

THE ROLE OF BOTSWANA TRADE UNIONS IN PROMOTING EMPLOYEE RELATIONS IN AN ORGANISATION: THE CASE OF BOTSWANA EXAMINATION COUNCIL

Theophilus TSHUKUDU*

Abstract: *This paper endeavors to appreciate the role of trade unions in the promotion of productivity in the Botswana State Owned Enterprise (SOE), namely Botswana Examination Council. According to the result of this study it is clear that that trade unions are doing little to promote productivity in the Botswana State Owned Organizations (SOEs). The role trade union movement has evolved for the better over the years and positive results have been evident in a number of respects such as collective bargaining and other negotiation processes. However, the role of trade union movement in the promotion of productivity the in the developing countries has been far-fetched. This challenge leaves the trade movement irresponsible when it comes to instilling a productivity culture amongst its members, yet both members and the employers are reliant on members' performance for profitability and continuity in the workplace. On the other hand BEC management has a role of embracing trade unions as stakeholders in the organizations performance and that their need for management to take trade unions on board in terms of performance improvement initiatives. Equally so, trade unions cannot distance it's from issues productivity and organizational performance because union members are an integral part of the organisation and their labour can improve organizational performance it can bring the organization down.*

Keywords: *Botswana Examination Council, productivity, organizational performance*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employees are among an organization's most important resources and coined as most valuable assets. The nature and amount of work performed by them have a direct impact on the productivity of an organization. So maintaining healthy employee relations in an organization is a requirement for any organization in order to achieve growth and success. Employee relations refers to a company's efforts to manage relationships between employers and employees. An organization with a good employee relations program provides fair and consistent treatment to all employees so they will be committed to their jobs and loyal to the company. According to Brian, (1988), Employee relations is a broad term that incorporates many issues from collective bargaining, negotiations, employment legislation to more recent considerations such as work-life balance, equal opportunities and managing diversity. It comprises of the practices or initiatives for ensuring that Employees are happy and are productive. Employee Relations offers assistance in a variety of ways including employee recognition, policy development and

* Department of Management, Faculty of Business, University of Botswana
tshukudutt@ub.ac.za//theophil700@gmail.com.

interpretation, and all types of problem solving and dispute resolution. It involves handling the pay work bargain, dealing with employment practices, terms and conditions of employment, issues arising from employment, providing employees with a voice and communicating with employees. Employee relations is concerned with maintaining employee-employer relation, which contributes to satisfactory productivity, increase in employee morale and motivation. Blyton and Turnbull (1994) defined Employee relations as a study of the rules, regulations and agreements by which employees are managed both as individuals and as a collective group, the priority given to the individual as opposed to the collective relationship varying from organisation to organisation depending upon the values of management. As such it is concerned with how to gain people's commitment to the achievement of an organisation's business goals and objectives in a number of different situations. The purpose of this write up is to discuss the role of Trade Unions in promoting Employee Relations at Botswana Examinations Council (BEC).

1.1 Background of the Botswana Examination Council

Botswana Examinations Council (BEC) is a parastatal organisation established by the Ministry of Basic Education (MoBE). It is located in Block 3, Gaborone next to Westgate Mall. It took over from the Examinations, Research and Testing Division in June 2007. It is mandated under section 5 of Botswana Examinations Council Act (Act No. 11 of 2012) to conduct school examinations and any other examinations for MoBE and issue certificates in respect of such examinations. BEC has four key activities which are to; develop, administer, accredit and certify examinations for primary and secondary level of education as well as the external examinations <http://www.bec.co.bw>. BEC has six directorates being the Examinations, Administration and Certification (EAC), Product Development and Standards (PDS), Research and Policy Development (RPD), Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), Human Resource (HR) and Corporate Services (CS). All these directorates are headed by the Executive Secretary. The mission of BEC is "Provision of a credible and responsive assessment and examination system" whereas its vision is "To be a provider of accessible and globally competitive qualifications". It has four core values namely; Excellence, Integrity, Transparency and People Focus <http://www.bec.co.bw>.

1.2 Problem Statement

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the relationship between change in the work environment and the activities of the trade unions. Therefore, due to these rapid innovations the trade unions are taking part in a national debate about the uses and consequences of this innovation. Therefore, the important question is what kind of relationship unions have with organisation in addressing

the issues concerning employees. For instance, in Botswana labour disputes mainly in the public sector have become a worrisome phenomenon. The essay is therefore directed to assess the role of Trade Union in promoting Employee Relations at Botswana Examinations Council (BEC), as it was realized that most BEC employees are not satisfied. For example, they are paid low salaries, working environment is not conducive and at times the organisation took too long to address their grievances, just to mentioned a few.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature or information review is putting the research project into context by showing how it fits into a particular field and it is an essential step in the research process. This literature review involves many sources and it should highlight related literature and contribute to the field by providing a novel and focusing on the reading of the literature. It must be well structured and systematically presented. According to Achur, (2011) literature review is an objective, critical summary of published research literature relevant to a topic under consideration for research. Its purpose is to create familiarity with current thinking and research on a particular topic, and may justify future research into a previously overlooked or understudied area. The topics that are going to be discussed in this chapter are classified as follows: Definition of Trade Unions, Types of Trade Unions, Importance of Trade Unions in organisations, Roles of Trade Unions in organisation, Benefits of Trade Unions and Challenges of Trade Unions

2.1. Definition of Trade Unions

A trade union refers to an organization or group of workers who are united in order to articulate and attain some interests including protection of the trades' integrity, achievement of better remuneration packages, good working conditions and safety among others. Trade unions usually have clearly defined leadership structure through which they use in order to bargain with employers. Achur, (2011) argues that elected leaders of trade unions negotiate with employers on behalf of ordinary members of the union for better working conditions, once the parties agree they sign contracts known as "collective bargaining agreements and may include wages and salaries, hiring and firing procedures, promotion, demotion of workers, rules and regulations among others.

According to Morris (2002), trade union is an organization based on membership of employees in various trades, occupations and professions, whose major focus is the representation of its members at the workplace and in the wider society. It particularly seeks to advance its interest through the process of rule-making and collective bargaining. Kaufman, (2004), posits that trade union is an

employee's organisation with the main purpose of protecting and promoting employee's interests at the working place, mainly through negotiations means and collective consulting with the employers. Their objective is to sustain and enhance the terms and conditions of work for their members. This is done through collective bargaining with employers. Recognition of the trade union by the organisation is very important for collective bargaining. Collective bargaining takes place when the trade union negotiates with the employer on behalf of the employees on matters regarding pay and other terms and conditions of employment.

2.2. Types of Trade Unions

According to Kaufman; (2004) Trade unions are of four types: company union, general or industrial union, craft union and white collar union. Company union represents the employees in a single company. General or Industrial union represents employees from several companies belonging to the same industry. Craft union represents skilled workers in a specific field while White collar union represent white collar employees e.g., teachers and professors.

2.3. Difference between national and international trade union

Unions are formed when workers join together as a group to negotiate work-related issues. Unions can be categorized into national unions and international unions based on the scope of their influence. According to Renaud, (2002) National unions are run by members from one country who works in different trades and occupational categories that have come together to attempt to increase the power of labor in their country. Priorities for national unions are wages, benefits, and safe working conditions while on other hand International unions are similar to national unions in that they work to improve safety, benefits, and wages and also have advocates and conventions. However, they also look to deal with global issues, such as poverty, trade, inequality, terrorism, and human rights.

2.4. Importance of Trade Unions

Trade unions play an important role in organisation as they are helpful in effective communication between the workers and the management. They provide the advice and support to ensure that the differences of opinion do not turn into major conflicts. They also play an important role in organizing courses for their members on a wide range of matters. Seeking a healthy and safe working environment is also prominent feature of the trade union. According to ILO, (1992), Trade Unions are important to workers because they strengthen workers' demand for better labour and industrial legislation. The ability of unions to represent workers and their families stand as an asset, for which political parties try

to encourage them by offering better deals in terms of pro labour legislation. Better medical facilities, welfare schemes, annual leave, insurance and other benefits are the results. Trade Unions also ensure more job security for its members than non-unionized workers as well as providing legal support to workers when they face police action and legal tangles. Factories with union activity are safer when it comes to chance for industrial accidents. Unions pressurize employers to ensure better safety standards and use their influence with law enforcement agencies to assure better safety measures at workplace.

Trade unions can also negotiate with management for mutual give and take in matters of increased productivity. When there is higher demand of production trade unions can negotiate better remuneration, so that both workers and managements benefit. Since trade unions protect their interests, workers can remain motivated and their economic, social, political well-being is taken care of. Trade unions help in accelerated pace of economic development by helping in the recruitment and selection of workers. They also teach discipline among the workforce as well as by enabling settlement of industrial disputes in a rational manner. Trade Unions helps in social adjustments. Workers have to adjust themselves to the new working conditions, the new rules and policies. Workers coming from different backgrounds may become disorganized, unsatisfied and frustrated. Unions help them in such adjustment. (Gennard and Judge 2002).

2.5. Roles of Trade Unions at BEC

The trade union plays many roles at BEC such as promoting the welfare of its members. For instance, they play the role of bargaining power, minimise discrimination or harassment of any kind, sense of participation of the members, platform of self-expression, betterment of employee relations and sense of job security of its members. Trade unions also play a vital role at BEC in terms of effective communication between management and employees. They provide the support system to ensure that the differences of opinion do not turn into major conflicts. Trade unions play an active role in negotiations between management and workers in times of disagreement. They not only represent employees to discuss their pay and benefits, but also provide a voice for the employees to be heard on various other aspects of personnel policies. These include selecting employees for layoffs, retrenchment, promotion and transfer. At times, the personnel selection criterion within BEC is not fair and transparent, therefore a trade union ensures that workers have a say in the proceedings and their interests are safeguarded.

From the management perspective, it is beneficial to deal with trade union members who represent all the employees rather than deal with employees individually. This saves time and is cost efficient as conflicts can be resolved in a timely manner. This ensures there is no stoppage of work, thus preventing adverse

effects on employee productivity and efficiency. Management will get to know from the trade union about the views of employees on various important aspects of the company policies. They can use this information to make important decisions that affect employees (Gennard & Judge, 2002).

2.6. Benefits of Trade Unions

Trade unions offer a number of benefits or advantages to their registered members, these benefits arise from the work that trade unions perform. First of all, trade unions lead employees in their negotiations and agreement with their employers on appropriate payment and work conditions. It is much easier for workers to push for salary increments unlike an individual employee. Thus, by joining a trade union, an employer may be able to enjoy the advantages of collective bargaining about better salaries and wages among other remuneration packages. Secondly, trade unions represent workers and protect them from any possible exploitation by employers. Whenever employees have concerns relating to the workplace, trade unions take up those concerns and discuss them with employers. These concerns include health and safety standards, more holidays and working hours. This means that if employees join trade unions, they are able to have these concerns discussed without delays, fear or intimidation (Freeman and Medoff 1984).

Trade unions are also beneficial to organizations because through them, employers can strike productivity deals with their employees (Freeman 2010). In these productivity deals, employers and union leaders agree on output targets whereby the unions undertake to mobilize their members to achieve the set targets whereas employers promise to increase the rewards to employees. These kinds of agreement ensure mutual benefits for both workers and organization. At the end of the day, no party feels that it has suffered a loss. Another important function of trade unions is that they enable their members to access education facilities as well as a number of consumer benefits like discounted insurance. This kind of education facilities ensure that employees get training to acquire new skills which can in turn make them work more productively for the benefit of the organization. It also ensures that they keep up with the ever-changing technology and as a result, they remain relevant in their organization. In addition, trade unions provide moral and legal advice to the members who could be facing disciplinary action. Union officials accompany the affected workers to disciplinary meetings and even speak up for them. In legal suits, unions may offer free legal services to the members and even represent them in courts. Allen, (1960) contend that trade unions improve the economic and social conditions of all workers in an organisations besides render to them assistance whether or not such workers are employed or have ceased to be employed.

Trade unions serve as an agency for the purpose of commenting on economic, social and political affairs including securing legislative protection for workers by acting in accordance with existing laws and regulations, the rules of the union and good industrial relations practice; liaising with and seeking advice and assistance from the appropriate full-time trade union official (Ananaba, 1979). Economic activities of trade unions are no doubt the dominant activities played by trade unions in most countries. Collective bargaining trade unions negotiate wages and salaries, helping to distribute the value added in the business firm and increasing the spending power of their members in the economy (Allen, 1960). While maximizing benefits to their members, trade unions are always conscious of the possible impact of their bargaining on inflation and employment. Globalization has made most countries to operate in as open economies, dependent on trade for survival. In many instances, inflation is determined by the cost of goods and services which are imported. There is not much evidence to suggest that trade unions are responsible for cost-push inflationary tendencies in the region. Nevertheless, unions direct their efforts at protecting their workers against the ravages of inflation, and trying to improve living standards which have been depressed for historical reasons. Moreover, they try to defend their member's right to work and are supportive of both macro and micro economic policies which would be conducive to high employment (Flanders, 1970).

2.7. Challenges of Trade Unions

Although trade unions are beneficial to employees and employers, they also have some challenges or disadvantages. Nurse, (1992) argues that because trade unions drive up wages, they unintentionally cause unemployment especially if the wages rise above the equilibrium. This means that trade unions have a challenge of ensuring that employees are paid high wages without leading to unemployment, this is not easy to attain due to lack of sufficient information and expertise that trade unions need in order to negotiate for equilibrium wages. Secondly, trade unions do not represent workers who are not registered as members of the union. In case a worker who is not registered has problems with the company or at a personal level, unions usually ignore such workers. Here, the challenge is to fight perceptions that the unions are discriminatory. Unions must work hard to ensure that all the workers see the benefits of union membership so that they can be members and union can serve all the workers without perceptions of discrimination.

In addition, Renaud, (2002) indicated that trade unions can easily lead to inflation since when wages rise above inflation rate, general inflation sets in. When general wages are increased due to trade union campaigns, workers end up having more disposable income and their purchasing power increases. Because of availability of cash in the hands of workers, commodity prices may rise

significantly. The challenge that trade unions face in this regard is therefore to ensure that workers get reasonable pay without such pay increments leading to inflation. It is also noteworthy that strikes caused by trade unions lead to work stoppages thus leading to loss of productivity

It is not always that all attempts by trade unions to improve employee welfare are successful. In some cases, unions fail to agree with the management on the way forward. As a result, trade unions mobilize their members to go on strike. In cases where such strikes take a long period, companies end up losing revenues due to discontinuity in production. Therefore, the challenge of trade unions in this regard is to fight for workers and pressurize company managers to improve employee welfare without jeopardizing the company interests. However, it is not easy for trade unions to engage in industrial action without undermining organizational productivity; firms often incur losses in cases of strikes.

3. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations are made and these include amongst others the following:

- BEC should try to encourage the growth of trade union since they are associated with increases in organizational productivity.
- BEC should try to create a positive working relationship with trade unions and the negotiation environment should be friendly enough to avoid stalemates that turn into strikes since strikes disrupt productivity.
- BEC should consider encouraging trade unions to participate in corporate social responsibility initiatives instead focusing only on their narrow employee representation.

4. CONCLUSION

Trade unions have been found to play an important role in organizational productivity through their impacts on individual employees. They advance collective employee interests and help in solving grievances that employees may have against their employers. They also play an important role in pushing for better remuneration packages for their registered members and ensure that workers enjoy a good working environment. The principle of collective bargaining and the benefits that come with it would not be possible without the important role that trade unions perform. Through them, employees are able to face their employers with a united front thus giving individual worker incredible bargaining power. However over and above this noble role of trade unions, times have changed and trade unions are expected to do more than the basic. This paper therefore advocate that Trade unions should be equally concerned with organizational performance

which is the total sum of their members' performance contributions. Trade shop stewards should spear head operational performance of their members not for them to be during disciplinary hearing even when it involves a non performing member. Shop stewards as an extension of the labour movement should be performance champions purely because their members' welfare issues are important but members' performance is the ultimate responsibility of trade union movement.

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