

Voices: My Experience with a Union

Tuesday, November 29, 2016



During my career I've had many different interactions with union organizations. I've been a union member, served as a union officer, been subject to "fair share" participation when I chose not to join the union and also had the opportunity to manage a large workforce of union employees. Through these experiences I've tried to rationalize the pros and cons of unionization for UNH's OS and PAT employees. Here are some of my thoughts based on 30 years of experience.

The union environment often creates a clear divide between the workforce and management. This starts with contract negotiations that can often take years to complete. It's not unusual for negotiations to extend from one contract period to the next, usually ending with both sides not being satisfied with the result. These negotiations are also conducted with teams appointed by each side that work under rules of confidentiality, leaving both the workforce and management blind to the actual issues being discussed. This can lead to deep-seated resentment that becomes part of an organization's culture, reducing morale, teamwork and production.

When negotiations are open, all is fair game. Any increase in compensation is balanced with a reduction in benefits with the target typically being reduction of health insurance costs.

Unfortunately, due to the adversarial nature of these negotiations,

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it's often difficult to explore alternative methods to deliver benefits that could possibly save money and provide reasonable options for both employees and management.

As a manager in a union environment I experienced many frustrations including the union's protection of low performers and the inability to meaningfully recognize the extra effort of high performers. Significant time and effort is spent by both sides preparing and responding to formal grievances as needed. Many of these, in my opinion, could have been resolved more efficiently without union representation through routine and appropriate communication.

The employee performance evaluation process was also challenging. The system was based on pass-or-fail criteria, "meets expectations" or "below expectations." I believe this lack of individual attention created an evaluation process that provided very little motivation for improvement and the process became less meaningful for both employee and supervisor, with very little coaching taking place. Recognition of individual meritorious performance was nonexistent, thereby reducing motivation for employees to strive for improvement.

Ultimately, I believe what we all must consider is how a union workforce would impact UNH going forward. To me, it's about the future of our organization, not individual gains or losses we could each realize. The reality of the higher education industry is that it will become much more competitive in the future. There are fewer students and more options for these students to receive their education. This points to the need for management, faculty and staff to all work together to find the best and most efficient ways to deliver our services. Given my past experience, I find it difficult to believe that the addition of a union will improve our odds of achieving the upcoming challenges we all will face.

—William P. Janelle

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