

Improving the Industrial Relations Climate

The preservation of a peaceful Industrial relations climate in any society should in the promotion of the national interest, be a priority agenda items of national stakeholders. The government as the single largest employer, private sector employers and the labour movement are therefore expected to exercise the level of leadership and management that would give effect to the attainment of this goal. Good leadership and management qualities can serve to ensure the maintenance of peace and tranquillity, which make for a harmonious and productive environment.

There is nothing to say that any system is prefect, and therefore fall outs between employer and employees are inevitable. In like manner, the strained relationship between the key stakeholders at the bipartite level, can become a source of contention at some point in time. This is usually attributed to issues of divide between labour and management/employers. Using the established industrial relations procedures, the parties attempt to settle the matters of divide through engaging the negotiation process. Inasmuch that it is commonplace for private sector employers and trade unions to face off, there are times when the government and labour unions face off. This basically occurs when issues arise primarily from actions taken by Ministers of Government in line Ministries, or in response to those of Permanent Secretaries who act as the Chief Executive Officers or managers of government Ministries, Departments, Agencies and /or Statutory Boards that fall under jurisdiction. This list may also be extended and rightly so, to include heads of institutions who act as agents of the employer, and those who have been appointed by the government to the position of Chairman of a Board of Management/Directors.

At a macro level, it is the intended or actual use of the legislative authority which resides in the government that causes a reaction by trade unions or a joint response from both labour unions and private sector organizations. This is usually the cause of some hostility, which leads to heightened lobbying, mobilization and strategizing. The end result in a worst case scenario, is the calling of a national strike. When it reaches this point, there is a clear indication that the fundamental problem solving techniques must be engaged. Where does it start and ends? The simple answer is through communication which is best expressed by the

parties engaging in constructive consultation and dialogue; which will ultimately contribute to facilitating the negotiation process.

Contingent upon this, it requires that the parties are prepared to operate against a backdrop of trust, honesty, openness, respect, and confidentiality. They must be imbued with a willingness to compromise and to show respect for what is known as the gentlemen's agreement. If there is a commitment to the negotiation process, then it should follow that discussions take place at the table and not in the media. Worse yet, the fuelling of the fire by making provocative statement(s), or putting out half-truths, should not be encouraged.

It is to be expected that leaders and managers as honourable and responsible persons, would subscribe to a no nonsense approach being adopted to personal attacks being made. Personal attacks will do little to build and maintain good relationships, and moreover serve to diminish confidence levels and cast doubts on integrity and credibility of individuals.

Returning to the issue of forging discussions, the point is to be made that these can only meaningfully take place within a conducive environment. This means that there is no place for the adversarial approach. The notion of trust and respect is only worth something, if both sides to a dispute are prepared to observe the principles they espouse.

Ironically, it is the principal decision makers who in the final analysis are to be held accountable for the good or bad industrial relations climate that exists. The attitudes, behaviour and actions they display, will always be a determining factor.