

Democratization of the Workplace

(Dennis de Peiza)

Within the 21st century, workplace democracy has become a prominent feature. The hallmark of workplace democracy is the exercise of democratic practices, whereby employees have earned the right and respect to participate in the decision-making process. It was unthinkable that such would have been entertained in the dark old colonial days, particularly in the instance where the European colonial masters, primarily the British, control and rule the sugar plantation societies of the English speaking Caribbean.

The advent of these societies graduating to political independence, brought the hope of change, whereby it was expected over time that the top down approach, where the master gave instructions which were carried out without question, would give way to a more constructive approach of participative management. In adopting this approach, there was a clear signal that workers were seen as an asset and not as chattel or property.

The introduction of workplace democracy would have been a revolutionary step towards the harmonizing of today's workplace, and in creating a new dimension in employment relations. The empowerments of workers meant that they acquired a voice in the workplace, and hence have gained some recognition as far as having a say in matters related to management issues and policy at the enterprise level. One positive feature of this development is the change from the existence of an adversarial relationship between

management and employees, to one that is more embracing and engaging.

While this approach is ideal, it would seem that the benefits to be derived through the pursuit of this, remains loss upon some employers. It would seem that some employers / managers would prefer to bask in the glory of ignorance, so as to create unnecessary workplace tensions. It wouldn't come as a surprise if this action on the part of some is a deliberate strategy that is directed at calling attention to themselves or the enterprises. In today's labour's environment, it would seem that the media circus is a popular medium which is being used to create industrial relations mayhem, rather than a resort to the medium of engagement, to be facilitated through consultation and dialouge to address workers' issues.

Inasmuch that work democratization provides workers with a strong voice within their organizations; it seems that this fact raises considerable fear amongst some employees. There really is no need for employers and managers to perceive that to empower and engage workers is a threat to their welfare. If and where such a fear exists, it may be that those employers and managers who are so minded, might be fearful of the repercussions to their less that favourable intentions and actions which are contemplated or initiated. There is absolutely no need to worry where the practice is to encourage employee engagement, participation, the promotion of fairness, transparency and due process. A no tolerance approach to divide and rule tactics should be advocated and promoted.

The argument can be advanced that democracy in the workplace will only realistically exists where there is the acceptance of equality and

the acceptance of shared responsibility. This is well founded. The problem comes by the narrow minded of those more concern with maintaining the bastion of power, and who see workers' participation as a perceive threat, rather than recognizing the value of having such wider participation in the decision making of the enterprise. The notion that by providing a platform for participatory democracy at the workplace would lead to a potential imbalance, is reflective of a non enlightened leadership and /or management. This is indicative of a poor vision, and hence it is not hard to understand why the fear factor exists.

A fundamental aspect of the liberation process which underpins the transition from the colonial age to the dawn of the independence era is the emphasis on the education of working class people. It is difficult to see how the how an educated people could exists in an environment that attempts to stifle their development, and ensure that they remain subject to a culture of subjection, where being dictated too is the norm.

The way forward for independent societies would be for the political directorate to work with trade unions to continue in pursuing a path that is directed at the protection of workers' rights and securing the empowerment of workers, through the enactment of progressive legislation, and the promotion of democratic principles in the workplace. The democratization of the workplace is certainly attainable. The commitment to an engagement by employers to employee share ownership would be a true reflection of the move towards the democratization of the workplace.