

UNION INVOLVEMENT IN WORKPLACE CHANGE

Supporting delegates

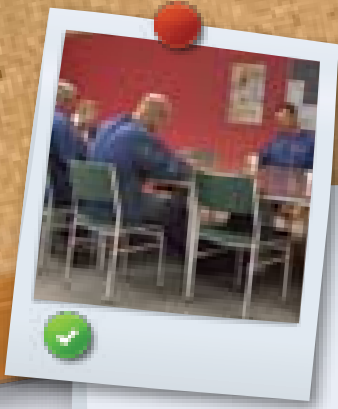
Workplace change processes place particular demands on delegates, who may sometimes be sandwiched between the union and their workmates and supervisors and management. Delegates participating in workplace change processes may have additional needs for support, including the following:

- agreement with management on how much paid time is available for them to participate in the process, and to consult with/provide feedback to other workers
- an understanding of any union goals for the change processes
- identification of any skills and training needs associated with the process – e.g. opportunity to learn about new management systems, delegate training, joint problem solving skills, leadership skills
- information on change processes that have been put in place in other unionised workplaces.

The role of unions in creating the workplace of the future

Unions who are or seek to be active in workplace change processes have a range of roles to play:

- representing the interests of members
- promoting union objectives and goals with members and managers
- educating current and future members about new ways of working
- keeping members informed about employer proposals, including making recommendations about proposals that are being considered and making counter proposals
- contributing to the design of new work systems
- promoting skills development, quality work and mechanisms for employee voice as part of the process of change
- participating with management in joint working parties and task forces
- promoting any new work systems that have been jointly agreed with management representatives
- identifying any unintended consequences of change that disadvantage groups of workers
- recognising the sometimes diverse needs of differing groups of workers (e.g. Maori, women, workers with disabilities, religious and ethnic groups).



Assessing union involvement in a workplace change process

The checklist below suggests questions for unions and members to think about when considering union involvement in workplace change processes:

Union and worker issues

- How well is the site organised already? Participation in workplace change processes is much more likely to have greater success where a site is well organised already, than where there are a large number of non-members.
- How many other unions have members at the site? If there is more than one union, are other unions likely to become involved as well?
- What are relationships like between the union, delegates and members? Change processes can test existing relationships so they need to be strong enough to withstand the challenges that may arise.
- How active are delegates at the site? Do they provide leadership for members, particularly where risks may need to be taken?
- What support will members and delegates need, and is the union in a position to be able to provide it?
- How engaged are workers in the workplace? Are they interested in being involved in the change process and have a sense of ownership about the outcome? Where a workforce is cynical (for example, as a result of having been through a large number of change processes) there is likely to be some understandable resistance to change.

Management issues

- Is there a clear rationale for change? Has it been well thought through and have alternative options been considered?
- What is the relationship between the management and the union like? Does the management accept or welcome union involvement? Is management supportive of providing delegates with time and resources to contribute to the change process?
- What is the record of this workplace in implementing change processes in the past? A history of “quick fixes” suggests management does not understand the importance of taking time and gaining staff support for changes to be sustainable in the long term.
- How financially stable is the company? If changes are being made as a result of a financial crisis, there may be pressure for positive financial results to be achieved in a short time frame. This may work against union needs for ensuring processes meet the concerns of workers, and for gains to be evenly distributed.
- How stable is the management team? One of the key reasons for interruptions in workplace change is a change of senior or key managers.