
Employee Involvement:

Watching Out for the Tricks and Traps



United Steelworkers of America
Collective Bargaining Services Department
Five Gateway Center
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Employee Involvement: Watching Out for the Tricks and Traps

by Charley Richardson

Collective Bargaining Services

Introduction

In 1993, the USWA initiated the New Directions bargaining program with the goal of gaining greater voice for the members, through their union, in those areas that have traditionally been viewed as “off-limits” under the management rights doctrine. The purpose of the Partnership language in our Basic Steel agreements was, and remains, to give the union tools which will aid it in more effectively representing the members in an economy and workplace that is constantly being buffeted by technological change and work re-organization initiatives. Ideally, the language helps to build the strength and viability of the USWA - supporting union-building and internal organizing efforts while entering into a process of “continuous bargaining” with management over change in the workplace.

In 1998 , the union refined its approach in the Wage Policy Statement where goals around continuous bargaining were clearly laid out:

3. Partnership / Involvement Programs

In recent years, our workplaces have become places of continuous change. In their drive to increase profitability, companies are constantly introducing new technologies and trying to implement new forms of work organization. These changes are often designed to increase the control that management has over our work. It is critical that the Union has the opportunity to bargain over these changes before they are implemented.

Almost all employers are creating programs that claim to provide "worker voice" or involvement. But without the full involvement of the Union, these programs will not address workers' needs.

In order to achieve a real voice in our futures, we must pursue contract language that sets up Partnership/Involvement programs based on the principles of continuous bargaining to deal with continuous change as well as reorganizing and that the Union is the exclusive bargaining representative for any and all forms of ongoing discussion. Our Wage Policy goals of 1998 were based on our experience in this area since 1993 and were designed to focus on the need for additional "resources" and "process and control".

The results of the 1999 round of bargaining in Basic Steel exceeded our expectations.

With respect to resources we set a pattern that provides for semi-annual meetings with the Union leadership of each location to meet with their Company counterparts and with other corporate leaders. The first day of this two-day meeting is a Union only caucus to prepare our agenda and issues. Additionally, the Union is provided up to \$25,000 to hire consultants (chosen exclusively by the Union) to assist with Union only training. The costs of the meetings and the Union consultants is borne by the Company.

With respect to the process and control, the pattern agreements provide that the Local Union President (or unit chair) will be solely responsible for deciding who will be the Union participants in all involvement activities and this includes the ability to remove Union participants.

Finally, if the Union believes that our participative objectives are not being met, the chairs of the negotiating committee will investigate and attempt to reach mutually satisfactory solutions.

While our 1993 New Directions Partnership Language, together with our 1999 modifications provide the framework and protections needed to insure effective participation with the Union being a full partner, those contemplating these issues should insist on a clause that provides:

a. Notice

The Union must be provided with notice of all proposed changes affecting the workplace well before any decision regarding the change is made. Without such notice, it is impossible to effectively research, evaluate and bargain over these changes.

b. Information

The right to information to support traditional contract bargaining is a well established principle. Information to support continuous bargaining is equally important. Partnership/Involvement programs must contain language that ensures full and complete access to information about any and all changes that are being considered.

c. Resources

Continuous bargaining takes significant resources. We cannot prepare ourselves and carry out the analysis and bargaining that is necessary without significant resources under the Union's exclusive control. If we are to keep up with the changes that are occurring, and train our officers, stewards and members to deal with this process, it is absolutely critical that we have and control the resources to do it.

d. Bargaining

An enforceable mechanism must be created that mandates ongoing discussions/ bargaining between the Union and management. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that all discussions regarding change in the workplace take place only in a union-sanctioned forum, and that all Union participants be chosen exclusively by the Union.

e. Job Security

Technological change and work re-organization can pose a threat to job security, seniority, health and safety and many other issues of importance to the Union. To the extent possible, we must negotiate basic protections which provide security to our members in the midst of rapid change.

Finally, it is important to recognize that winning good contract language, while critical, is only a first step. We must also develop a strategy for dealing with the issues that arise as the workplace changes. We need training, research, and the development of a clear sense of union goals and priorities.

While the USWA was working on its plan for giving the members an enhanced voice in their own future, many in management were busy developing their alternative - "new management" programs and techniques which often contain the rhetoric of involvement and voice, without the substance of collective worker power. These management-designed programs, under names like Continuous Improvement, Employee Involvement, Kaizen, Corrective Action Teams, Six Sigma, etc., seek to make changes in the workplace and to engage the workforce in the discussion of change, but only while maintaining strict management control over the process. They are designed to bypass the mechanisms of union power. They specifically interfere with the union "acting like a union" as it discusses change with management. We have too often failed to treat these discussions as bargaining, and have arrived at the table unprepared.

This document is designed as a warning to us all - a guide to questioning the techniques and watching out for the "Tricks and Traps" of involvement. It takes a critical look at the techniques used in many of the involvement programs, particularly (but not exclusively) those where we have failed to aggressively maintain control of the program. As such, it is the first step, and only the first step, in developing a true union strategy for bargaining over change.

The Involvement Movement: A Management Driven Program for Discussing Change

Under many different names, such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Employee Involvement,

Empowerment, Six Sigma, Employee Participation, Kaizen, Problem Solving Teams, Continuous Improvement, World Class Manufacturing, etc., management is bringing programs into our workplaces which raise new and important challenges for our locals.¹

Even where we have negotiated language that gives us some mechanisms of control, management seeks (often successfully) to determine both the general direction and the details of implementation. Where they are successful, it is often because we have not been sufficiently vigilant or successful in pursuing the rights we have under the law and through contract language, and because we too often allowed consultants and others to take over the specific implementation of the programs, without engaging in the ongoing and necessary processes of ongoing bargaining that are important to ensure that the programs are not used against us.

The programs that have been brought into our workplaces generally have certain common characteristics:

- * They are designed to facilitate change in the way work is done;
- * They talk a lot about involvement of the workforce, using such terms as empowerment and involvement in decision-making
- * They often contain significant "criticism" of management, and particularly of the "old way" that management has been operating;
- * They use "teams" or some kind of group activity, either within (self directed work teams or natural work groups) or outside (problem-solving teams, department steering committees, etc.) the work process;
- * They gather and use employees' knowledge about the work process;
- * They often involve a great deal of "training" for the members in so-called soft skills (communications, group processes, holding meetings, etc.) and in the "right" way to think about and solve problems;
- * They are generally designed and/or implemented by a consultant; and
- * They are often developed without significant union input or with union input coming only after many of the key decisions have been made. Even where there is union input, the details of the program often come from management or a management-oriented consultant.

There are concrete reasons why restructuring/involvement programs are appearing in many if not most of our workplaces. Companies and public sector organizations are facing pressures from competitors,

¹ Despite the wide variety of names given to these programs, we will use the general term of "involvement program" to describe them all in this document.

from investors, from customers and/or from taxpayers to save money and to increase profits. At the same time, new technology, especially computers and telecommunications, is allowing management to make changes in the work process that they could not have even dreamed of a decade ago. The combination of pressure and opportunity is creating the movement for change in the way goods are produced and services are provided.

Management needs a program for implementing change that ensures that the changes meet management's needs and goals, because generally they can't implement change on their own. Management needs two things from the workforce:

- They need the workers to accept change; and
- They need the workers to contribute to change, in order to help implement it.

Management is looking for a program for discussing change that they shape and control. The techniques described in this document are the heart of that program.

Even where the union has led the way and negotiated protections, for example in our Steel and Aluminum Industry clauses of 1993/1999 the pitfalls described below can de-rail the union's plans and bend the activities (and our members) to the company's wishes. When we do not use the expertise or the trained personnel we have to analyze, critique and revise management-developed plans, many of the details of implementation are provided by management.

Involvement programs are often introduced with the help of consultants (either external or internal). These consultants use a series of techniques and exercises to involve your members in management's program of workplace change and to change the way your members think about the world around them, especially the world of work. These techniques are the result of years of research into group dynamics, peer pressure, conformance (getting people to adopt or conform to a new set of values) and other methods of persuasion.

Most consultants claim to be neutral - neither pro-labor nor pro-management. In fact, you will see that many of the techniques described below have an appearance of "fairness." While they seem to treat labor and management equally, this doesn't mean that their impact is equal on labor and management. Protecting our power and unity is more important to the union than to management, and is something we have to pay regular attention to.

Continuous Bargaining in the Changing Workplace

Unions have to find a way to insert the collective voice of the union into the discussion of change in the workplace. Unfortunately, the basic model for most change programs has been developed by management and management-oriented consulting firms. This model tries to involve the members in the discussion of change, while leaving the union, and unionism, on the outside. Therefore, it is necessary for the union to be extremely vigilant. Unions need to be prepared to bargain over change, but we need to do it in a way that builds rather than undermines union identity and that leaves the union stronger rather than weaker.

If the techniques described in this document sound familiar to you - Watch Out! Look at the involvement program at your workplace to understand how it might be affecting your union. You can then adopt some of the strategies suggested here, or develop your own.

The goal of this document is not to shut down a program designed to allow bargaining over change. It is instead to make sure that the union is at the table, able to powerfully represent the members' interests. The challenge for the union is to develop a union agenda and a union-building strategy for responding to change. In order to do this, you should be aware of the dangers that can accompany these techniques, and make a conscious decision about how to deal with them.

This document is aimed at giving you an understanding of involvement programs where the "rubber hits the road," in the actual implementation. This is where our members will see it, and this is where they can be led astray by management's way of looking at the world.

Involvement Techniques: Don't we use these inside the union?

As we talk about mobilizing the members and organizing new members, our unions are using techniques that sound suspiciously like the techniques used in the involvement movement and described below. You will probably recognize some of these techniques. You may even have used some of them in your union. **Many of these techniques, when used in a union-only process, can be very helpful in building the union (and are used regularly by labor educators). But techniques that are useful for the union, have very different impacts when they are used in a labor-management setting.**

Lets look at an example. **Brainstorming** is a technique used by labor educators and involvement consultants alike. A description of brainstorming, as presented in a Steel Company pamphlet, is as follows:

“An idea generation technique useful whenever a wide variety of ideas is desirable.

Ground Rules

Criticism or evaluation of ideas not allowed during the brainstorming session.

Quantity of ideas is desirable.

“Wild and Crazy” ideas welcomed.

Combining/improving of ideas encouraged, e.g. piggybacking on others’ ideas.

The steps include:

3. Ask that group members present their ideas without evaluating them. This may be done by:
Unsequenced participation: members share ideas at random; or
Sequenced participation following silent generation: Each member writes own ideas on paper then members share non-duplicative ideas, one at a time, in order.
4. Ask at the start that no members evaluate others’ ideas, although they may ask for a clarification if they do not understand what was suggested.
6. If at some point, one or more members begin to evaluate an idea, remind them that evaluating will come later.”

Brainstorming is a very good way to gather new ideas from your members and involve them in a discussion of issues. But when used in a labor-management setting, this technique can be problematic because:

- ideas are put on the table before the union has had a chance to evaluate them for their impact on the members and the union
- there is no opportunity for the union to package ideas or proposals
- union members put forward contradictory ideas or suggestions out, which in turn can give management an edge when it comes time to formally bargain over issues.
- divisions between bargaining unit members are exposed to management.

In fact, as you can see above, we are specifically told not to evaluate the impacts of our ideas before putting them in front of management.

Some of the points that are made in this document may seem petty or may seem to overstate the dangers of the techniques. But there are a couple of things that should be remembered: First, the techniques are rarely or never used in isolation, and together they have a great deal of power. Second, even the strongest unionists can be moved (bit by bit) away from their traditional union values. In particular, lessons learned and behaviors practiced in seminar rooms tucked away from the real world where they seem harmless will often be carried back to the workplace, without a re-evaluation of their impact, where they can undercut the strength of the union.

In this document we will look at the apparent lessons of these techniques (what they seem to be or are supposed to be teaching us), as well as at the deeper and more subtle lessons - the tricks and traps - which are usually not discussed. You should understand that the facilitator or trainer using these techniques may not even recognize or understand these deeper lessons. But the protest from the trainer: "That's not what I meant to do!" doesn't change the impact of these techniques in the union.

Our own members are even trained to use these techniques. And they use them without any sense of how they might affect the union and the members, without doing the careful analysis that is needed. Remember, a union person using a technique with negative impacts on the union can be even more dangerous than a management person using the same technique.

Is the Problem "Bad" Management?

One thing that can leave unions un-guarded in dealing with involvement consultants is the fact that many of them are very critical of management practices. Their criticisms even match what union folks have been saying for years - that management has a short term view, that they focus too much on "getting it out the door", that they never listen to the workers who know the job, and that they want to blame everything on the workforce even though they don't give us the necessary tools, materials, training, time and support.

To the extent that management (the people or the system) is a barrier to the achievement of "management goals" of productivity, quality and competitiveness, the consultant will be glad to criticize them. W. Edwards Deming, one of the fathers of the quality movement, is well known for his attacks (often vicious) on management. The purpose of these attacks, however, was to build up, not undercut, management.

It is indeed tempting to believe that our problems are due to the failure of management to be good managers, and therefore that the consultants are "on our side." But as unionists, we are not just protecting our members from "bad" management. We also have to be concerned about "good" management, which will de-skill us, speed us up, contract out our work and eliminate our jobs. We should not let ourselves be

fooled by consultants who undercut managers in order to achieve management goals.

Analyzing Involvement Techniques

We obviously cannot, in this document, talk about all of the techniques that involvement consultants and programs use. We will instead give some examples of techniques and discuss why they can create problems for the union. We will present a method for looking at consultant techniques and analyzing their impact on the union and the members. We will also make suggestions about how a union can respond and disarm the techniques.

In looking at the techniques of involvement, it is important to examine three areas of concern:

1. The role of the union as the representative of the members and the impact of the technique on the member's ability and willingness to act in a unified manner.

Do members get to meet separately from management?

Do members get to work as a union group or are they only treated as individuals?

Does the union have a significant place in the discussion of the workplace?

2. The values that are built into the technique and/or activity.

Is cutting labor costs (and therefore cutting jobs) seen as a good thing?

Is conflict between labor and management seen as bad?

Are union values such as solidarity and job security anywhere to be found?

3. The assumptions that the techniques bring with them.

Do they assume that "competitiveness" is always positive and is the over-riding goal?

Does the training promote a view that "competitiveness" is the only real problem and that if we just help with competitiveness, we will be taken care of?

Do they assume that what is good for management is necessarily good for the union and its members?

Do they assume that management should be able to make the final decisions?

The impact of any technique on the strength and role of the union is of course especially important. Questions that should be asked include:

- How does the technique impact the members' sense of identity as union members and their sense of solidarity with fellow members?

- Does the technique promote the idea that labor needs and management needs are merging (through common goals and/or problems) and thereby undermine the cohesion of the union?
- How does the training affect the members' and the union's sense of what the "problem" is that needs to be solved (is the only problem competitiveness)?
- How does it affect the union's and the members' ability to "act like a union" in its dealings with management?
- Does the technique promote judging people based on "merit," with merit defined by the needs of management?
- Does it promote or undercut union activities and culture?
- Does the technique affect identification with fellow workers outside the union, for example people who work for competitors or suppliers, and therefore will it affect peoples' willingness to engage in organizing activities? In other words, does it build "company unionism"?

Remember that the techniques described below can be used in involvement programs ranging from the most openly anti-union to the most "union-involved." While their power may be less where the union is active, their purpose and the threat they pose for the union remain the same.

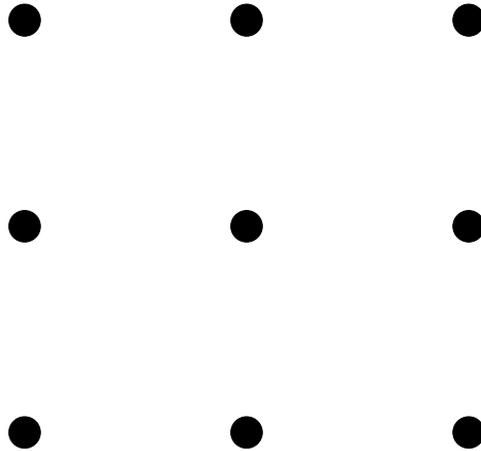
The Techniques

In this section, we will discuss the techniques that are used in involvement programs and offer ideas about what the union can do in response.

1) Nine Dot Exercise

The Nine Dot Exercise is one example of a brain-teaser that is often used at the beginning of a involvement session. There are many others that are very similar.

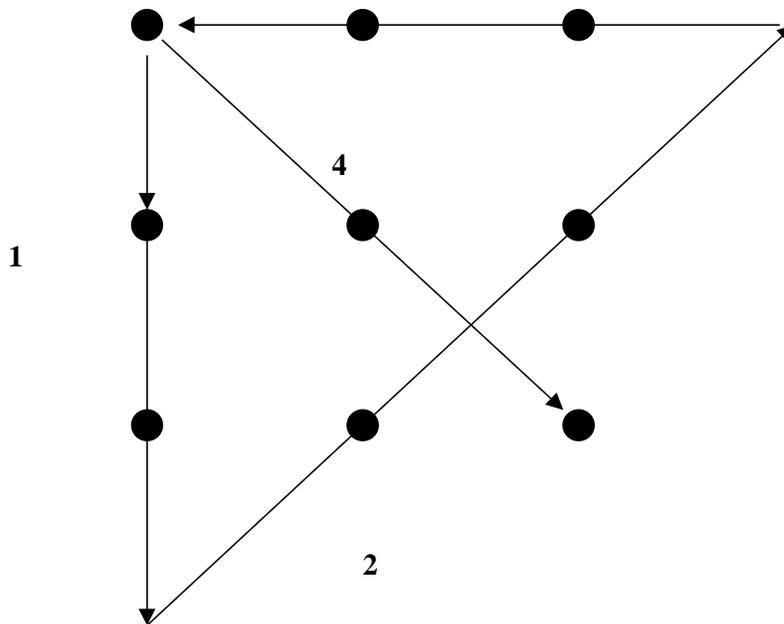
The participants are shown a flip chart (or given a hand-out) with nine dots arranged as below:



They are challenged to find a way to connect all nine dots by drawing four straight lines. They are told that they cannot lift their pens/pencils off the paper and they cannot re-trace over any line (although crossing lines is permitted).

Participants are then given a few minutes to work on solving the problem. Generally, other than those who have seen the problem done before, no one will find a solution.

The instructor then shows the participants how to do the problem.



People are told that the reason that they couldn't find the solution was that they were "stuck in the box" formed by the dots. They failed to move outside the "boundaries," even though no one had told them they couldn't.

The lessons that consultants draw from this exercise are that:

- 1) "We" can solve problems even if they seem impossible;
- 2) The barriers to solving them are our narrow mindedness and traditional way of thinking about problems; and
- 3) The key to solving problems is to broaden our thinking, to not get "stuck inside the box."

The lesson that "just because you can't see a solution doesn't mean there isn't one" is a good one for us all to learn. And the idea that we often need to expand our thinking is certainly not wrong. But there are other more subtle lessons to be drawn from this exercise when it is done in (or applied to) a labor-management setting. It has the specific effect of softening people up for the new ways of thinking that will be introduced later.

Another way to state the lessons of the exercise is that:

- 1) People should question the way that they have been thinking about the world and
- 2) If they don't, they are to blame for the fact that things aren't working and problems aren't being solved.

In essence, people are accused of narrow thinking that is preventing them from solving problems. This lays the basis for the argument that the problem that they are failing to solve is the problem of "competitiveness" and that it is this failure that is creating all of our other problems, such as job loss, wage decline, insecurity, etc. We are supposed to believe that if only union people could change their way of thinking (not be stuck inside the box), they could solve the problems (whatever they are). The implication is that the box that people are caught in, the "old thinking" (or old paradigm) that is preventing solutions, that people need to get rid, is the single-minded belief in seniority, work rules, health and safety protections, union goals and identity as separate from management (adversarialism), etc.

The key question is "Who is being asked to get outside which box?" and does "getting outside the box" mean surrendering your basic values.

An example of the use of this technique was given at a union-only training. One participant described how the consultant had used the nine dot exercise at their labor-management involvement

training. That member had tried throughout the day to question the “solutions” that were being discussed, citing concerns about job security, seniority, etc., but he was consistently attacked by the other participants for being "stuck inside the box." He eventually gave up raising the union issues because the pressure to conform (to get outside the union box) from the facilitator and from fellow participants (including fellow members) was too great.

Another impact of this exercise is to start the training session by making people feel stupid and incompetent, because they are unable to solve a “simple” puzzle. The facilitator, on the other hand, comes off as competent and bright because they can solve the puzzle (even though they never had to figure out the solution because someone told them how to do it). This sets up a situation where people tend to undervalue their own ideas and instincts (which couldn't help them solve the nine dot problem) and overly rely on the knowledge of the facilitator.

Basically people are made to (subconsciously) feel: "Well, even though this (some idea that is being put forward) doesn't seem right to me, I couldn't do the 9 Dot exercise and the facilitator could, so maybe I'm just stuck in an old or narrow way of thinking." This is a setup of other ideas to be introduced later in the program.

The final point to notice is that while the facilitator is telling your members to "get out of our old box", get beyond our old rules, they are also imposing a new set of rules on them: "you can't use more than four lines, you can't lift your pen off the paper, you can't retrace steps." They want us to drop our rules (get out our box) but they also assume that we will accept theirs.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

If someone knows the answer (or figures it out), they can go to all of the union members and show them the solution.

Everyone could use 5 lines instead of 4, or could pick their pencils up off the paper, and then challenge the facilitator's right to make the rules.

2) Lost in the Desert

Lost in the Desert is one of several "Lost..." exercises (Lost at Sea, Lost on the Moon, Lost on an Island, etc.), all of which follow the same basic outline. This exercise is designed to examine group functioning and to show the superiority of group processes over individual decision-making.

The following is a standard Lost in the Desert exercise:

Lost in the Desert

You and your teammates are passengers in a small plane flying from Los Angeles to Phoenix. It is July 16, 1988 at nine a.m. Suddenly the pilot announces that the engines are losing power and he thinks the plane will crash. The radio is out and he is unable to notify anyone of your position. Immediately before you crash, he announces that you are 85 miles south-southwest of the nearest known inhabited site, and that you are about 50 miles off course from the flight plan that he filed with the airport on departure.

When the plane crashes, the pilot is killed on impact. Only the passengers survive. Luckily, no one is injured. The plane catches on fire; before it burns, you are able to salvage only the 15 items listed below. All are in good condition.

Besides the information that the pilot gave you, you know that you are in the Sonora Desert. The area is flat and barren except for a few cacti. The weather report said that the temperature would reach 110 that day, which means a ground level temperature of 130.

All the passengers are dressed in light weight clothing - street shoes and socks, pants and short sleeved shirts, a handkerchief. You pool your money and find that you have \$103 in bills and \$4.57 in change. One passenger has a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a ballpoint pen. You have all said that you will stick together.

Your task is rank the items below according to their importance to your survival. "One" is the most important and "15" is the least important.

Step 1:

Each member of the team works alone to rank each item. You will have 8 minutes for this step. Do not discuss the problem among yourselves, and do not change your individual rankings once the 8 minutes are over.

Step 2:

The team as a whole will rank the items. You will have 20 minutes for this step.

The items are:

- large flashlight**
- a small mirror**
- pilot's air map of the area**
- two fifths of grain alcohol**
- plastic poncho**
- cooking utensils**
- compass**

silk parachute
salt tablets
gauze bandages
gun and ammunition
knife
one quart of water per person
one overcoat per person
one pair of sunglasses per person

The list is made once as an individual and once in small groups. The responses are then scored by comparing them to the responses of desert survival experts. In practically all cases, the group response scores higher than the individual. The clear lesson is that a group, working together, will do a better job of problem-solving, and is more likely, by a significant margin, to "survive".

The implied lesson is that if only labor and management (or employees and management) would work together, all problems of the workplace could be more easily solved and we could all survive in the desert created by the new competitive environment.

This exercise operates with some important assumptions - some of which are clearly stated and some of which are buried in the exercise. These assumptions are critical to the message or lesson of the exercise and include:

- * Success and failure are easily measured. In this case you are either dead or not, there is no such thing as partial success or partial failure.
- * The measures of success and failure are agreed upon by all. Everyone thinks that living means success and dying means failure.
- * There is no possibility of differential impact - everyone is affected the same. The possibility that some people live and some people die is not allowed for.
- * Because everyone is affected the same, there is no possibility of betrayal (or incentive for betrayal). All members of the group are expected to only act in the interest of the group. The individual interest is the same as the group interest.
- * There are no power relations within the group. No one can enforce their solution. Therefore individuals are forced to seek consensus or agreement.

Of course, none of these assumptions are true in real life. In the workplace (and especially in the changing workplace):

- * Success and failure are not easily measured and are not clear cut for us. Usually, even when we make gains in some areas, we have losses in others.
- * Management measures success and failure differently than we do. For management, success is about profit and control, while we look at such issues as the quality of life for the members and the strength of the union.
- * There is always the possibility of differential impact. In fact, success for management often means failure for us. Management can be very successful by moving the work out of town, eliminating it through computerization or speeding us up.
- * There is therefore significant incentive for betrayal. Management can be nice for as long as they think it will help them, and then change.
- * There are always power issues and relations within the group.

Because the conditions are different in the workplace, the lessons of Lost in the Desert cannot (and should not) be simply transferred into the labor-management setting. This is of course never raised or discussed in the involvement session.

It is also important to see the power of the image of life and death in the Lost in The Desert exercise. Think of it: "We are lost in the desert of "competitiveness". If we don't cooperate and come to consensus, we will all die. And if anyone doesn't go along with the consensus, they are threatening the lives of the whole group." The message that cooperation is necessary in order to survive is clearly part of what your members are supposed to learn from this exercise.

The exercise below is a rewrite of Lost in the Desert that tries to build in the possibility of differential impact and therefore the incentive for betrayal. It also presents the possibility that power is significant within the group.

Lost in the Labor- Management Desert

You are on a small plane flying from Los Angeles to Phoenix. It is July 16, 1995 at nine a.m. With you is your spouse, your business partner and one other person who is a stranger to you but who seems to know your business partner quite well. Your business partner, who you know is a gambler and at times in debt, will inherit the whole business if you die. Your past history with your partner has been difficult at best and you suspect that he has stolen from the business and lied to you about expenses in the past. On this flight, he has been very friendly and talking a lot about building a trusting and co-operative relationship.

Suddenly the pilot announces that the engines are losing power and he thinks the plane will crash. The radio is out and he is unable to notify anyone of your position. Immediately before you crash, he announces that you are 85 miles south-southwest of the nearest known inhabited site, and that you are about 50 miles off course from the flight plan that he filed with the airport on departure.

When the plane crashes, the pilot is killed on impact. Only the passengers survive. Luckily, no one is injured. The plane catches on fire; before it burns, you are able to salvage only the 15 items listed below. All are in good condition.

Besides the information that the pilot gave you, you know that you are in the Sonora Desert. The area is flat and barren except for a few cacti. The weather report said that the temperature would reach 110 that day, which means a ground level temperature of 130.

All the passengers are dressed in light weight clothing - street shoes and socks, pants and short sleeved shirts, a handkerchief. You pool your money and find that you have \$103 in bills and \$4.57 in change. One passenger has a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a ballpoint pen. You have all said that you will stick together.

Your partner and the stranger have fallen asleep. You and your spouse (who you love and trust) are discussing which items are most important to your survival and what to do with them.

Assign a number to each of the items according to their importance to your survival. 1 is the most important and 15 is the least important.

In the standard version of Lost in the Desert, when power relations are irrelevant and differential impact is not possible, the gun is near the bottom of the survival list. However, when the possibility of betrayal is introduced, many union people move the gun up to number 1. Their first instinct is to protect themselves against their partner by securing the gun (although some people prefer the knife). Once self-protection within the group is achieved, people can think about how to survive in the desert.

In the workplace, where management can always use its power (and the tool of technological change) to take things away from the members, having a weapon, a source of power (a strong, aware and united union) is crucial. Ignoring self-protection can be a fatal mistake.

3) Consensus Decision Making

One of the lessons that is supposed to emerge from the Lost in... exercises is the importance of consensus decision-making and consensus-building. Many involvement programs use some form of consensus decision-making in joint labor-management deliberations. Although consensus decision-making is a very attractive process because it seems to be very democratic and seems to give the union veto power over any and all decisions, it can actually work to undermine collective action and the union when used in a labor-management setting.

According to one labor-management booklet:

“Consensus has been reached when:

All group members agree on the decision though it may not be everyone’s first choice.

Everyone is committed to support the decision as if it were the first choice of all group members.

Everyone agrees that he or she has had sufficient opportunity to influence the decision”

The consensus process starts from the following assumptions:

* Everyone enters the process as an individual; and

* Everyone enters the process as an equal.

Because it treats everyone as an individual, the consensus process works against the union operating like a union. It therefore undercuts core union values and goals. Unions get their core strength from the fact that they are a group, that they stick together. Consensus decision-making, like many of the "win-win" techniques, directly undercuts the union's cohesion leaving people to speak as individuals. It limits their ability to "act like a union" and therefore tends to undermine their strength. In fact, caucusing, a key union activity, is often discouraged, if not outright banned, in a consensus process.

The idea that people enter any discussion in the workplace as equals is of course ridiculous. The idea that we can ever enter into discussions as individuals is deadly.

If one person disagrees with the decision that the group is heading toward, rather than having the

opportunity to check their disagreement with their union sisters and brothers, they are subjected to intense pressure to fold or to come up with an "acceptable" alternative. Divisions within the union are exposed to management. In bargaining we would never allow these kinds of disagreements to be aired in front of management.

Another problem with consensus (or any other joint decision-making process) as it is generally applied in the workplace is that the scope of decision-making is often not well defined. The company has a great deal of leeway as to what it can bring into the process. Decisions that it wants to completely control, or where it doesn't feel a great need for workforce knowledge and acceptance, can be kept to management alone.

Which decisions are presented to the consensus process and which are reserved for management may well be more important than how the process itself is run.

Can anyone bring an issue to the consensus process?

Must management bring issues to the process (or can they simply invoke management rights)?

The appearance of democracy is once again used to cover up the reality of management control.

The way that consensus is applied in involvement settings often includes two other assumptions or operating principles:

- 1) that everything that happens in the room is secret; and
- 2) that all communications about the results come from the group.

Following these principles tends to build the relationship with management over the relationship with the union members and cede the union's specific role as representative of their members.

It also surrenders the union's ability to critique any agreement with management. The union is supposed to sell it to the membership as the best approach, rather than the best they could get. This is an important difference between consensus decision-making and bargaining - a difference which can greatly undermine the union. (In bargaining we reserve the right to criticize an agreement as the best we could win.)

Many people have begun to use a modified consensus process, where the union is well aware of the dangers and caucusing is actively used. Any decision-making process must be analyzed with an eye toward what it promises versus what it delivers, with an understanding of how the members' attachment to the union could be affected and with the question: Does it allow the union to "act like a union?"

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Don't agree to consensus rules.

Caucus.

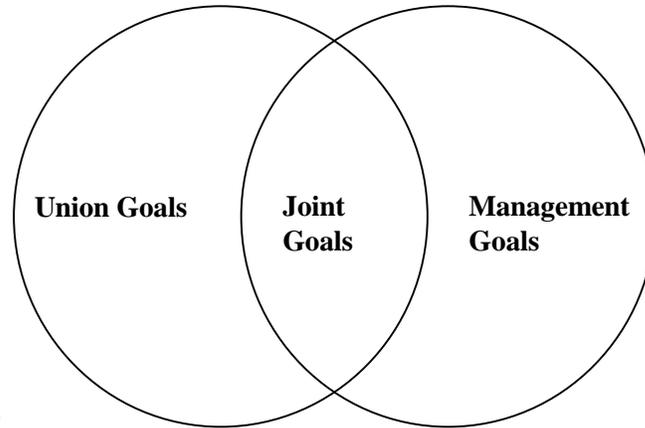
Create a series of signals, either hidden or open so that you can caucus during the meeting.

4) Win-Win or Mutual Gains Rhetoric

As a couple of the examples above show, the rhetoric of "win-win" (the rhetoric says that if management and labor just work together, they can find a solution that is better for all - mainly is more competitive) is a large piece of the involvement pie. Some programs just operate on a general assumption of win-win, while others specifically and aggressively promote it. Often the win-win argument is watered down to trickle-down - where we are supposed to assume that if management does well, the employees will also do well (the rhetoric of "mutual success through competitiveness").

The fundamental idea of the Win-Win approach is that labor and management have common interests which can be met if we only get beyond our "bickering". Many Win-Win supporters argue that the area of common interest has grown because of the new level of competition, because of technology, because of the need for highly skilled workers, etc. Issues that are described as common interests include a safe workplace, keeping the worksite open (a profitable company), better quality, satisfied customers, a satisfied workforce, etc.

Common interests are typically illustrated as overlapping circles:



While it may be true that, in certain situations, there are ways to increase profits while improving job security and wages, this does not mean that there is a merger of interest between labor and management. Management continues to pursue profit (and more profit) while labor is watching out for wages and job security (and should be watching out for the strength of the union). If union people become convinced that this merger of interest exists, they will naturally lower their defenses in dealing with management.

Our sense of our own interest, particularly in the arena of workplace change is not well-developed. Too often we only look at the short term impacts of changes while ignoring long-term impacts, and too often we fail to measure the impacts on the strength of the union and its ability to bargain in the future. We also have a tendency, because we have been on the defensive for so long, to evaluate the impacts of a change on the members and the union in relation to a "doomsday" scenario such as a plant shutdown or significant job loss. If we come up with a "solution" that cuts the workforce in half, we are supposed to see that as a win because there are still some jobs rather than none.

For example, a clear union goal is definitely to preserve and increase union jobs. Yet in these days of downsizing, attrition rather than layoffs is seen as a victory, even though attrition undercuts the union over the long run. Attrition preserves current workers' jobs but forfeits jobs for the next generation, for our future.

Another union goal is to increase pay, and yet in these days of stagnant or declining wages, gain-sharing programs which essentially place union members in the position of bribing management to "give" them an increase (if we save you tons of money, we will get a piece of it) are seen as a step forward, even when these programs create division and dissension within the union.

A commonly cited example of a win-win situation is where a company finds a different insurance company which gives the same benefits and costs less. If there are in fact savings to be gained from

changing insurance carriers, and these savings come without any negative impact on the benefits, shouldn't the union and the company negotiate over what should be done with the savings?

Workers compensation and safety is another area that is sometimes seen as fitting the Win-Win model. It is certainly true that high workers compensation rates are hurting companies, while workers are having their lives destroyed by injuries (and occupational illnesses that are rarely compensated). Presumably both labor and management want to cut accident rates. But we often see that companies try to cut the reporting of accidents rather than the accidents themselves, or they try to avoid spending money to improve conditions by blaming accidents on the workforce or they try to cut compensation rates by changing the law to lower benefits and tighten eligibility. The solutions that unions and management put forward are quite different because the problems they are trying to solve, and the interests they are trying to serve, are really different.

The techniques of win-win or interest-based bargaining were primarily developed to deal with international, stalemate bargaining, where either side can "blow up" the situation, but neither side can make a move. The idea is that the different interests of the parties can each be accommodated through a process of negotiation, and it assumes that neither side wants to use their power to blow things up (this is the real "common interest" that exists in this type of bargaining).

The union rarely these days has ultimate power in dealing with management. We are often forced into an accommodation of different interests because of our lack of power, but this is very different from the rhetoric of common interests which is so much a part of the win-win approach. The main impact of the common interest rhetoric is to undercut the members' sense of independent union identity and interests.

To what extent does the company ever really give something up that the union doesn't somehow pay for? A wage increase funded by speed-up is not really a concession on the company's part (unless you assume that they could have gotten the exact same speed-up without any wage increase).

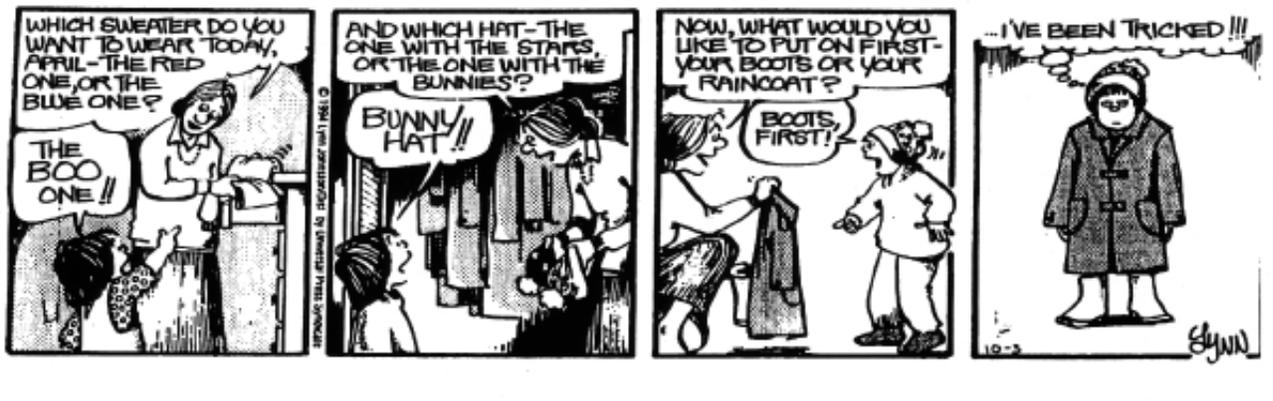
Many of the techniques associated with the win-win approach tend to break down the union's ability to bargain, while they don't similarly hobble management. Joint investigation of issues, for example, can lead to a loss of clarity for the union about what the issue really is and also gets the union members of the bargaining team used to sharing thoughts with management rather than with each other. This has the effect of breaking down solidarity in practice. In some of the later sections you will see some of the other techniques used in win-win bargaining discussed.

5) The Rhetoric of "Empowerment" and Choice

Like the mother in the cartoon below, many involvement programs seem to offer increased choice and decision-making authority to members, often described by terms such as empowerment, while they are actually moving the union in a very clear, management-dominated direction. Unfortunately, like in the cartoon on the next page, the choices offered are all limited by the needs or goals of management. Empowerment was defined by the CEO of a domestic motorcycle company as, "Freedom within fences." Of course the fences are built by management. Management generally sets the boundaries of the discussion by deciding what the problem is and giving the criteria for an acceptable solution.

A careful reading of the empowerment rhetoric shows that the level of empowerment or worker

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE by Lynn Johnston



decision-making is flexible in the process. The promise is that the employees can have as much empowerment as they can handle. Of course, the way that you show that you can handle empowerment is by making decisions that meet management goals.

Questions that might be asked when confronted with the rhetoric of empowerment or choice include:

How does the appearance of choice, offered by the company, affect the ability of the union to bargain? How does it affect the members' view of the union as their representative and themselves as active union members?

How much choice is the union (or are the members) actually given?

Do you have the information you need to analyze the real situation?

Do you have the time and resources that are needed to be independently involved?

Do you have the larger perspective necessary to avoid being trapped in the company's view of the

situation?

6) Building Personal Relationships

Most involvement programs have a significant component of building personal relationships among the labor and management participants, directly connected to the argument that "we used to be them and us, but now the 'them' that we have to be concerned about, the larger enemy, is the outside competition and that means that labor and management together have to become an us." The programs seek to downplay the institutional and representational aspects of peoples' social role, and have them enter into the discussion as individuals.

The loss of identification as union representative is directly destructive and is often accompanied by an increase in identification with the company or organization, and therefore with management. This particularly works against the interests of the union since it is only through union identification that the union gets its strength. Below are some examples of these personal relationship-building activities:

A) Getting to Know You Exercises

There are a whole series of exercises that are used to promote individual and personal interaction. These often involve sharing personal insights, hobbies, family details, etc. While there is nothing wrong with knowing managers on a personal level, there is a problem when that personal knowledge gets in the way of union members recognizing managers as agents of Management.

These exercises help disguise or bury the social and power relationships, and different goals, that exist in the workplace. They tend to make people forget who they represent and who and what management represents. When managers are dealt with as individuals, they become (symbolically) just another member of the problem-solving team, instead of direct representatives of the interests of management. The problem is that the real power relationships between labor and management are not changed even though the appearance is. This leaves the union even more susceptible to management pressure.

B) Casual Clothing

Many consultants will suggest that everyone wear casual clothes to the sessions. The idea is that everyone can be more comfortable and the "artificial" divisions that are usually apparent due to differences in dress between labor and management will be "removed." It is critical to understand, though, that getting rid of the trappings of power (the symbols of power) without changing the reality of power does not

equalize the discussion but only fools people about where power resides. For the union, this can lead to insufficient attention being paid to building the power of the union.

A boss without a tie is no less of a boss.

Unity in the bargaining unit is in part created by common culture and experience in the workplace. This in turn stems from common social position. The fact that managers are referred to by their trappings (white hats, suits, ties, triangles, etc.) shows the importance of these as symbols of power and in creating a sense of unity within the union.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Make sure that everyone from the union wears union insignia. Have people wear common clothes - all one color or the same union t-shirts.

C) No Titles

People are also often told not to refer to each other by titles. The elimination of titles is the same as the wearing of casual clothing. It is designed to give the appearance of equality and commonality, but again it does not change the substance of power relations.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Have union folks refer to each other as sister and brother. Refer to company people by their titles.

D) Trust Building Exercises

At backwoods retreats, labor and management are sometimes asked to perform exercises designed to build team spirit and trust. An example is when participants are asked to fall backwards off a wall, to be caught by management and union working together. The image is pretty powerful and clear: Learn to trust management and learn to seek safety through that trust. Understand that if labor and management are busy fighting each other, you will fall and hurt yourself. These lessons, learned in safe (and completely unreal) circumstances, carry a great deal of power even when union members return to the real world of the workplace.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Remind managers of all the times they "dropped" union members in real life, and suggest that they

are not ready for this exercise.

E) Seating

Many consultants will work to have union people sit at meetings interspersed with management. Sometimes you will walk into a meeting room and management has already taken seats spread throughout the room. Other times there will be assigned seats with union people alternating with management. This is part of moving away from "adversarialism" and the "them and us mentality". It is making a statement that we are all in it together and have the same concerns and interests. It is supposed to remove artificial barriers to more natural interaction.

But accepting that union members should be seated inter-mingled with management breaks down the physical symbol of unionism and union identity and also makes interaction with fellow unionists more difficult. It makes impossible what might be called "mini-caucuses", when one unionist leans over to another to ask a question or discuss a point. In these ways, it weakens the union members' ability to act in unity and therefore undercuts union strength.

It is important to note that this inter-mingling does not weaken management in the same way as it weakens the union. Management's power doesn't come from unity the way the union's does. Management power comes from ownership, from the law and from their ability to make unilateral decisions about operations and investment. Managers have to "unite" with upper management or lose their jobs. So what might seem like "equal treatment" on the surface, - both union and management are divided up - is really an attack on the core of unionism - unity.

Spreading union members around the room also visually removes the process from a bargaining context (it no longer looks like a bargaining session). This is important because the context provides signals for behavior. In a bargaining session, or a meeting that looks like bargaining, the union does many things to protect itself, its identity and its strength that become less natural and more difficult when people are dispersed.

Another way to think of this is: What if a member walked into the room while you were in a meeting, what would they see? If you are interspersed with management, they would not see a union.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Change seats to make sure that union folks are sitting near each other and across from management.

7) Off-Site Meetings

Involvement programs often utilize off-site meetings where union members and management can get "outside the box" and practice working together with management, without "reality interfering". Getting away from the workplace removes union members from the symbols and reminders of the reality of work and of management control, things like whistles and the noise of machinery. It also removes them from the members.

8) Language

Language is a powerful force in our lives. The language that is used to discuss a problem can have a big impact on the definition of the problem and on the outcome of the discussion. Language has built-in values that may not be (and often aren't) our values.

Think about the situation: If a boss asks a member to come to a problem-solving meeting to discuss the work process - coffee and donuts, in the conference room, on work time. Most members would say "Sure." But what if the same manager offered the same deal but asked the member to come to a meeting to bargain over the work process. In this case, most members would say that the union bargains and would decline.

There are several things (union-building things) that you would do (or should do) to get ready for a bargaining session that you might not do to prepare for problem solving. Problem solving also implies that there is agreement on what the problem is, while in bargaining both sides come to the table with different problems that they want solved.

"Joint decision-making" or "partnership" are also sometimes used instead of bargaining in describing the relationship between labor and management. These both carry with them a feeling of equality and equal power which rarely if ever exists. Sometimes they are even called "true" or "equal" partnerships. Using the words thus only serves to lull people into a false sense of security. They also imply agreement on the resolution of any problem. They therefore undermine the union's right and ability to act independently and to criticize the agreement with management. In bargaining, a union can say: "This is the best we can get." In partnership or joint decision-making, they are forced into the situation of saying "This is the right thing."

In addition to the examples above, there is literally a whole new language that comes with the

involvement movement. Paradigm, empowerment, coaches, Self-Directed Work Teams, etc. Why do consultants use a new language to discuss the labor-management interaction? In addition to moving unions folks outside a bargaining context, speaking in a new "language" tends to make people feel lost, disempowered and separated from their own sense of reality. People who have been to a country where they don't speak the language will recognize the feelings. They welcome any guidance about how to get around in the new land and are apt to be more trusting of an "expert" who can "translate" for them.

By changing the language used to discuss the workplace, the consultants separate union members from their union culture, make them feel lost and weak and then save them by showing them what the new language means and, in the process, showing them a new way to think.

There are two categories of words that are used in involvement programs that carry with them specific powers to confuse. These are smile words and frown words.

Smile Words

Words like quality, improvement, etc. are what might be called smile words. These are words that have a positive feel to them (that make you smile), but that often have a negative meaning (for the workforce or the union) as they are implemented in the workplace. We all, for example, believe in improvement. But in the workplace, continuous improvement really means continuous speed-up, and continuously fewer workers - which isn't good for us. The power of the smile words should not be underestimated. Salespeople are taught the importance of always asking a question so that the customer can answer yes. The positive feeling of saying yes flows over into the big question: Do you want to buy this?

Frown Words

Frown words are the opposite of smile words. They are words that carry with them an automatic negative feel. Waste is a good example. Who could be for waste? But when we look underneath the surface, we find that waste is defined so that it includes our coffee breaks, our lunch breaks and our ability to exert control over the pace of work. Eliminating waste is a program that too many union people are lured into without a real analysis of what waste is.

In examining an involvement program, we must always look at the language that is used - looking for new words that are unnecessary and looking for smile and/or frown words that are designed to misdirect the activities of our members.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Always investigate the true meaning of words that carry implicit value. Make sure that you are using the words the same way the company is.

Ask specifically what the company means by all new words.

When the word paradigm is used, have everyone put two dimes (pair of dimes) on the table in front of them.

Make up a buzzword bingo game card and have each member keep track of all of the buzzwords that management uses..

Write up a union glossary of management terms.

9) No discussing collective agreement issues.

This is a "protection" which is often negotiated into involvement agreements, sometimes even at the suggestion of management. It is agreed that the collective bargaining agreement shall not be discussed and sometimes a person is appointed as the "contract monitor" to make sure that this is adhered to.

The question about this for the union is: Does it lock you in or lock you out? On the one hand, it means that management can't touch the contract. This is, of course, very important (although it is already true). But it also means that anything that isn't specifically covered by the contract might be open game. This means that, under the best case scenario, management is discussing (bargaining over) mandatory subjects of bargaining with the union, and over non-mandatory subjects with the members individually. Under the worst case, only those issues that have already been bargained are kept for the union, while anything else is bargained with employees.

Nothing in the work process can be changed without having some impact on the members, on the union and on bargainable issues. To say that there are changes that the union doesn't have to pay attention to is ridiculous.

With changes in technology and process creating new opportunities for management and new problems for the union, there are many, many things which are not covered by the contract. This type of agreement can actually limit the role of the union to protecting the contract rather than protecting the members.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Train union members to specifically stand up for union principles, not just for the contract.

10) Setting Ground Rules: Sticking to the Agenda - Using a Parking Lot

One of the key goals for a involvement facilitator is to maintain control over the process. One technique that is used to do this is an emphasis on sticking to the agenda and following "good meeting rules or ground rules." Since in many cases the involvement facilitator has created the agenda, this ensures that the meeting moves in a certain direction. Another technique is to create a Parking Lot (maybe a flip chart) where issues that arise that aren't on the agenda can be placed. This allows the facilitator to defer issues until people have been softened up more and until the emotion from the immediate issue has died down.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Suggest that one rule is that if there is ever a potential disagreement between union members there will be a caucus.

The parking lot must be cleared at the end of each section, before the session can continue.

11) Showing you a little bit at a time

A favorite trick of involvement consultants is to only reveal the plans for the program a little bit at a time. This maintains control for the consultant, allows them to adjust to new conditions and prevents the union from discussing the program based on a real understanding of what it includes. This approach has been compared to a salesman trying to sell you a car by showing you the hub cap. The incremental (only a little at a time) approach ensures that none of the steps are so large that they raise a flag for the union. This approach also counts on the early steps to soften people enough that they will be more accepting when the later steps are unveiled. Yet at the end, the union may come to realize (like the little girl in the cartoon shown earlier) that they have been tricked.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

It is important that the union ask to see the whole picture from the beginning.

12) Emphasis on Facts and Data

Much of the rhetoric of involvement builds on the idea that facts and/or data are the only right way to make good decisions. W. Edward Deming, considered by many to be the father of the quality movement,

is quoted as saying "In God we trust, all others must bring data."

We are told never to decide based on gut feelings or emotion, but only on data. But in many cases the data that is collected and presented tends to support (or push people to focus on) management goals. We rarely see management asking us to collect data on how much more workers make in many European countries or how long their vacations are or how much better their health coverage is. They don't ask us to collect data on how stress at work makes family life difficult and how forced overtime is affecting our kids. On top of this, many of the things that unions fight for, like respect and dignity, are human emotions and feelings which cannot be easily measured but are nevertheless important. The focus on data tends to exclude the issues that may be important to us.

The focus on data, and on the process of collecting data, is also designed to ease the transfer of knowledge and power from union to management. The key difference, from our perspective, between skill and data is that skill is something we control and data is something they control. The implications of this for the strength of the union should not be ignored. Once they have gathered information about how our processes work, they no longer need us as much, which takes away from our leverage.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

Make the consultant use union issues when talking about data. How many times do people have to go the medical department, how often are vacation requests denied, how many times do people miss seeing their children because they are working excess overtime?

13) Brainstorming

As discussed earlier, brainstorming sets up a situation where ideas (proposals) are put on the table before a union analysis of the idea can be made. When the union bargains, issues are packaged so in order to watch out for the whole workforce and for both long and short term. "You can't have this without that." While you may not be legally bound, the fact that an idea is on the table makes it harder to walk away from it.

In a brainstorming session none of the packaging can take place, ideas are presented before they are evaluated from a union perspective and people are encouraged by the process to act as individuals rather than as a group (a union). The consolidation and evaluation of ideas and the formation of the group occurs with management in the room.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

*Don't do brainstorming with management.
Always caucus before a brainstorming session.*

14) The Power of the Magic Marker

A flip chart and magic marker are often used to record issues and points made during discussion. But the facilitator has the ability to reinterpret ideas as they write them down. This is a significant trap of involvement but it also presents an opportunity for members to challenge the facilitator when they improperly interpret members' points.

Ideas for Acting Like a Union:

*Make sure that things you say are properly recorded.
Ask that a flip chart not be used or that a union member be allowed to do the recording.*

The above are only a few of the tricks used by facilitators and the traps that the union can fall into. The management consultants are coming up with new ones all the time.

There are several key lessons to remember. First and foremost - when discussing any kind of change in the workplace, **Treat It as Continuous Bargaining**. Do the preparation necessary for successful bargaining, including:

- 1) Make sure you select the Union's bargaining representatives and train them (in union-only sessions) for their roles;
- 2) Understand the members' issues and concerns using surveys, planning meetings, one-on-one information gathering, etc.;
- 3) Organize and activate the members to defend their interests and the union's strength in the bargaining process;
- 4) Analyze the union's (and management's) strengths and weaknesses given the current bargaining environment;
- 5) Prepare proposals and positions as a committee and approach management as a united and organized voice;
- 6) Develop a clear bargaining strategy;
- 7) Caucus regularly to maintain unity, to develop a common strategy and to formulate

responses to management proposals;

When confronting the Tricks and Traps:

Always know what the union stands for and wants (and make sure everyone in the discussion knows)

Always look carefully at the "problem" they want you to solve and make sure that the union's and the members' problems are on the table

Always questions the assumptions that are being made

Always challenge the language that is being used

Always find ways to **act like a union**.

Make it clear what the expectations are of anyone who is involved in a labor-management discussion. Develop a code of conduct for members that helps them understand how they can be strong union members within any involvement/change process.

And finally two key pieces of advice:

- 1) Never ignore your gut reaction to something an involvement facilitator is doing.
- 2) Caucus early and caucus often.

Please send comments and suggestions to Charley Richardson c/o Labor Extension Program, University of Massachusetts, Lowell MA, 01854.

Telephone: 978-934-3266

Fax: 978-934-4033

E-Mail: [crichardson@ uswa.org](mailto:crichardson@uswa.org)