS/BVNA.

The data

This section presents the data from each sector and group of workers. It is important to note a key difference between racing stables and veterinary practices; stable staff have been collectively organised, with pay governed by collective bargaining, since the 1920s. From 1920-1975 they were members of the TGWU, with collective bargaining atomised between different racing centres, for example Newmarket and Lambourn. From 1975-2006, after derecognition of the TGWU in 1976, they were deemed to be members of the Stable Lads' Association, an employer-controlled body. From 2006-the present, the National Association of Stable Staff has taken on the job of representing stable staff, including through the National Joint Council for Stable Staff.

By contrast, veterinary nurses have no collective union representation, since the BVNA is a professional body and there is no collective bargaining agreement. However, the BVNA does contract with an HR consultancy to provide a legal helpline for members in employment difficulties.

Discussion

Voice, voice mechanism, size of firm, location, product, exit, loyalty.

The kinds of grievances which had been raised

How addressed – individual or collective

The outcome

In the small firms' literature, specifically, managers often regard informal voice mechanisms, such as the 'open door policy' as more appropriate. This is said to be a satisfactory product of the close and more harmonious working situation deemed to be present. In their report on small firms surveyed in WERS 2004, Forth et al (2006:50) state that 'direct methods of communication may have a better fit than representative forms of voice'. This begs the question 'better form whom' as the evidence from veterinary practices and racing stables offered a different perspective on the validity of representative voice in these small firms.

In racing respondents said that ‘although some managers have a genuine open door policy’, this was not widespread and ‘in 90% of yards there is no HR, nor is there sufficient training in staff management amongst assistant trainers and head lads’. Attitudes were very ‘traditional’ and staff could be intimidated by their managers, particularly through horse welfare and the threat that a good horse could be taken away from an individual worker if s/he did not cooperate.

The evidence very strongly pointed to the fact that workers in both sets of small firms valued the assistance they had received, either from NASS or the BVNA helpline. One Senior Veterinary Nurse respondent did say that:

> We need individual representation as the employment relationship is too personal for individuals to resolve problems on their own

Two stable lads said that they were very happy with the support they had received from NASS in solving conflict at work and appreciated having an independent organisation to which they could turn, since, as a Head Lad and NASS representative in Newmarket said:

> Individual staff are less confident to raise issues. They will turn to a friend at work or someone they know is a NASS representative

Discussions with veterinary nurses also revealed a culture of bullying around issues of animal welfare.

The response from both groups tended to suggest that union membership was not a controversial issue and the veterinary nurses intimated that they would not object to union membership if it was offered to them. Given that both groups are employed in a large number of small firms, the evidence suggested that unions might have some success in mounting an organising campaign. While dispersed across small organisations, both groups have opportunities to meet on an inter-firm basis: for veterinary staff at regional continuing professional development meetings and the

BVNA annual conference; and for stable staff at the NASS annual conference, regional committee meetings and at race meetings on a regular basis.

There is currently an initiative by UNITE through the British Veterinary Union to organise vets and nurses into an independent trade union.

Collective action – 52% of veterinary nurses had been part of a group dealing with a problem at work, without the help of the BVNA. Overwhelmingly they said that they did not contemplate taking a form of collective action, such as a work to rule. However, nurses were prepared to meet their employer as a group and confront the employer with the problem and seek resolution

For both groups, a strong inhibition to industrial action came from concerns with animal welfare.

Exit showed up as a firm alternative and it was clear that stable staff and veterinary nurses would vote with their feet if problems could not be resolved at the workplace. However, the results did not show that this was the first course of action which was likely to be contemplated. Loyalty to animals in their care

Conclusion

BIBLIOGRAPHY