

Managing interpersonal relationships at work

Key concepts and terms

- *Assertiveness*
- *Dominant coalition*
- *Interpersonal relationships*
- *Networks*
- *Self-managed team*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also understand:

- The significance of team working in organizations
- How to achieve good teamwork
- The importance of networking and how to do it
- Barriers to communication and how to overcome them
- What it means to behave assertively
- How to handle emotional behaviour
- How to manage conflict
- How to negotiate
- The meaning of political behaviour in organizations and how to deal with it
- What HR people should do about being politically astute and ethical
- How to liaise with external and internal customers

Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are those that take place between people when they associate with one another at work. As covered in this chapter, they take the form of working in teams or groups, networking, communicating, being assertive, handling emotional behaviour and conflict, negotiating, handling politics, acting in a politically astute and ethical manner to secure HR objectives, and liaising with customers.

Team working

Teams are essential to the effective functioning of organizations. They assemble the skills, experiences and insights of a number of people who work together to achieve a common purpose. Most formally constituted teams have an appointed leader. But informal teams can develop during the normal course of work in which leaders may emerge with the consent of the work group. It is also possible for both formal and informal teams to be self-managed.

Effective teams

In an effective team its members work together in order to achieve expected results. The purpose of the team is clear and its members feel the task is important, both to them and to the organization. They may not always agree on the best way to achieve the task but when they don't agree, they discuss, even argue, about their differences to resolve them.

The structure of the team is likely to be one in which the leadership and methods of operation are relevant to its purpose. People will have been grouped together in a way which ensures that they are related to each other by way of the requirements of task performance and task interdependence. Job specialization is minimized, team members operate flexibly within the group, tasks are rotated among them and they are multi-skilled.

The atmosphere in an effective team tends to be informal, comfortable and relaxed. The leader of the team does not dominate it, nor does the team defer unduly to them. The role of the team leader may be primarily to act as a facilitator – more supportive and participative than directive. There is little evidence of a struggle for power as the team operates. The issue is not who controls, but how to get the job done.

Self-managed teams

High levels of engagement and commitment and better teamwork can be achieved by a self-managed team. Such a team is highly autonomous, responsible to a considerable degree for planning and scheduling work, problem

solving, developing its own performance indicators, and setting and monitoring team performance and quality standards.

Ten things to do to achieve good teamwork

- Establish urgency and direction.
- Select members based on skills and skill potential who are good at working with others but still capable of taking their own line when necessary.
- Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.
- Set immediate performance-orientated tasks and goals, including overlapping or interlocking objectives for people who have to work together. These will take the form of targets to be achieved or projects to be completed by joint action.
- Assess people's performance not only on the results they achieve but also on the degree to which they are good team members. Recognize and reward people who have worked well in teams (using team bonus schemes where appropriate), bearing in mind that being part of a high-performance team can be a reward in itself.
- Encourage people to build networks – results are achieved in organizations, as in the outside world, on the basis of who you know as well as what you know.
- Describe and think of the organization as a system of interlocking teams united by a common purpose. Don't emphasize hierarchies. Abolish departmental boundaries if they are getting in the way, but do not be alarmed if there is disagreement – remember the value of constructive conflict.
- Hold special 'off-the-job' meetings for work teams so they can get together and explore issues without the pressures of their day-to-day jobs.
- Encourage teams to socialize and provide them with facilities and even the funds to do so.
- Use learning and development programmes to build relationships. This can often be a far more beneficial result of a course than the increase in skills or knowledge which was its ostensible purpose. Use team building and interactive skills training to supplement the other approaches. But do not rely upon them to have any effect unless the messages they convey are in line with the organization's culture and values.

Networking

Networks are loosely organized connections between people with shared interests. Increasingly in today's more fluid and flexible organizations, people get things done by networking. They exchange information, enlist support

and create alliances – getting agreement with other people on a course of action and joining forces to make it happen.

To network effectively here are ten steps you can take:

- Identify people who may be able to help.
- Seize any opportunity that presents itself to get to know people who may be useful.
- Have a clear idea of why you want to network – to share knowledge, to persuade people to accept your proposal or point of view, to form an alliance.
- Know what you can contribute – networking is not simply about enlisting support, it is just as much if not more concerned with developing knowledge and understanding through ‘communities of interest’ and joining forces with like-minded people so that concerted effort can be deployed to get things done.
- Show interest – if you engage with people and listen to them they are more likely to want to network with you.
- Ask people if you can help them as well as asking people to help you.
- Put people in touch with one another.
- Operate informally but be prepared to call formal meetings when necessary to reach agreement and plan action.
- Make an effort to keep in touch with people.
- Follow up – check with members of the network on progress in achieving something, refer back to conversations you have had, discuss with others how the network might be developed or extended to increase its effectiveness.

Communicating

People recognize the need to communicate but find it difficult. Like Schopenhauer’s hedgehogs, they want to get together; it’s only their prickles that keep them apart. Words may sound or look precise, but they are not. All sorts of barriers exist between the communicator and the receiver. Unless these barriers are overcome the message will be distorted or will not get through.

Barriers to communication

The barriers to communication are:

- Hearing what we want to hear. What we hear or understand when someone speaks to us is largely based on our own experience and background. Instead of hearing what people have told us, we hear

what our minds tell us they have said. We have preconceptions about what people are going to say, and if what they say does not fit into our framework of reference, we adjust it until it does.

- Ignoring conflicting information. We tend to ignore or reject communications that conflict with our own beliefs. If they are not rejected, some way is found of twisting and shaping their meaning to fit our preconceptions. When a message is inconsistent with existing beliefs, the receiver rejects its validity, avoids further exposure to it, easily forgets it and, in his or her memory, distorts what has been heard.
- Perceptions about the communicator. It is difficult to separate what we hear from our feelings about the person who says it. Non-existent motives may be ascribed to the communicator. If we like people we are more likely to accept what they say – whether it is right or wrong – than if we dislike them.
- Influence of the group. The group with which we identify influences our attitudes and feelings. What a group hears depends on its interests. Workers are more likely to listen to their colleagues, who share their experiences, than to outsiders such as managers or union officials.
- Words mean different things to different people. Essentially, language is a method of using symbols to represent facts and feelings. Strictly speaking, we can't convey meaning; all we can do is to convey words. Do not assume that because something has a certain meaning to you, it will convey the same meaning to someone else.
- Non-verbal communication. When we try to understand the meaning of what people say we listen to the words but we also use other clues which convey meaning. We attend not only to what people say but to how they say it. We form impressions from what is called body language – eyes, shape of the mouth, the muscles of the face, even posture. We may feel that these tell us more about what someone is really saying than the words he or she uses. But there is enormous scope for misinterpretation.
- Emotions. Our emotions colour our ability to convey or to receive the true message. When we are insecure or worried, what we hear seems more threatening than when we are secure and at peace with the world. When we are angry or depressed, we tend to reject what might otherwise seem like reasonable requests or good ideas. During heated argument, many things that are said may not be understood or may be badly distorted.
- Noise. Any interference to communication is 'noise'. It can be literal noise which prevents the message being heard, or figurative in the shape of distracting or confused information which distorts or obscures the meaning.

- Size. The larger and more complex the organization, the greater the problem of communication. The more levels of management and supervision through which a message has to pass, the greater the opportunity for distortion or misunderstanding.

Overcoming barriers to communication

- Adjust to the world of the receiver. Try to predict the impact of what you are going to write or say on the receiver's feelings and attitudes. Tailor the message to fit the receiver's vocabulary, interests and values. Be aware of how the information might be misinterpreted because of prejudices, the influence of others and the tendency of people to reject what they do not want to hear.
- Use feedback. Ensure that you get a message back from the receiver which tells you how much has been understood.
- Use face-to-face communication. Whenever appropriate and possible, talk to people rather than sending an e-mail or writing to them. That is how you get feedback. You can adjust or change your message according to reactions. You can also deliver it in a more human and understanding way – this can help to overcome prejudices. Verbal criticism can often be given in a more constructive manner than a written reproof, which always seems to be harsher.
- Use reinforcement. You may have to present your message in a number of different ways to get it across. Re-emphasize the important points and follow up.
- Use direct, simple language. This seems obvious. But many people clutter up what they say with jargon, long words and elaborate sentences.
- Suit the actions to the words. Communications have to be credible to be effective. There is nothing worse than promising the earth and then failing to deliver. When you say you are going to do something, do it. Next time you are more likely to be believed.
- Reduce problems of size. If you can, reduce the number of levels of management. Encourage a reasonable degree of informality in communications. Ensure that activities are grouped together to ease communication on matters of mutual concern.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is about expressing your opinions, beliefs, needs, wants and feelings firmly and in direct, honest and appropriate ways. It means standing up for your own rights in such a way that you do not violate another person's rights. When you are being assertive you are not being aggressive, which means violating or ignoring other people's rights in order to get your own way or dominate a situation.

Behaving assertively puts you into the position of being able to influence people properly and react to them positively. Assertive statements:

- are brief and to the point;
- indicate clearly that you are not hiding behind something or someone and are speaking for yourself by using expressions such as: ‘I think that...’, ‘I believe that...’, ‘I feel that...’;
- are not over-weighted with advice;
- use questions to find out the views of others and to test their reactions to your behaviour;
- distinguish between fact and opinion;
- are expressed positively but not dogmatically;
- indicate that you are aware that the other people have different points of view;
- express, when necessary, negative feelings about the effects of other people’s behaviour on you – pointing out in dispassionate and factual terms the feelings aroused in you by that behaviour, and suggesting the behaviour you would prefer;
- indicate to people politely but firmly the consequences of their behaviour.

Handling emotional behaviour

Emotional behaviour can include aggression, withdrawal and unreasonable actions or reactions.

Aggression

If you are faced by aggression, take a breath, count up to 10 and then:

- Ask calmly for information about what is bugging the aggressor.
- State clearly, and again calmly, the position as you see it.
- Empathize with the aggressor by making it plain that you can see their point of view, but at the same time explaining in a matter-of-fact way how you see the discrepancy between what they believe and what you feel is actually happening.
- If the aggressive behaviour persists, indicate your different beliefs or feelings, but do not cut aggressors short – people often talk, or even shout, themselves out of being aggressive when they realize that you are not reacting aggressively and that their behaviour is not getting them anywhere.
- If all else fails, suggest that you leave it for the time being and talk about it again after a cooling-off period.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal can take the form of lack of interest, uncooperative behaviour or refusing to take part in the work of a team, an activity or a project. If any of these happens and work is affected, you have to deal with it, not by confrontation but by trying to reach agreement that something is wrong (not easy; people in an emotional state are quite prepared to believe that everyone is out of step but them) and attempting to establish the cause of the behaviour.

By definition, if someone is in an emotional state it is going to be difficult to get through to them. But the attempt must be made and this is best done by being unemotional yourself and only referring to facts about the situation – what has happened or is happening. The aim is to get the person to accept that these facts are correct, although there may still be a real problem in that their view of the facts is distorted by their emotions. Of course, this could apply to you and a dispassionate pursuit of the truth may result in you readjusting your views on the matter. If, and it can be a big if, you get to the root of the problem, you can try to get the individual to propose what actions should be taken by them or by you. Try to get them to suggest solutions; don't impose your own ideas.

Unreasonable actions or reactions

If someone seems to be acting unreasonably, the first reaction of many people is: 'I must make them see reason.' But you can't make people see reason; they have to be convinced that an alternative way of behaviour or reaction is more reasonable than the one they have adopted. The best approach is the one suggested above for dealing with withdrawal. You have to question to get the facts and listen to what is said. You have to establish the reasoning behind the behaviour (assuming there is any – it could be no more than an immediate emotional reaction) so that agreement can be reached as to what can be done about it. However, if it is unreasonable and unacceptable this must be spelt out so that the individual knows what is expected and is aware of the possible consequences (eg disciplinary action) if the behaviour persists.

Handling conflict

Conflict is inevitable in organizations because they function by means of adjustments and compromises among competitive elements in their structure and membership. Conflict also arises when there is change, because it may be seen as a threat to be challenged or resisted, or when there is frustration – this may produce an aggressive reaction: fight rather than flight. Conflict is not to be deplored. It results from progress and change and it can and should be used constructively. Bland agreement on everything would be

unnatural and enervating. There should be clashes of ideas about tasks and projects, and disagreements should not be suppressed. They should come out into the open because that is the only way to ensure that the issues are explored and conflicts are resolved.

There is such a thing as creative conflict – new or modified ideas, insights, approaches and solutions can be generated by a joint re-examination of the different points of view as long as this is based on an objective and rational exchange of information and ideas. But conflict becomes counterproductive when it is based on personality clashes, or when it is treated as an unseemly mess to be hurriedly cleared away, rather than as a problem to be worked through. Conflict resolution can be concerned with conflict between groups or conflict between individuals (interpersonal conflict).

Handling inter-group conflict

There are three principal ways of resolving inter-group conflict: peaceful coexistence, compromise and problem solving.

Peaceful coexistence

The aim here is to smooth out differences and emphasize the common ground. People are encouraged to learn to live together, there is a good deal of information, contact and exchange of views, and individuals move freely between groups (for example, between headquarters and the field, or between sales and marketing).

This is a pleasant ideal, but it may not be practicable in many situations. There is much evidence that conflict is not necessarily resolved by bringing people together. Improved communications and techniques such as briefing groups may appear to be good ideas but are useless if management has nothing to say that people want to hear. There is also the danger that the real issues, submerged for the moment in an atmosphere of superficial bonhomie, will surface again later.

Compromise

The issue is resolved by negotiation or bargaining and neither party wins or loses. This concept of splitting the difference is essentially pessimistic. The hallmark of this approach is that there is no ‘right’ or ‘best’ answer. Agreements only accommodate differences. Real issues are not likely to be solved.

Problem solving

An attempt is made to find a genuine solution to the problem rather than just accommodating different points of view. This is where the apparent paradox of ‘creative conflict’ comes in. Conflict situations can be used to advantage to create better solutions.

If solutions are to be developed by problem solving, they have to be generated by those who share the responsibility for seeing that the solutions work.

The sequence of actions is: first, those concerned work to define the problem and agree on the objectives to be attained in reaching a solution; second, the group develops alternative solutions and debates their merits; and third, agreement is reached on the preferred course of action and how it should be implemented.

Handling interpersonal conflict

Handling conflict between individuals can be even more difficult than resolving conflicts between groups. Whether the conflict is openly hostile or subtly covert, strong personal feelings may be involved. However, interpersonal conflict, like inter-group conflict, is an organizational reality which is not necessarily good or bad. It can be destructive, but it can also play a productive role.

The reaction to interpersonal conflict may be the withdrawal of either party, leaving the other one to hold the field. This is the classic win–lose situation. The problem has been resolved by force, but this may not be the best solution if it represents one person's point of view which has ignored counterarguments, and has, in fact, steamrolled over them. The winner may be triumphant but the loser will be aggrieved and either demotivated or resolved to fight again another day. There will have been a lull in, but not an end to, the conflict.

Another approach is to smooth over differences and pretend that the conflict does not exist, although no attempt has been made to tackle the root causes. Again, this is an unsatisfactory solution. The issue is likely to re-emerge and the battle will recommence.

Yet another approach is bargaining to reach a compromise. This means that both sides are prepared to lose as well as win some points and the aim is to reach a solution acceptable to both sides. Bargaining, however, involves all sorts of tactical and often counterproductive games, and the parties are often more anxious to seek acceptable compromises than to achieve sound solutions.

Personal counselling is an approach which does not address the conflict itself but focuses on how the two people are reacting. It gives people a chance to release pent-up tensions and may encourage them to think about new ways of resolving the conflict. But it does not address the essential nature of the conflict, which is the relationship between two people. That is why constructive confrontation offers the best hope of a long-term solution.

Constructive confrontation is a method of bringing the individuals in conflict together with a third party whose function is to help build an exploratory and cooperative climate. Constructive confrontation aims to get each party involved to understand and explore the other's perceptions and feelings. It is a process of developing mutual understanding to produce a win–win situation. The issues will be confronted but on the basis of a joint analysis, with the help of the third party, of facts relating to the situation and the actual behaviour of those involved. Feelings will be expressed but they will be analysed by reference to specific events and behaviours rather

than inferences or speculations about motives. Third parties have a key role in this process, and it is not an easy one. They have to get agreement to the ground rules for discussions aimed at bringing out the facts and minimizing hostile behaviour. They must monitor the ways in which negative feelings are expressed and encourage the parties to produce new definitions of the problem and its cause or causes and new motives to reach a common solution. Third parties must avoid the temptation to support or appear to support either of those in contention. They should adopt a counselling approach, as follows:

- Listen actively.
- Observe as well as listen.
- Help people to understand and define the problem by asking pertinent, open-ended questions.
- Recognize feelings and allow them to be expressed.
- Help people to define problems for themselves.
- Encourage people to explore alternative solutions.
- Get people to develop their own implementation plans but provide advice and help if asked.

To conclude, conflict, as has been said, is in itself not to be deplored: it is an inevitable concomitant of progress and change. What is regrettable is the failure to use conflict constructively. Effective problem solving and constructive confrontation both resolve conflicts and open up channels of discussion and cooperative action.

Many years ago one of the pioneering and most influential writers on management, Mary Parker Follett (1924), wrote something on managing conflict which is as valid today as it was then. She said that differences can be made to contribute to the common cause if they are resolved by integration rather than domination or compromise.

Resolving conflict between team members

To resolve conflict between team members the following actions can be taken:

- Obtain an overview of the situation from your own observations.
- Find out who is involved.
- Talk to each of the parties to the conflict to obtain their side of the story.
- Talk to other members of the group to get their views, being careful to be dispassionate and strictly neutral.
- Evaluate what you hear from both parties and other people against your knowledge of what has been happening, any history of conflict and the dispositions and previous behaviour of the people involved.

- Reach preliminary conclusions on the facts, the reasons for the dispute and the extent to which either of the parties or both of them are to blame (but keep these to yourself at this stage).
- Bring the parties together to discuss the situation. The initial aim of this meeting would be to bring the problem out into the open, get the facts and defuse any emotions that may prejudice a solution to the problem. Both parties should be allowed to have their say but as the facilitator of this meeting, you should do your best to ensure that they stick to the facts and explain their point of view dispassionately. You should not even remotely give the impression that you are taking sides.
- Try to defuse the situation so that a solution can be reached which on the whole will be acceptable to all concerned. Ideally, this should be an integrated solution reached by agreement on the basis of collaboration along the lines of 'Let's get together to find the best solution on the basis of the facts.' It may be necessary to reach a compromise or accommodation – something everyone can live with.
- Only if all else fails or the parties are so recalcitrant in holding an untenable position that no integrated, compromise or accommodating solution can be reached should you resort to direct action – instructing one or other or both the parties to bury their differences and get on with their work. If the worse comes to the worst, this may involve disciplinary action beginning with a formal warning.

Negotiating

Negotiating takes place when two parties meet to reach an agreement on the price of something, on the terms and conditions of a contract or employment or a pay claim. Negotiation can be convergent when both parties are equally keen to reach a win-win agreement (in commercial terms a willing buyer-willing seller arrangement). It can be divergent when one or both of the parties aim to win as much as they can from the other while giving away as little as possible. This can become a zero-sum game where the winner takes all and the loser gets nothing.

Negotiations in an industrial relations setting differ from commercial negotiations in the respects set out below.

Negotiations take place in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Neither side knows how strong the other side's bargaining position is or what it really wants and will be prepared to accept.

Negotiating and bargaining skills

The skills required to be effective in negotiations and bargaining are:

- analytical ability – the capacity to assess the factors that affect the negotiating stance and tactics of both parties;

TABLE 15.1 Differences between industrial relations negotiations and commercial negotiations

| Industrial relations negotiations | Commercial negotiations |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume an ongoing relationship – negotiators cannot walk away. • The agreement is not legally binding. • Conducted on a face-to-face basis. • Carried out by representatives responsible to constituents. • Make frequent use of adjournments. • May be conducted in an atmosphere of distrust or even hostility. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiators can walk away. • The contract is legally binding. • May be conducted at a distance. • Carried out directly with the parties being responsible to a line manager. • Usually conducted on a continuing basis. • Usually conducted on a 'willing buyer/willing seller' basis. |

- empathy – the ability to put oneself in the other party's shoes;
- interactive skills – the ability to relate well to other people;
- communicating skills – the ability to convey information and arguments clearly, positively and logically;
- keeping cards close to the chest – not giving what you really want or are prepared to concede until you are ready to do so (in the marketplace it is always easier for sellers to drive a hard bargain with buyers who have revealed somehow that they covet the article);
- flexible realism – the capacity to make realistic moves during the bargaining process to reduce the claim or increase the offer, which will demonstrate that the bargainer is seeking a reasonable settlement and is prepared to respond appropriately to movements from the other side.

Organizational politics

To be politic, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, you can be sagacious, prudent, judicious, expedient, scheming or crafty. Organizational politics involves various kinds of desirable and undesirable behaviour designed to get outcomes which are sought by an individual or a group. The behaviour may consist of overt, or, more probably, covert, pressures on individuals in positions of power or on interest groups to agree to or obstruct a course of action. Influence may be exerted outside the usual channels to

get things done or to undo things; for example, the opinions of committee members might be influenced by lobbying them outside the committee. This could be justified by the politician as the best way of achieving something. But it could be undesirable if it consists of perverting the normal open and transparent processes of decision making, especially when it is perpetrated simply to pursue the organizational politician's own ends.

Political behaviour is inevitable in organizations because they consist of individuals who, while they are ostensibly there to achieve a common purpose, will, at the same time, be driven by their own needs to achieve their own goals. Effective management is the process of harmonizing individual endeavour and ambition to the common good. Some individuals will genuinely believe that using political means to achieve their goals will benefit the organization as well as themselves. Others will rationalize this belief. Yet others will unashamedly pursue their own ends. They may use all their powers of persuasion to legitimize these ends to their colleagues, but self-interest remains the primary drive. These are the corporate politicians whom the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as 'shrewd schemers, crafty plotters or intriguers'. Politicians within organizations can be like this. They manoeuvre behind people's backs, blocking proposals they do not like. They advance their own reputation and career at the expense of other people's. They can be envious and jealous and act accordingly. They are bad news.

But it can also be argued that a political approach to management is inevitable and even desirable in any organization where the clarity of goals is not absolute, where the decision-making process is not clear cut and where the authority to make decisions is not evenly or appropriately distributed. And there can be few organizations where one or more of these conditions do not apply.

Political sensitivity

Organizational politicians exert hidden influence to get their way, and 'politicking' in some form takes place in most organizations. If you want to progress, a degree of political sensitivity is desirable – knowing what is going on so that influence can be exerted. This means that you have to:

- know 'how things are done around here';
- know how decisions are made;
- understand the factors that are likely to affect decisions;
- know where the power base is in the organization (sometimes called the dominant coalition) – who makes the running, who the people are who count when decisions are taken;
- be aware of what is going on behind the scenes;
- know who is a rising star, and whose reputation is fading;
- identify any 'hidden agendas' – try to understand what people are really getting at, and why, by obtaining answers to the question: 'Where are they coming from?'

- find out what other people are thinking and seeking;
- network – identifying the interest groups and keeping in contact with them.

Dangers

The danger of politics, however, is that it can be carried to excess and can then seriously harm the effectiveness of an organization. The signs of excessive indulgence in political behaviour include:

- backbiting;
- buck passing;
- secret meetings and hidden decisions;
- feuds between people and departments;
- e-mail or paper wars between armed camps – arguing by e-mail or memorandum is always a sign of distrust;
- a multiplicity of snide comments and criticisms;
- excessive and counterproductive lobbying;
- the formation of cabals – cliques which spend their time intriguing.

Dealing with organizational politicians

One way to deal with this sort of behaviour is to find out who is going in for it and openly confront them with the damage they are doing. They will, of course, deny that they are behaving politically (they wouldn't be politicians if they didn't), but the fact that they have been identified might lead them to modify their approach. It could, of course, only serve to drive them further underground, in which case their behaviour will have to be observed even more closely and corrective action taken as necessary.

A more positive approach to keeping politics operating at an acceptable level is for the organization to manage its operations as openly as possible. The aims should be to ensure that issues are debated fully, that differences of opinion are dealt with frankly and that disagreements are depersonalized, so far as this is possible. Political processes can then be seen as a way of maintaining the momentum of the organization as a complex decision-making and problem-solving entity.

Meeting HR aims in a politically astute and ethical manner

HR practitioners are inevitably involved in organizational politics and they are more likely to survive and thrive if they handle these astutely. But they

also have to behave ethically, whether they are politicking or going about their daily business of providing advice and services.

On being politically astute

Politically astute behaviour on the part of HR practitioners means that they have to identify the key decision makers when they are involved in developing new approaches and getting things done. Before coming to a final conclusion and launching a fully fledged proposal at a committee or in a memorandum, it makes good sense to test opinion and find out how other people may react. This testing process enables them to anticipate counterarguments and modify their proposals either to meet legitimate objections or, when there is no alternative, to accommodate other people's requirements. All this requires political sensitivity, as described in the previous section of this chapter.

Ethical considerations

Making deals as described above may not appear to be particularly desirable, although it does happen, and HR practitioners can always rationalize this type of behaviour by reference to the end result. This is in effect utilitarianism as described in Chapter 8 – the belief that the greatest good to the greatest number allows people to be treated as means to an end, ie it is to the advantage of the majority. Actions should be judged in terms of their consequences. This is sometimes interpreted as supporting the dubious principle that the ends justify the means.

Politicking is unethical if it means adopting a devious approach to getting things done. For example, withholding information is not legitimate behaviour, but people do indulge in it in recognition of the fact that knowledge is power. Judicious withdrawal may also seem to be questionable, but most people prefer to live to fight another day rather than launch a doomed campaign. It may be unethical to abandon beliefs in an effort to achieve results. But it is worth remembering what Benjamin Franklin presented to the meeting held on Monday, 17 September 1787 in Pennsylvania State House to debate the draft Constitution of the United States of America. His words were:

For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better Information, or fuller Consideration, to change Opinions even on important Subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. That people believe themselves to be right is no proof that they are; the only difference between the Church of Rome and the Church of England is that the former is infallible while the latter is never wrong.

This is a particular case. In general, ethical behaviour by HR practitioners means that HR specialists need to take account of the dignity and rights of employees when taking employment decisions. These include having clear, fair terms and conditions of employment, healthy and safe working conditions, fair remuneration, promoting equal opportunities and employment

diversity, encouraging employees to develop their skills, and not discriminating against or harassing employees. The ethical frameworks for judging HR practices are basic rights, organizational justice, respecting individuals, and community of purpose.

Liaising with customers

Liaising with customers, whether external or internal, is a matter of establishing their wants and needs and then meeting them in a way that will create and maintain good relationships. With external customers this results in repeat sales and an enhancement of the company's reputation in the marketplace, and with internal customers it means furthering the objectives of the organization and fostering a cooperative attitude between those involved. It is necessary to define what is required from all concerned in liaising with external or internal customers. It is also necessary to remember that relationships with internal customers are also important.

Defining customer service requirements

The requirements for effectively liaising with customers can be defined in terms of attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours.

Attitudes

Customer service excellence is achieved by people whose attitudes can be summed up in the sentence: 'Put the customer first.' They must believe that they exist because customers exist and that being responsive to customer needs and expectations is a vital part of their role.

Skills

The main skills required are:

- interpersonal skills – ability to relate well to people during person-to-person contacts;
- listening skills – ability to pay attention to people, absorb what they are saying and react appropriately;
- communication skills – ability to explain matters to customers clearly and with conviction and to handle telephone conversations;
- complaints handling skills – ability to deal with complaints and handle angry customers.

Knowledge

Knowledge will be required of the product or service offered. For external customers, this could be quite advanced knowledge enabling individuals to identify and deal with faulty equipment or provide technical advice. It will also be necessary to understand the customer service systems and procedures

used in the organization. For internal customers it is necessary to understand what the departments or individuals need and how to satisfy those needs.

Behaviours

When liaising with customers the behaviours required are:

- taking time to understand the specific needs, requirements and any current pressures the customer may be under;
- looking for ways to delight the customer;
- being honest about the product or service offered and what can be done to help the customer;
- generating a range of solutions to address a difficulty.

Internal customers

An internal customer is anyone who makes use of the outputs or services provided by other departments or individuals in the organization. This means everyone – all employees are customers of other employees and they all provide services to other employees. Some departments, such as HR, IT and facilities management, provide professional or technical services directly to other departments. Other departments exist to produce outputs upon which other departments rely to achieve their objectives. Research and development has to deliver products which can be promoted and sold by marketing and sales departments. Production or operating departments exist to deliver the products or services that are required by sales to meet customer demands. Marketing and sales departments produce the information on forecast demand which enables production and operating departments to plan their activities.

It can be argued that meeting the needs of internal customers is a prerequisite for meeting the needs of external customers. If, for example, marketing gets its sales forecasts wrong or manufacturing fails to meet the requirements specified by sales, then it is the level of service to external customers that suffers and this has a negative impact on satisfaction and loyalty.

The basic approach to creating high standards of service for internal customers is to define how the different parts of the organization interrelate and spell out who serves whom and who receives service from whom. It is then necessary to ensure that all the parties concerned know the importance of good service to internal customers and what is expected of them from their internal customers. This can be defined formally as a service level agreement, which sets out the levels of service to be provided.

For example, an agreement for an HR service centre could set out standards in the following areas:

- speed of response to requests for help or guidance in areas such as recruitment, training, handling disciplinary cases and grievances, and health and safety;

- the time taken to prepare and agree role profiles, fill job vacancies or conduct a job evaluation exercise;
- the quality of candidates submitted for job vacancies;
- the proportion of discipline or grievance issues settled at the first time HR is involved;
- the number of appeals (successful and unsuccessful) against job grading decisions;
- the results of evaluations of training carried out by participants in training programmes;
- the outcome of employee attitude surveys.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships are those that take place between people when they associate with one another at work.

Teamwork

Teams are essential to the effective functioning of organizations.

In an effective team its members work together in order to achieve expected results. The purpose of the team is clear and its members feel the task is important, both to them and to the organization. The structure of the team is likely to be one in which the leadership and methods of operation are relevant to its purpose. The atmosphere in an effective team tends to be informal, comfortable and relaxed. The leader of the team does not dominate it, nor does the team defer unduly to them.

Networks

Networks are loosely organized connections between people with shared interests. Increasingly in today's more fluid and flexible organizations, people get things done by networking. They exchange information, enlist support and create alliances – getting agreement with other people on a course of action and joining forces to make it happen.

Communicating

People recognize the need to communicate but find it difficult. Words may sound or look precise, but they are not. All sorts of barriers exist between the communicator and the receiver. Unless these barriers are overcome, the message will be distorted or will not get through.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is about expressing your opinions, beliefs, needs, wants and feelings firmly and in direct, honest and appropriate ways.

Emotional behaviour

Emotional behaviour can include aggression, withdrawal and unreasonable actions or reactions.

Conflict

Conflict is inevitable in organizations because they function by means of adjustments and compromises among competitive elements in their structure and membership. There are three principal ways of resolving inter-group conflict: peaceful coexistence, compromise and problem solving.

Interpersonal conflict can be handled by constructive confrontation.

Negotiating and bargaining skills

The skills required to be effective in negotiations and bargaining are analytical ability, empathy, interactive skills, communicating skills, keeping cards close to the chest and flexible realism.

Organizational politics

Political behaviour is inevitable in organizations because they consist of individuals who, while they are ostensibly there to achieve a common purpose, will, at the same time, be driven by their own needs to achieve their own goals.

Organizational politics involves various kinds of desirable and undesirable behaviour designed to get outcomes which are sought by an individual or a group.

HR practitioners are inevitably involved in organizational politics and they are more likely to survive and thrive if they handle these astutely.

But they also have to behave ethically, whether they are politicking or going about their daily business of providing advice and services.

Liaising with customers

Liaising with customers, whether external or internal, is a matter of establishing their wants and needs and then meeting those wants and needs.

The requirements for effectively liaising with customers can be defined in terms of attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours.

Reference

Follett, M P (1924) *Creative Experience*, New York, Longmans Green

Questions

- 1 What are interpersonal relationships?
- 2 What is the significance of teams in organizations?

- 3 What makes a team effective?
- 4 How can good team working be achieved? (List at least four approaches.)
- 5 What are networks in organizations?
- 6 What steps can be taken to improve networking? (List at least four.)
- 7 What are the main barriers to communication?
- 8 How can those barriers be overcome?
- 9 What is assertiveness?
- 10 What are the characteristics of assertive behaviour?
- 11 How can aggression be handled?
- 12 What are the three main ways of handling inter-group conflict?
- 13 How should counselling be handled when dealing with interpersonal conflict?
- 14 What is the process of negotiating?
- 15 What are the most important negotiating and bargaining skills? (Name at least four.)
- 16 What is the role of political behaviour in organizations?
- 17 What do you have to do to be politically sensitive? (Name at least four actions.)
- 18 What is politically astute behaviour on the part of HR practitioners?
- 19 What are the skills required when liaising with customers?
- 20 What is a service level agreement?