



Managers must take the lead in explaining IR changes

By **Bob Crawshaw**

THE FEDERAL Government's \$55 million advertising campaign may have helped get the Workplace Reform Bill over the legislative line, but the real communications are only just beginning. After months of conflicting government and union advertising in the Press and on TV, workers are likely to be confused.

One side claims the new IR reforms will make us globally competitive in the new century. The other side claims they will take us back to the 19th century. With so much claim and counter claim, it's little wonder that recent polls show growing community trepidation about the impending changes. A *Canberra Sunday Times* poll on December 11 surveyed 150 people across the ACT about the changes. Of that 150, 114 answered "no" when asked "Do you think the new industrial relations laws will make your work a better place?" A survey in the *Australian* on December 19 revealed similarly high levels of concern about the details of the IR package.

The implications for Australian managers are clear. There will be confusion about the new arrangements unless effective corporate communications can beat the office or factory grapevine in telling people what is happening. The onus will be on the top floor to tell the shop floor about the new arrangements and how they will be implemented.

This places a premium on workplace communications at a time when anecdotal evidence suggests many Australian managers are just not very good at talking to staff.

While some organisations continually rate the effectiveness of their management-staff communications, there is lack of information across the economy on how good Australian managers are as communicators. Where companies do have data they tend to keep it to themselves, unless it is very good, in which case they share it at PR gatherings with anyone who will listen.

Our experience of working in and with government agencies and others over 38 years suggests the biggest threat to effective workplace change is poor communications. Management is often more about talking to workers, not with them, and while the boss expects to be heard he or she is not always prepared to listen. Modern marketing is all about creating and maintaining relationships, but the internal marketing of new ideas in many organisations is still based on a 1960s PR model of one way, downward dialogue.

Many organisations are often too quick to reach for a technical fix to their communications problems. Sending an email, posting news to the intranet or publishing an on-line newsletter are strategies that ignore the fact that people prefer a personal touch where they face uncertain times. They prefer to hear news face to face from supervisors, reinforced by meetings with senior management.

Research this year by English academics Dr T. J. Larkin and Sanda Larkin, suggest emails, town hall meetings, intranets and brochures may have their place but the best way to achieve sustainable workplace change is for managers to launch thousands of small face-to-face conversations with staff. The Larkins'

work uses case studies in the banking, airline and other industries to show people value personal contact, especially when the issues are complex.

But pity the modern manager. Often they are untrained in the art of communication. To have reached the higher corporate echelons they have been judged more on their financial, technical or bureaucratic skills rather than their ability to relate to people.

So how should managers communicate the new IR changes as they take effect in 2006?

Firstly, they need to assess in detail the impact of the new arrangements on their business, industry and workforce. This analysis will serve them well because they must explain in clear, simple language the implications of these changes on penalty rates, superannuation, hourly rates and other standards.

The best chance for communications success is for executives to walk around, answer questions and use a strategy of personal involvement reinforced with more formal tools like video links and on-line strategies.

No doubt many executives will throw up their hands in horror and exclaim that it's all too time consuming. But the alternative to clear, transparent communications is likely to be uncertainty, and perhaps even hostility, particularly when the next round of enterprise negotiations begins.

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