

Unions: Organizations of the Past, or Beacons of the Future?

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Unions

Over the years, we have had senior leaders ask us about the implications between union membership and generational values, behaviours and expectations. They ask, "How do the younger generations respond to being part of a union?" Anecdotally, we have heard from labour relations colleagues that many Gen Xers and Gen Ys do not view union membership favourably. Once upon a time, before creating n-gen, I had the experience of managing a team of younger employees, and one of my team members said "Why do I have to pay \$40 from each paycheque to the union, when all I get in return are newsletters that are titled Dear Bretheren and Sisteren, and an invitation to a Christmas party for children, when I don't have kids?". The challenge that unions face is no different than the challenge that every employer faces, who wishes to attract, retain and engage the best and the brightest. All organizations, including unions, have to remain relevant to their internal stakeholders. In organizations, that's the employee - in unions, that's the member. In this newsletter, we highlight both the challenges and opportunities unions face in their fight for sustainability. In part, the information comes from a significant consulting project that n-gen executed with an international union, which has over 64,000 members.

Union Philosophies

Many unions have a long and proud history of supporting and fighting on the behalf of members for safe workplaces, fair HR practices and decent wages. Some unions have certainly impacted labour legislation, which then became internalized by organizations as standard practices. While the raison d'etre for many unions may be deep, many younger members struggle with the relevance they provide today and in the future. Younger employees have also internalized many of the workplace benefits that unions have fought for. For them, these practices are automatic and they don't necessarily care that, once upon a time, those benefits didn't exist and were part of the union's platform. Having said that, many of the younger members with whom we spoke, were interested in learning the history of their union. They felt that understanding the reasons for the union and the different initiatives - whether organizationally or legislatively - that the union created, would give them a greater sense of pride, thereby leading to increased engagement.

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However, just understanding the past is not sufficient to engaging the younger generations. They have the expectation that they will be involved in creating future plans today, not tomorrow when they have 'paid their dues'. Within both the membership and senior union leadership, we have often heard that experienced members expect younger members to be seen and not heard. This approach is disengaging and impacts membership commitment to the union.

Union Structure

Most union structures are based on Traditionalist's values, behaviours and expectations. There is an expectation that members will remain forever loyal to one particular union, or even perhaps one local. The most senior leaders of the union lead the organization in a command and control style, often paternalistically, because they believe that they know what is best for the membership. Many union leaders have had to work very hard, and learned how to be politically savvy in order to move up in the union structure to a position of authority. They expect respect based on tenure and title. There is the expectation that apprentices demonstrate long term commitment through unquestioning adherence to everything union until they get their red seal. As one journeyman told me 'when I was an apprentice it never occurred to me to talk back to my boss or the union'. Thus many journeyman and unions are surprised by Gen Xers and Gen Ys tendency to question everything, and even demand changes by their union before they have completed their apprenticeship.

The younger generations are not, and will not, be blindly loyal to any organization, including a union. If they have a choice as to which union they can belong to, they will interview each union and see which one best suits their needs. Younger generations do not see it as a privilege to belong to a union, rather they see the union as a service provider to its members, just like any other service provider. For many senior union leaders, this is a difficult concept to grasp, especially if the union operates in a sector where it was difficult to become a union member during the booming days of the 1970's and 80's, when the labour market had a glut of Baby Boomers all jockeying for union jobs.

If younger union members do not have a choice as to which union they can belong to, then the challenge becomes one of being able to engage the membership. It would be foolhardy for any organization to believe that it can be successful long term without having the internal stakeholders (be it employees or union members) engaged. For example, collective bargaining ratifications hinge on members accepting the deal, thus unions need engaged members. In addition, work performance on the job is impacted by engagement, which is ultimately required to keep union pensions strong by having sufficient members to pay into the pool to keep the pension growing. If members leave the profession, then the future of a union is at risk.

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Engaging Younger Members

Similar to forward-thinking companies, forward-thinking unions are starting to explore the issue of engaging younger members. They are conducting focus groups, surveys and interviews to benchmark current engagement levels and identify areas for improvement. They are drilling down deeper to understand what the union benefits might be for each generation. What it means to have 'job security' for a Baby Boomer - meaning having a job for life - may mean something else for a Gen Y - who wants the union to ensure that the performance management process is based on competency and is fairly executed by an employer. Unions are exploring what it means to be inclusive from many aspects, whether it be gender, race, ethnicity, religion and/or age. Unions also recognize that they are working on a fundamental culture shift that will require a structural shift. In shifting their way of doing business, unions also have to be careful not to alienate their existing, mature and retired members.

So the process requires careful negotiation, intense, consistent and frequent communication and an understanding of what the end goal is. The goal is to ensure that the union remains sustainable by engaging all its members. In today's world, that must include understanding how to engage and inspire younger employees to want to join a union and eventually lead that union to future success.



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