



# GETTING PAST GO

## A START-UP GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP

**Getting Past Go** is a collection of materials designed to help organisations explore the idea of workplace partnership. It's a basic introduction to what's involved in working together in partnership, and the benefits and challenges for organisations adopting this approach. We've gathered together information to help you get started and keep moving towards a more productive workplace relationship.

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### WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

**Relationship.** *n.* the dealings and feelings that exist between people or groups.

The state of workplace relationships is of critical importance to organisational success and the wellbeing of people at work. Workplace relationships exist between different groups (teams, functions, departments), between management, staff and the union, and between staff and their union. These relationships are influenced by how people individually treat each other in the workplace.

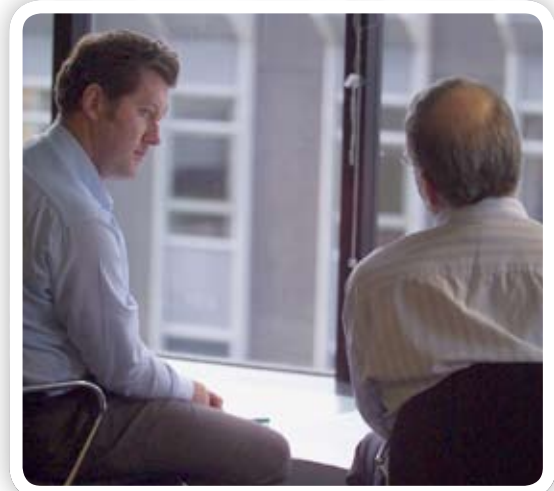
A distinctly different approach to workplace relationships is one of the five key attributes common to organisations that have achieved successful workplace partnership.

A partnership approach requires a move away from a relationship based on self-interest and conflict, to one based on mutual interest and partnership.

#### ADAPTING FOR PARTNERSHIP

The conventional workplace relationship is typically contractual. Established through the employment contract or collective agreement, it sets out the rights and obligations of each party and how disagreements are to be handled. A contractual relationship can discourage the parties – employers, staff and the union – from seeing themselves as partners in the organisation or business. It commonly creates a 'them and us' style relationship from the very start.

A better working relationship can emerge when everyone comes together as partners or allies. The distinct and different interests of each



group are recognised, but there is more focus on how the partners can work together to the benefit of everyone.

Adopting a partnership approach means each partner is committed to the success of the other partner. It's the commitment to this type of workplace relationship that's required if you want to adopt a partnership approach in your organisation and see the benefits.

#### RELATIONSHIPS – WHEN THINGS AREN'T WORKING

Poor workplace relationships can affect the overall performance of the organisation. When relationships between individuals and groups aren't working well, an organisation may experience communication breakdowns, low morale and job satisfaction, more personal grievances and high rates of staff turnover.



A constant focus by the union on negative issues can also lead to relationship tensions between the union and its members.

Managers and employers may need to spend much of their time managing reluctant performance. The reputation of the organisation as a good employer may be affected, and it might become difficult to recruit and retain skilled staff. All of these add to the costs of running an operation and reduce profitability.

When there is underlying dissatisfaction with the general state of workplace relationships, there is the potential for employer-union

## **GOOD WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS – WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?**

It's not easy to describe, in precise terms, what a 'good' relationship looks like, but there are three features that are common to good relationships:

- open and constructive communication between individuals and groups
- a willingness to be honest about each of the parties' relationship behaviours
- the ability to think about what can be done to improve the relationship for the other party.

Most people will know when the relationships in the workplace are good. When they're not working as well as they could be, the task then becomes putting in place the systems and processes to improve relationships across the workplace.

## **BUILDING BETTER WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS**

Many things contribute to the overall quality of a workplace relationship – people's personal attributes, beliefs and attitudes; the style of management in the organisation; the approach and attitude of the union; workplace structures; work pressure and stress; and how people communicate.

The first step towards building better workplace relationships is often just to be aware of the importance of relationships and to understand what makes one work well. This also means each of the parties – employers, staff and the union – must recognise and agree that tolerating poor relationships is costly and disruptive to business operations, staff wellbeing and the union's effectiveness. Ignoring poor workplace relationships isn't good for the organisation, or the people working within it.

The second step requires you to assess the current state of your workplace relationships,



relations to be more difficult and tension-filled. If you're experiencing these issues, it may be the symptom of a deeper and more pervasive problem with relationships across the organisation.

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so you know where you need to improve and what you need to work on. We've found a good approach to this:

1. Organise a meeting between leaders of the organisation and the union to discuss and define what partnership means.
2. Agree to carry out an assessment of the current state of workplace relationships.
3. Agree what will happen next and set up a formal partnership project group, representative of all the parties, to move things forward.

Having an independent party facilitate these steps usually helps to progress things, especially at the beginning. A Partnership Resource Centre Associate may be able to work with you and help you get started.

### **ASSESSING YOUR CURRENT WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS**

If you're interested in adopting a partnership approach to relationships, you'll need to assess the state of the relationships in your organisation, as they are right now.

Like others who have done this, you might find there are gaps between what employers, the union and the staff believe the other thinks about them. For example, managers might think that staff have open access to them and are free to raise issues, but the staff might think that this isn't the reality, or it only happens for trivial matters. Unions might think that they are in touch with their members, but the members may believe that the union doesn't really understand their needs and has its own agenda. Clear differences in how all the parties see the relationships between them usually suggest the relationship needs to be improved. Knowing exactly what areas of the relationship need attention will also allow you to focus your

improvement efforts and monitor what's going on over time. Expect to have to spend time together in both formal and informal discussions to better understand your existing relationship and agree on the sort of relationship you desire – what works, what doesn't and what you want to see changed.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP DILEMMA**

Often it can be difficult to see how an employer and the union can uncover mutual interests in the midst of what appear to be very obvious differences. And how do you work together in the future when you have such a poor experience of doing so in the past?

The way to deal with this dilemma is to talk openly and honestly with each other about your past experiences and how you see the relationship working differently in the future. Once you have a shared vision of your future relationship, you can each decide what you can do to make it a reality.

The Workplace Partnerships: Diagnostic Toolkit has checklists you can use to assess the state of your workplace relationships. These checklists can assist you to collect the opinions of managers, staff and the union within your workplace, but it's a good idea to get help to carry out the assessment from an independent party, like the Partnership Resource Centre.

### **SUCCESS – WHAT SHOULD YOU AIM FOR?**

Good workplace relationships, in isolation, won't ensure your organisation is successful, but it's difficult to achieve success if you have poor ones. With partnership, the aim is that your organisation's workplace relationships work alongside effective leadership, good communication and motivated staff, to respond to the challenges you face in your market environment.

## 👉 Did You Know?

Evidence shows that effective and representative participation – where employees and their unions are involved in the decisions that affect them and the business – delivers better results than either conventional collective bargaining, or union-free human resource management.

A 2001 study of large manufacturing firms found that unionisation, combined with innovative work practices like partnership, delivered higher levels of productivity growth (20 percent) than other approaches.

*Source: How to Compete: The Impact of Workplace Practices and Information Technology on Productivity, Black, S E and L M Lynch (2001).*

## 👉 Find out more

- **What do unions do?** Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, Basic Books
- **How to Compete: The Impact of Workplace Practices and Information Technology on Productivity.** Sandra Black & Lisa Lynch, Review of Economics and Statistics
- **Speaking Up! Voice, Industrial Democracy and Organisational Performance.** David Coats  
[www.theworkfoundation.com](http://www.theworkfoundation.com)

The Partnership Resource Centre's case studies on the partnership experiences of Asure NZ, Fisher & Paykel, and Winstone Pulp are available on our website or you can contact us for copies.

## 👉 Things to think about

Before you move on, here are some things to think about:

1. Are all the parties in your organisation ready to openly and honestly examine workplace relationships?
2. What are relationships currently like across your workplace?
3. What is the current state of the employer-union relationship in your organisation?
4. Does your organisation accept that there are diverse interests in the workplace and that employees need to have a voice?

## 👉 Moving forward

- Read the other Getting Past Go materials to learn more about partnership.
- Start talking together. Create opportunities for union representatives, managers and staff to meet and discuss matters of mutual interest.
- Talk with the Partnership Resource Centre and find out how they can help and support you to move towards partnership.
- Take a look at the **Workplace Partnerships: Diagnostic Toolkit**. It can guide you through the things to think about in a more structured way and help you assess your existing workplace relationships.

## PARTNERSHIP RESOURCE CENTRE

The Partnership Resource Centre provides advice on workplace partnership projects. The Centre has a team of independent associates who have extensive knowledge and experience in industrial relations and organisational development. Our Associates work alongside employers, unions and staff and help them develop constructive workplace partnerships, improve partnership practices, or work through particular problems. Contact us to find out more about partnership and what we can do to help you.

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w [www.dol.govt.nz/prc](http://www.dol.govt.nz/prc)