

## Labor and Management: Rally 'Round the Mission

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

As this edition of *HR News* comes off the presses, we will be about a month away from celebrating Labor Day. Labor Day is that end-of-the-summer holiday celebrated with equal vigor by all Americans, whether they consider themselves trade unionists or dyed-in-the-wool adherents of Adam Smith's invisible hand and free markets. Parents at both ends of the political spectrum certainly anticipate with equal enthusiasm Labor Day's promise that their children are finally about to go back to school, thereby restoring relative predictability to the daytime lives of the adults in the family. Myself the parent of a teenager, I confess to sharing with my peers a certain sense of relief as September returns.



### Beyond Burgers and Textbooks

Let's take this Labor Day's approach, however, as an occasion to dwell on a topic a bit more significant than family barbecues and back-to-school sales. The organized labor movement has played a significant role in the evolution of our modern American society, but now only about 12 percent of Americans are union members. With the growth of the service economy in 21st-century America, the industrial sector—historically the core strength of the union movement—has waned in its significance, both in absolute and relative terms. As a result, the largest single union, the National Education Association, with 3.2 million members, is now comprised of local government employees.

Indeed, of the 20 largest unions in the United States in 2003, then representing some 16 million workers, government employees accounted for about six million, or more than a third of that number. In 2011, all unionized workers numbered only about 15 million people, and govern-

ment employee unions exceeded six million members, or more than 40 percent of the total. Three of the five largest unions now represent government workers.

Public employee unions, like most unions, have tended to focus on pay and working conditions. They have had a widely varying relationship with the elected political leaders and appointed executives in charge of leading the governments where the union members serve. In many cases, they have forged close political ties with the political party in power. In other cases, the relationship has been more confrontational. The relationship has been particularly tense with regard to the union's right to strike, or lack thereof.

Calvin Coolidge, as governor of Massachusetts in 1919, famously declared that "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time," as he faced a Boston police strike.

As a child growing up in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s, I witnessed how the periodic strikes of the Transit Workers Union and the Sanitation Workers Union, among others, could and did regularly bring the bustle and energy of what was then the nation's largest city to a screeching—and odoriferous—halt. More than a generation later, Pres. Ronald Reagan defeated an attempt by unionized Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controllers to strike in the summer of 1981. He fired more than 11,000 union strikers.

### Back to the Future

In very recent times, the fiscal pressures of the Great Recession have resulted in strong political pressures at the state and local government level for cost reduction. This has cost many state and local government employees their jobs, and often translated into cuts to pay and benefits for those still on the payroll. Even in the heartland of the American labor movement, in Midwestern states like Wisconsin, Ohio, Illinois and Michigan, public

employee unions have experienced reversals.

What should be the appropriate relationship between organized labor and agency management? First, it is appropriate to acknowledge that there can be an appropriate role for public employee unions. This may not be true for every state or every local government, or every federal agency. Indeed, many governments have consciously chosen not to have public employee unions. Still, as management guru Stephen Covey once observed, "I'm not opposed to unions, I am opposed to the bad management that creates them. Unions are created by bad management as a protection against the unilateral and arbitrary abuse of power and authority."

To Covey's point, we in the public sector human capital management profession spend our careers striving to ensure that agencies have good management. We take care that laws and regulations are followed. We guide management to make wise decisions consistent with civil service principles. We work to ensure that employees are empowered and motivated to serve the public interest. Still, the management of government agencies is comprised of human beings, and human beings will occasionally make mistakes.

### Bad Management Does Happen

Sometimes bad management can be found in truly surprising places, and can trigger an effort to organize the employees. In the federal government, the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, is part of the Executive Office of the President. Comprised of about 400 federal employees, almost all of whom are career civil servants, it is hard to imagine any group of people who are more closely associated with management. After all, their job is to make sure that federal agencies are doing what the OMB director thinks the president wants the agencies to do. OMB attracts many of the best and brightest in the federal government. These workaholic civil servants routinely work up to 60 hours

per week, sometimes longer. Their offices are less than a five-minute walk from the fabled Oval Office (if you don't count the time spent walking through metal detectors).

However, even in such a rarefied atmosphere one can encounter poor management. Morale and frustration with OMB's own management got so bad a few years ago that in October 2011 the OMB employees held an election to determine whether they should form a union. While the vote ultimately went against the union, it did send a message to management. As an alumnus of OMB, I am pleased to report that working conditions at that institution have been improving somewhat since the election.

Whether management mistakes are ones of omission or commission, public employee unions, or, as was the case with OMB, merely the threat of a union, can be one valuable mechanism for identifying problems and focusing management attention on those problems. This refocused attention can benefit both the government workers and management. More significantly, this refocused attention serves the purposes of their mutual ultimate boss and shared constituency: the taxpayer/voter.

## Beyond Compliance

Federal, state, and local laws and ordinances prescribe in great detail what the rights and responsibilities are of a public employee union and the agency management with which it interacts. Their postures are occasionally adversarial, and to some extent that is both natural and even healthy. That being said, at a higher level of analysis, labor and management in government should share the same goal: advancing the public interest.

Management and labor should both be willing to rally around the mission of the agency. They should both be willing to cooperate with one another to advance that mission for the ultimate benefit of the public.

At their core, most government managers and most government rank-and-file employees share a strong commitment to the mission of the agency where they work. This creates a common ground and common sense of purpose that is less

likely to be found underpinning private sector labor management relations.

## Helping Each Other

In any large organization, effective executives need tools for finding out what the workforce is thinking. Government agencies are no exception. In fact, the need is typically greater in government where the environment typically is bureaucratized, siloed, hierarchical, and one where risk-taking is rarely rewarded. Executives cannot simply rely on collecting information through the chain of command—they need to have multiple tools at their disposal to gather intelligence about what is happening in their organization.

There are many ways to do this. One can practice management by walking about, and interact directly with rank-and-file employees in their work environments. Leaders can conduct employee viewpoint surveys to gain insight into what employees are thinking. Executives can hold periodic town meetings or all-hands meetings with employees as a group to share and receive information. A manager may have a trusted informal “kitchen cabinet” of employee opinion leaders, with whom she touches base regularly to maintain an accurate perception of what is going on beneath the surface of the agency.

Another such tool is frequent interaction with the public employee union, whether this is done informally and on an ad hoc basis, or through the mechanism of regular meetings of a formally structured labor-management council. But don't wait until management thinks it has a labor relations problem that it cannot avoid addressing, or an anticipated management action triggers consultation under a collective bargaining agreement to interact with the union. Instead, management should aim to cultivate an ongoing atmosphere of stress-free trust and open communication. This results from establishing a pattern of successful interaction over an extended period of time when there is no crisis looming.

That is not to say that management should “give in” to the union and bargain away its management prerogatives that are technically outside the scope of the collective bargaining agreement. Some thought and discretion therefore needs to

be exercised in how management engages its union, but establishing an atmosphere of trust and openness will pay significant dividends for agency management in the long run.

In addition to their legal rights and responsibilities, public employee unions have a great opportunity to inform management. They can surface ideas to improve the productivity and morale of employees, to help the agency grow better supervisors and managers, to improve service to citizens. By so doing, they can improve the working conditions and overall experience of their union members. By helping management make the agency demonstrably successful, they can help develop a convincing case that will support the budgets, pay, and benefits desired by their members.

## Creating the Win-Win Solution

Labor and management in the public sector must be prepared to work constructively together in pursuit of the public interest. Through cooperation and active engagement, they can satisfy their shared drive to accomplish the agency mission, better serve the public, and then bask in the satisfaction that their agency and community is better off as a result of their joint efforts.

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