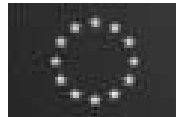


HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION CASE STUDY

RTE (Radio Telefis Eireann)



IPC

Irish Productivity Centre

1998

Abstract

During the late '80s and throughout the '90s RTE embarked on a process of gradual change for which it sought to establish a broad consensus of support from within its multi-union environment. A significant degree of success was achieved through a philosophy of devolving decision making to locally based groupings and an overall philosophy of partnership. Progress however was slow and while not covered in detail here, emerging external pressures in 2000/2001 would raise serious questions around the future direction of change at RTE. The Case raises interesting questions around the ideal processes of change and work organisation in situations of a volatile external environment.

HI-RES Case Study: RTE

Sector

Broadcasting

Key Words

Partnership; Devolving decision-making; Education and training;

Consultation; Bureaucratic structures; external environments; Public service

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'Good Practice' Case Study: RTE

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1. Background Information

Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE) is the National Public Service Broadcasting organisation in Ireland with a remit extending to overseeing and operating two television stations - with a contribution to a third - three radio stations, a concert orchestra, a symphony orchestra and also to publishing Ireland's best selling magazine the '*RTE Guide*'. There are some two thousand people employed by RTE at a variety of locations around the country, the majority of whom are based at the Montrose-Donnybrook complex in Dublin. Historically, broadcasting in Ireland was developed through the Civil Service structures and therefore is thought by some commentators to have evolved towards a certain 'bureaucratic' style of administration over time. For many years the only indigenous broadcasting organisation within the State, RTE has had to compete in an ongoing way with UK and other broadcasting output, as such have been accessible to the Irish public. The organisation is highly unionised.

Since 1993 the organisation has had a '*Participation Forum*' and this was available to support the Safety Committee, the Canteen and Catering Committee and an Equality Committee and there is also a Training Committee that brought about several lifelong learning initiatives. A joint internal mechanism for dealing with industrial relations disputes, the Industrial Relations Tribunal, was introduced within RTE between 1993-1994 but overall, such structures were not viewed locally as constituting 'partnership' or even to form part of a partnership agreement. They can however be regarded as precursors to the establishment of more formal partnership arrangements which followed on.

(Postscript : In 2000 / 2001 after an era of partnership a totally new scenario is emerging within RTE owing to radical change in the external television and radio marketplace. It remains to be seen how the new challenges will affect the arrangements and structures created in the '90s.)

2. Drivers for Change

Current technology in the broadcasting industry has at most a two to three year cycle in many areas of the business and the most significant technological change in the past few years has been the transition from analogue to digital systems both in radio and television. In 1988 legislation was enacted which provided for the licensing of private radio and television operators in Ireland and this over time has also had an obvious impact on RTE's operations offering enhanced choice to audiences and providing competitive services. More recently in 1996/1997 the development of independent radio and television led to a slow down in the growth of RTE's advertising revenue and this when the income from licence fees was stabilising. RTE also found around that time that other costs were increasing substantially as a consequence of changes in its market place. Overall this complex set of developments brought about recognition by both Management and the Trade Union Group that competitive issues were presenting serious difficulties for the organisation. Although RTE was making a surplus at that time it was clear, from the reasons mentioned, that this surplus could turn into a deficit within a short period.

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

At the beginning of 1998 the management executive board decided to conduct a review of structures and operations. The trade union group contended that if a review of the organisation was to be undertaken then staff should be represented on the review body. After some considerable discussion on the matter it was decided that two teams, one management and one trade union would carry out the review. In June of 1998 both teams presented their reports at a joint session; the reports differed but both parties agreed that developing a partnership approach was the most desirable way of interacting for the foreseeable future.

It is now felt that the most significant decision made in relation to the successful implementation and functioning of partnership was that it would involve 'people making decisions where those decisions mattered'. This ensured that power was being devolved outwards to the people/areas where decisions needed to be made regularly. It also engaged the commitment of the workers by giving them the decision-making responsibility to invigorate the organisation from the ground up.

Between June and September 1998 a series of tripartite discussions took place under the guidance of an external independent facilitator. Following this in early September 1998 a joint statement on behalf of RTE, the RTE Managers Association and the RTE Trade Union Group was issued and it affirmed that an agreement has been reached to adopt a partnership approach to meet the challenges that faced the organisation in the future. The three parties in order to guide the partnership process in RTE created a 'Memorandum of Understanding' and copies were then distributed to employees throughout the organisation. The document contained specific terms of reference for the creation of a Partnership Steering Group, which was to be joint union and management team. RTE at the time also engaged the ESRI to carry out a 'Survey of Staff Attitudes' which survey added to the overall process.

In September 1998 the Partnership Steering Group started work again utilising the services of an external independent facilitator, its objective now was to explore how partnership would work within RTE and to produce a report by December 1998 which would include recommended models of partnership. A ballot of trade union members at the time indicated some 82% in favour of the partnership-based approach.

In an effort to support the process of communicating understanding of the partnership agreement members of the Steering Group arranged numerous joint union-management presentations. At such sessions many members of staff offered their opinions of what effective partnership meant to them and overall this process acted as both a method of delivering and receiving information. It also assisted in removing the element of fear that is associated with all types of workplace change and at local level this is now believed to have been one of the most beneficial aspects of the change process as everyone became involved.

The Partnership Steering Group also arranged a variety of training programmes relevant to the change that was occurring within RTE; these included 'Working Together' type courses and additional special workshops for managers that were arranged in the Irish Management Institute (IMI). However, the majority of the training that occurred was designed with the assistance of an independent facilitator and took place within the organisation itself.

4. Obstacles to Change

The following were all encountered and to a degree overcome:

- Bureaucratic thinking deriving from a history, which saw the Broadcasting Service as an arm of the Civil Service. This backdrop while having certain advantages in relation to elements such as control and support does not necessarily support a dynamic approach to change.
- Individuals fear of change.
- The expressions of apathy and cynicism from individuals with relation to change and new work organisation.
- The inevitable inter-union tensions arising from perceived loss of power positions.
- The ever-changing external environment and the nature of 'policy' reactions to it, which could be construed at times to run counter to the objectives of the internal change process.

5. Risk Analysis

To a degree the process adopted was gradual with the idea of allowing individuals and groups to 'feel their way' through the change process. Such an approach must rely to a degree on a stable external environment which was not the case with respect to RTE. Furthermore the successful introduction of sustained change is difficult in an environment of competing power brokers and this aspect is worthy of further consideration.

It is also interesting to observe that the prevailing environment in an organisation such as RTE could be said to be one of 'innovation' and 'creativity' allied to a constant demand to satisfy the disparate needs of a demanding external client base. Such a dynamic and challenging scenario may not necessarily mesh comfortably with a gradual process of change and in that sense the methodology adopted may have required additional support and dynamism.

6. Benefits of Change

One of the distinct features of the change process at RTE is the large number of bodies that are involved with it including itself, the RTE Managers Association (RTEMA) and the RTE Trade Union Group (TUG). The large number of trade unions making up the latter group perhaps makes the particular partnership agreement almost unique. There are eight trade unions involved in the Trade Union Group. This group is comprised of the Amalgamated Electrical and Engineering Union (AEEU), the Building and Allied Trades Union (BATU), the Irish Actors' Equity Group (IAEG-SIPTU), the Irish National Painters and Decorators Trade Group (INPDTG-SIPTU), the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Services, Industrial, Professional, Technical Union (SIPTU), the Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU) and the Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT-Ireland). That a partnership agreement exists

between all of these diverse bodies indicates the high level of commitment from all of the trade union participants.

Another special feature of the RTE partnership agreement is the manner in which it is structured. There are no fewer than ninety-three *Local Partnership Groups*, fourteen *Divisional Partnership Groups* and one *Corporate Partnership Group*.

The *Local Partnership Groups* are considered to be the fundamental and most direct level of partnership within the process. They are based throughout RTE in either organisational sections or working teams. The section manager chairs the weekly or fortnightly meetings of this *Group*. The frequency, timing and agenda of the meetings are agreed in advance with the vice-chair who is a local trade union representative. Up to ten other people may make up each *Local Partnership Group*.

The number of *Groups* and their areas of responsibilities are reviewed, from time to time, by the *Corporate Partnership Group* to ensure their continuing effectiveness. The *Groups* are similar in make up in that a senior manager chairs the meetings with the trade union representative again acting as vice-chair. The *Group* may comprise of up to ten other people and each *Group* will meet on eight occasions during the year while additional meetings may be organised with agreement of the parties. These *Groups* deal with issues such as addressing the objectives and goals as defined by the *Corporate Partnership Group*. As well as undertaking these tasks groups also review the divisional business plans and ensures that partnership operates at divisional level.

The Director General of RTE chairs the *Corporate Partnership Group* whilst the Secretary of the Trade Union Group holds the vice-chair. Other members on this partnership group include four members of RTEs Executive Board, five representatives from the Trade Union Group including two full-time trade union officials, and one representative from the RTE Managers Association. This Group meets four times each year and it deals with the corporate objectives, strategy and budgets of the organisation. In addition it has responsibility for ensuring effective co-operation at all levels throughout the organisation and also for ensuring adequate resourcing of the partnership process.

Any member of either of these *Groups* may request that the chair or the vice-chair add an item to the agenda. The final item on the agenda of every meeting of any of these *Groups* is the composition of an agreed communiqué on the business of the meeting. This will be delivered to all relevant staff and forms the only published outcome of a meeting.

Conclusions

(The following are listed as key learning points from within RTE)

- It was felt that having two thousand people working to resolve the organisations difficulties was a better solution than ten people telling one thousand nine hundred and ninety others how it must be done.
- The greatest benefit of change through partnership at RTE was the amount of local involvement by ordinary staff members who are now able to become involved in the decision making processes; this was previously undervalued by the hierarchies in both management and trade unions.

- There is a deal of two-way communication and discussion about workplace change going on that did not exist previously.
- Setting up a steering group that had the engagement of senior management and trade union people worked – it retained a balance representation from both sides
- Get a good consultant (external independent facilitator) to facilitate the change project.
- Give time to the process – create a five to seven year plan and keep at it and dedicate people to undertake important tasks.
- The commitment and the signals that come from senior people, both trade union and management, must be consistent and very firm.
- Apathy and cynicism, if they reach a certain percentage of the workforce and cannot be reduced, are possibly more damaging to the process than someone who is vehemently opposed to partnership.
- Be absolutely clear as to what your overall objectives are in terms of the partnership process – what can it deliver – what do you want it to deliver?
- Distinguish between partnership and transformation and don't be unrealistic in your aspirations.
- Get senior management and trade union people to buy into the concept - dedicating resources for training and ensuring that employees are released for training.

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