Impact of Collaboration on Labor-Management Relations and the Collective Bargaining Process

Matthew Noggle, Ed. D.
Temple University, 2009
715 Oxford Lane
Wallingford, PA 19086
(610) 447-0623
matt419@comcast.net

Arthur Hochner, Ph. D.
Department of Human Resource Management
Fox School of Business & Management
Temple University
Alter Hall 344
1801 Liacouras Walk
Philadelphia, PA 19122
(215) 204-8133
ahochner@temple.edu
Adversarial relationships between teachers unions and school boards exist in virtually every region of the United States. Growing pressure to increase student achievement, calls for school reform and constrained budgets are contributing to a crisis that faces not only school boards but also teachers unions. Walton & McKersie (1965) asserted that collective bargaining is not merely distributive, i.e., adversarial, but also integrative. In public education bargaining, there has been growth of interest in the use of such integrative "win-win" or collaborative bargaining approaches to deal with mutual concerns and explore new potential mutual benefits. Their effect, though, on contracts is unclear, even while improved attitudes and relationships have resulted. On the union side, Kerchner & Koppich (1993) advocate expanding the scope of teacher unionism toward a new, professional model combining traditional bargaining with a focus on educational quality, improved teacher preparation and rigorous evaluation through site-based decision-making, team teaching and district-level councils.

The research project reported here culminated in a case study on the formation and maintenance of collaborative structures between management and unions in the public school setting. The primary goal of the research was to ascertain the impact of collaboration on labor-management relations and the collective bargaining process. What byproducts resulted from the new collaborative relationship paradigm? How did these collaborative byproducts affect the quality of service delivered? What were the benefits and limitations of forming the collaborative relationship? While the study probed the labor-management relationship between teacher unions and public school district administrations, its findings are relevant to other public and private entities.

Case study methodology was selected, because it offered the best opportunity for eliciting the most relevant and depth of data. What was the context under which collaborative structures were formed, maintained, and their impact on collective bargaining and labor-management relations in public school entities with well established, strong collaborative relations? What factors facilitated or inhibited collaboration? The selection of study sites was nonrandom, in that they were not representative of all school systems. Those selected to participate have forged strong and well-documented non-traditional collaborative relationships between the parties at their site. The sites were four public school systems with diverse demographics in different geographical regions of the United States. Interview participants were drawn from both administration and union at each of the four sites selected.

The researcher studied the events that led to the formation of collaborative structures, the collaborative activity, the impact of collaboration on the collective bargaining process, and the challenges to collaboration at each study site. Data collection relied primarily on intensive personal interviews, and secondarily on archival sources, such as the negotiated teachers' contract. The interviews were recorded via telephone, to allow access to participants that best matched the goals of the study.

The results of the study showed that there are, in fact, strong models of collaboration between school district administrations and teacher unions. Much of the collaborative work that occurred at each study site was in the form of committees with
equal representation from both labor and management. The parties strive for, and often attain, consensus in their decision making process. One significant finding related to improved relations between management and labor representatives at each site. Greater respect for the role of others emerged as the parties began to realize that they had more in common than previously thought. Discussions became more focused on shared interests and the needs of the students served. The traditional rancor that normally occurs during contract negotiations was replaced, over time, with a more collegial and collaborative spirit.

At each site, the labor-management cooperation resulted in many collaborative byproducts. In focusing their combined efforts on the best interests of the students they served, they co-created successful initiatives related to improved student academic experience and teacher efficacy, financial and security interests of labor, as well as other terms of employment. The new paradigm also witnessed a sharing of decision making power that resulted in site-based decision making bodies that included the representation of various constituents, peer review programs where labor shares in the responsibility for cultivating quality in its ranks and assisting in the termination of those whose performance is unacceptable or unprofessional, as well as exploration of alternative teacher compensation systems. Even in cases where a solution was not attained, the parties did come to agreement in philosophy and the need for further exploration.

The impact of trust and the will of all participants to collaborate were found to be the primary factors in the formation and maintenance of collaboration at each site. Use of formal and informal structures continues to support collaboration between the parties. All have stated their commitment to collaborate and mutually attempt to address issues raised by either party. At two sites, in particular, collaborative work between labor and management leaders resulted in securing tens of millions of new dollars in grant funding for district initiatives. Many of these collaborative structures have been purposefully incorporated into the collective bargaining agreement, assuring continued collaboration in their district. These collaborative relations have also had a profound impact on the collective bargaining process at each of the study sites. The formal interest-based bargaining model, or some derivative thereof, is employed at each site. At two of the four study sites, the teachers’ union president is now included on the district superintendent’s administrative cabinet.

Authentic collaboration between labor representative groups and management in the public and private sectors is found in limited instances. The models of collaboration presented here can serve as a strong model for those in public education looking to change the paradigm by which labor and management interact and the quality of educational product delivered. Moreover, the concepts presented here are applicable to other public and private sector organizations interested in improving labor-management relations, strengthening their organization, and improving the quality and efficiency of the product or service delivered.