

Unilateral Decision Making

In democratic societies, it is often viewed that decision making is based on consensus of opinion. This is an ideal which ought to be observed considering that it is best that the decision-making process involves persons in the process of consultation and discussion. In an imperfect world and one that is not a utopia, it is to be expected that leaders would sometimes act contrary to the accepted and established practices and procedures. Where a leader fails to engage with others, to invite them to share their opinions or advice, this could be a sign of overconfidence and of individualism over inclusiveness. It might also be seen as a sign of disregard for team members, and what is meant by participative leadership. What stands out is the fact that decisions made may not take into consideration the concerns and feelings of others.

These are worrying signs that the democratic and participatory leadership style has given way to the autocratic and authoritarian style of leadership. In a democratic society, it becomes a major concern where the autocratic style predominates. This will most likely become an issue where it is viewed that autocratic leaders make all the decisions themselves. In essence, they do not consult their team members or encourage them to make or to be party to decision making. The leader shoulders the responsibility for making decisions and expects to have acceptance of and compliance with the decision by team members. There is the theory that leaders who resort to making unilateral decisions, do so in order to effectively communicate that they are in control. This may be conceived as a weakness of the leader. It is a cause for concern in a democratic society if team members are prepared to accept this type of dictatorial behaviour.

This approach could be unhealthy for the cohesiveness of a team. The dominance of any one individual, can be construed to mean a lack of confidence and trust of other team members in the decision making process. The downside of unilateral decision making is its impact on the working relationship, and how it potentially reduces the commitment of other team members to the decision-making process. Unilateral decision making as a practice, should be avoided at all cost. Notwithstanding this, there are times where peculiar circumstances may force the leader to take a unilateral decision. However, it is to be reemphasized that unilateral decision making should not be the norm.

Trade union leaders should be conscious that they are directly accountable to the membership for their actions. Trade unions elect an Executive Committee or Council, of which the President is a member. The President or Chairman by whatever name given, is required to consult and to follow the mandates of the membership. In civil society organizations which include trade unions, this does not give the President absolute power and authority to make unilateral decisions. Individuals who venture to act in such a manner are well aware that they run the risk of a vote of no confidence being tabled against them. It requires a special meeting to be called by the

Unilateral Decision Making: Dennis de Peiza, Labour & Employee Relations Consultant, Regional Management Services Inc., November 10, 2023

membership for the purpose of tabling a vote of no confidence. On the other side of the coin, politicians take the liberty to make all types of decisions, and do so claiming that they have been elected by the people to govern. In the Parliament, it is possible to table a vote of no confidence, but the possibility of achieving such is not unlikely, but usually highly improbable.

In the workplace, the practice of unilateral decision making is sure to encounter a push back response. Within the workplace, it is the norm to engage in the process of collective bargaining, as this leads the parties of the employer and employees to reach a joint agreement. The beauty of this is that there is the engagement of the consultation process.

An example of unilateral decision making on the part of government, can be identified in the instance where there is a breakdown in the collective bargaining process between government as the employer and the trade union as the representative body for labour. There is a tendency for government to revert to Parliament for the purpose of legislating the wages and salaries of Public Officers, when the parties fail to reach an agreement. This is basically a form of collective unilateral decision making, whereupon politicians determine that can unreservedly exercise the authority invested in them by the populace to manage. This may be deemed as nothing short as the abuse of power.