

Chapter 4

'Waiting for heaven' or 'fearing a new hell': trade union opinions on the introduction of team-working in a food processing company

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1. Introduction

Working in autonomous teams is a contested topic, both in society and academia. Teamwork advocates extol its benefits, with a whole body of literature viewing autonomous teams as beneficial for both employee well-being and company performance (Delarue *et al.* 2008; Pot and Koningsveld 2009). More concretely, autonomous teams give employees greater job discretion (Gallie *et al.* 2012), thereby decreasing the risk of job-related stress. This in turn leads to fewer mental health problems such as burn-out (Häusser *et al.* 2010), fewer physical health problems such as high blood pressure (Clays *et al.* 2007) and improved individual performance (Pflanz and Ogle 2006), commitment (Mathieu and Farr 1991) and motivation (Brough *et al.* 2013). Because employees in healthy and motivating jobs are able to work longer as well as meeting increasing organisational demands, autonomous teams might be part of the solution for simultaneously boosting an organisation's performance and employee well-being.

In the advocate's view, both parties are or should be happy with this win-win situation. Completely at odds with this utopian view is the dystopian view, as exemplified by the following quote:

'The central argument put forward in many of the critical studies is that teamwork, while apparently empowering employees, generates new forms of control which assist management in extracting labour from employees via work intensification... Critical accounts almost invariably make employee experience of teamwork absolutely central to their analyses and explicitly question the unitarist assumption that positive employee experiences and improved organisational performance are necessarily natural partners.' (Harley 2001: 725)

Operating in this contested terrain can be difficult, especially for employee representatives. Whom are they to believe: the advocates promising heaven, or the antagonists fearing a new hell? While a few radical ideologists may be convinced that the world is either black or white, most people are more comfortable with a shade of grey. Employee representatives are therefore unlikely to blindly follow either the utopian gospel or the dystopian view, although such images will influence their views of what teamwork means or will mean for those they represent.

Against this background, we investigate the views of two Flemish unions in a concrete case: a program to implement autonomous teams in the Belgian subsidiary of a French multinational. Before going into it, we discuss possible consequences of team-working for employees. As background to the case, we then present certain features Belgium's employment relations system. The next sections look respectively at the methodology and the case itself. We conclude in the conventional way by discussing our findings.

2. Team member interests and experiences

There is an extensive literature on team-working in general and autonomous teams in particular. The latter have been portrayed as the acme of direct employee participation: team members themselves are meant to take decisions on how their work is to be performed. This is traditionally portrayed against the background of a 'command-and-control' model, where employees merely have to follow orders from their superiors. The command-and-control model has been criticized for humanistic and economic reasons. It was seen as dehumanizing and leading to alienation, likely to result in employee apathy towards their production tasks. This in turn leads to the economic dimension: disinterested employees are unlikely to make quality products and/or work effectively and efficiently. In addition to this effect on an employee's psyche and consequently his behaviour, it is generally impossible to foresee all working contingencies and thus to prescribe in detail what employees are supposed to do. Trying to do so may lead to considerable losses, as military commanders found out at least as early as the nineteenth century. In the course of the twentieth century this insight was repeatedly rediscovered and extended. Significantly, socio-technical theorists developed insights into the importance of how teams are embedded in organisational structures. Although it is widely acknowl-

edged that teams do not necessarily function smoothly, a consensus seems to have developed in managerial literature that team-working is good for people and organisations.

For employees participating in team-working, the picture is a more complex. Whilst a fair degree of job discretion is in most cases welcomed, other aspects give reason for concern. Implementing team-working tends to have consequences for such aspects as job content, employee control, work intensity, required competencies and thus additional training and/or instruction, career possibilities, inter-personal and power relations, and payment. Employee representatives may try to influence these aspects. In addition, headcount may well be at stake, especially when autonomous teams are implemented as part of a larger change project to boost an organisation's performance. If these teams increase performance as intended, such productivity gains may lead to redundancies. In that case, 'fewer but better jobs' may be the motto. Managers often use the argument that performance needs to go up to legitimate proposed changes, including implementing team-working. An organisation's survival may be claimed to be at stake if performance does not exceed a certain threshold level, thereby creating pressure on employee representatives to agree with organisational changes. Somewhat paradoxically, unions may even fear for their survival if teams are successful. Relatively autonomous team members working to pursue their employer's goals may lead to their normative identification with that employer, thereby turning their backs on unions. Teamwork may then even be seen as a substitute for unions (Pulignano 2002; Bryson 2004).

Yet another issue are the possibilities to influence managerial decision-making. In general, trade unions behave in two ways when confronted with organisational changes (Huzzard *et al.* 2004). Unions opposed to the change will see themselves and the employers as two boxers in the ring, behaving accordingly when employers plan to introduce autonomous teamwork. They might for instance hit out against the plan or persuade employees with descriptions of what will go wrong when the change is implemented. By contrast, unions in favour of the change will put themselves in a dancing arena with the employer, participating in internal meetings and discussing common interests. Irrespective of basic attitudes towards cooperation, timing matters as well. When employee representatives are involved early on in the decision-making process, their potential to mould the change process is much greater than when they are involved later on and/or confronted with *faits accomplis*.

To summarise, in this study we are interested in examining whether trade union representatives follow the believers or opponents of team-working. Valid arguments are to be found in the literature for both believers and opponents. This study looks at why union representatives in a Belgian case organisation chose to oppose or support the implementation of team-working in a specific organisation. Did they follow the utopian or dystopian view on team-working?

3. Employment relations in Belgium

The Belgian employment relations system is rooted in the Social Pact of 1944, in which employer organisations and trade unions recognised each other and specified both the way of bargaining and the main topics for discussion. The Belgian employment relations system is characterised by a three-level collective bargaining system: company, sectoral and inter-sectoral. Agreements at lower levels are tied to agreements at higher levels. At each level employer organisations and trade unions are represented. Every two years a national-level agreement on wages and working conditions is established between trade unions, employer organisations and the government. This agreement forms the basis for agreements at sectoral and company level. Moreover, a high number of Belgian employees (some 55 percent) belong to a trade union. One important explanation for this is the strong institutional embeddedness of trade unions in Belgium. Trade unions are for instance involved in providing unemployment benefits under the so-called Ghent system (Van Rie *et al.* 2011).

Belgium has three main unions: the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV), the General Federation of Belgian Labour (ABVV) and the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (ACLVB). Every four years a nationwide social election is held for works councils and workplace health and safety councils. In 2016, ACV was the largest trade union with about 52% of votes, followed by ABVV with 36% and ACLVB with 12% (Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue 2016). Election results have been stable over time.

Most of the time, the three unions work together. However, different historical roots lead to them having differing explanations and interpretations of societal and economic problems, as seen in the following short historical overview. All Belgian unions are rooted in the weaving and

spinning unions which developed in 1857. These unions were shaped as pluralist and politically neutral unions. However, in 1865 members of the weaving union developed a socialist-inspired reading club. In the following years, the union became a member of the First International and the Flemish Socialist Labour Party. ABVV thus has its roots in this socialist weaving union. As a result of this move towards socialism, liberal and Christian members of the weaving union established a new union: the anti-socialist cotton processing union (what is now the ACV). After a while, Christian members took the lead in this new union, prompting liberal members to leave the union in the 1880s and found the liberal workers' protection union (what is now the ACLVB). We thus see that the three representative unions were originally established in the 19th century due to ideological differences between union representatives.

Hyman (2001) defines three typical union identities. The first is an anti-capitalist or class identity, under which the unions concerned use socio-political mobilisation to create militancy around class interests. The second sees unions as an instrument for increasing social integration and introduces a more societal identity. The third argues that unions should only represent occupational interests during collective bargaining periods. Hyman (2001) relates these three typical identities to historical developments embedded in different national and regional contexts. This study relates these identities to differences between various national unions. In Belgium all three unions are strongly embedded in institutions and are therefore to be positioned between the class and societal identity form. However, while the first form is more related to socialist trade unions (like the ABVV), the second form is more related to Christian-inspired unions (like ACV). The liberal ACLVB can be positioned between the ACV and the ABVV.

4. Belgian trade unions and change programs

Workplace innovation was long ignored by Belgian trade unions. This relates back to the Social Pact of 1944, which states that employees should not be involved in the way work is organised in their company. Hence, unions were for long just focused on such issues as employment contracts and wages. In 2015, at the annual conference of the European Workplace Innovation Network, a Flemish trade unionist said for instance: 'How production is organised was for long out of our focus' (EUWIN 2015). The implementation of autonomous teams thus did not belong to the core

business of Belgian trade unions. This has however changed in recent years, and an increasing number of trade unionist are now being confronted with workplace innovation programs such as autonomous teamwork. Between 2011 and 2014, four percent more organisations have been restructured in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Notebaert 2016).

5. Features of the investigated company and the data collection process

Located in the Flemish part of Belgium, the company studied is a Belgian subsidiary of a French food-processing multinational with a worldwide workforce of about 100,000 employees, 400 of whom are employed in the Flemish subsidiary. In 2008, the subsidiary started a change program intended to implement autonomous teams in its production plant. The program is scheduled to finish in 2020.

We chose this food-processing company after observing that two of the representative unions in the subsidiary behaved differently with regard to the proposed team-based change program. In interviews with five union representatives we wanted to find out (1) the unions' views on the potential benefits of the team-based change program, and (2) the reasons why the unions chose to adopt different roles during the change program. The research team interviewed the national trade union officials respectively responsible for workplace innovation practices within the Christian and the socialist unions (i.e. ACV and ABVV) in January and February 2016. In the same period three union representatives – two from the ACV and one from the ABVV – from the subsidiary itself were interviewed.

A draft version of this chapter was sent to the union interviewees in June 2016. The union representatives made a number of comments on this preliminary version, which were then included in this final version.

6. Findings

In the next sections we outline the unions' views on the potential benefits of the team-based change program as well as the union motivation to support or oppose the change program.

6.1 Unions views on the potential benefits of the team-based change program

The unions disagreed on whether the change program had the potential to increase (1) the quality of working life, and (2) the organisation's performance. First, the Christian union representatives argued that the program led to an increase in the quality of working life, stating that the team-based change program created multidisciplinary production teams in which employees were more engaged, as they were required to fulfil more demanding and diverse tasks. Employees are no longer assigned to just one or a few production tasks but to a more complete task. Similarly, job control increased: for instance, when a machine was not functioning properly, employees were supposed to repair it. Christian union representatives argued that the combination of more demanding work and higher job control led to more committed workers with a higher quality of working life. Their argument is exemplified by the following quote:

'We now work differently. In the past, we had just one production line. If something went wrong, we just called a technician. (...) In the past we had one specific task. (...) They [the managers] wanted to change that structure (...) [so] that people [employees] could do more. When they [the employees] know how to operate different machines, they can do more. (...) The idea is for instance that an operator will get out his screwdriver and tighten a reflector. These are just small things. People [employees] can do more than before.'
(Union representative)

For the Christian union, the change to autonomous teams was backed by two important aspects: a training program and a revamped pay scale. On the one hand, the training program gave employees competences that helped them cope with increased demands from their more diverse tasks, while at the same time helping them reduce the risk of stress from feeling incapable of performing a range of production tasks. An essential side note for the Christian union is that employees were not obliged to follow the training programs. On the other hand, a revamped pay scale was implemented which took account of the new team-based approach. The Christian union representatives argued that before the change program employees had few possibilities to earn more. With the introduction of the new pay scale employees could achieve higher wages by learning more tasks. The following two quotes illustrate this:

'[during the financial crisis] (...) there was a surplus capacity of employees. And we made good use of this by internal training. At that time, we had the opportunity to have people work in pairs on one machine.' (Union representative)

'Our pay scale was at its peak. 80 percent of workers were on the top scale and could not grow anymore. Not even financially. And people were asking questions: 'I've had my appraisal, what now?' (...) If a new way of working is introduced, and work is restructured, this has to be related to a revamped pay scale.' (Union representative)

The socialist union representatives argued that the proposed program could lead to a deterioration in the quality of working life. Although the representatives acknowledged the positive aspects of autonomous teamwork, they argued that the change towards autonomous teams was driven by management's cost-cutting objectives, to be achieved through rationalising production. An important aspect of this was to reduce the number of employees to an understaffed level. One representative argued that they were also against the change because such understaffing would lead to higher workloads and therefore increased work stress for the remaining employees. The following quote underlines this argument:

'I do not say that autonomous teamwork has no positive effects. But, when you have to do everything [tasks] with less people [employees], work gets more stressful. We have nothing against the system [of team-working], but you should also be adequately staffed to do work in a workable way. (...) They [the managers] should not only look at annual profits but also at people [employees].' (Union representative)

The socialist union did not, in contrast to the Christian union, believe that management would create decent training programs to accompany the team-based intervention program, leading to higher stress for employees, as they would not all have the competences to perform their new tasks. The socialist union feared that: (1) older employees who were satisfied with their work and did not feel any necessity for training would be fired or side-tracked; and (2) management would only recruit high-skilled employees because such employees would need no further training. Such a selection strategy might however encourage a segmented labour market in which the subsidiary only worked with high-skilled employees, with low-skilled employees squeezed out. Their argument is underlined by the following two quotes:

'We have always said, "beware, this is a lie [of the management]". (...) So much attention to training, while I (...) always heard that there was no time for that. All of a sudden, the same management has to provide an education and training system (...). How is that possible from one day to another, such a metamorphosis in a company? (...) We just couldn't believe it.' (Union representative)

'In itself, it is a positive story. Training and coaching. You cannot deny that. But (...) what does it mean? What are the motives? It is important to make sure that everyone has sufficient chances. (...) You will need highly-educated workers here (...). And that we find a fundamental (...) aspect to be highly sceptical. (...) There must be a place for everyone in the production plant.' (Union representative)

Second, the Christian union representatives argued that the subsidiary's economic performance was important because European restructuring was forthcoming. They supported the change program because it could increase the subsidiary's performance: flexibility, quality, innovativeness and productivity. The subsidiary would therefore, in their view, be more protected against such a European restructuring program, planned by European headquarters. In other words, the job security of employees in the subsidiary was of prime importance for the trade union. Their argument is exemplified by the following quote:

'It was an economic crisis (...) so we had to be ready (...) to be the best in the class. (...) A number of factories would be closing and others would be greatly downsized. We now see that many additional volumes are coming our way [to the subsidiary]. So, the group [multinational] has decided to fully invest in our subsidiary. Within the group [multinational], they also say that because we have good training, we are ready for new products and new volumes. For us, this is the proof of the pudding. (...) We are glad we got here.' (Union representative)

The socialist union representatives did not follow the view of their Christian union counterparts, arguing that it is risky for trade union representatives to think like managers, because one can never be sure which criteria management will use to close a subsidiary or to keep one open. The following quote illustrates this:

‘They [management] wanted to have a very efficient company. (...) But you never have any real job security. (...). If they take a decision at headquarters, they always take a broader view. And you never know whether you fit in it or not. Even when you’re very efficient and profitable. (...) We must take care when following such [management] thinking. (...) We must (...) view the changes from a worker’s role. Is it doable? Is it workable? (...) Because you never have job security.’ (Union representative)

Table 1 summarises the unions’ views on the benefits and disadvantages of the change program. We see that the Christian trade union (ACV) representatives followed the utopian view on teamwork, stating that the implementation of team-working leads to less job stress for employees, jobs with higher demands and greater control, more training opportunities and a revamped and better pay scale. In their view, teamwork benefits both the subsidiary’s employees and its performance, increasing production flexibility, quality, innovativeness and productivity. This in turn was seen as protection against European restructuring, creating greater job security for subsidiary employees. By contrast, the socialist trade union (ABVV) representatives followed the dystopian view on teamwork. In their view, employees had a lower quality of working life, while the subsidiary’s performance was not deemed that important. In particular, the ABVV representatives stated that the implementation of teamwork created higher workloads, more job stress, acute understaffing, and required

Table 1 Union views on the potential benefits of team-working

Consequences of team-working	View of ABVV	View of ACV
For employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Higher workload – More job stress – Obligation to follow training programs – Acute understaffing – Employers hire mostly high-skilled employees. Fewer jobs for low-skilled employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increased employee commitment through greater job control and higher demands – Less job stress – Increased training opportunities – Adapted and better pay scale
For the subsidiary’s performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Unclear, as criteria keep changing (which criteria will be used by managers to close a subsidiary in any European restructuring program) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increase in flexibility, quality, innovativeness and productivity – Better positioned against European restructuring, higher job security

training courses for employees. Moreover, jobs remained insecure. In summary, the representatives of the two unions seemed to have completely different views on the benefits and disadvantages of teamwork. The following section looks at union motivations for these different views.

6.2 Union motivations for these differing views on team-working

The union representatives gave two main reasons why their unions had differing views on the outcomes of the change program for the subsidiary's employees and performance. First, the union representatives stressed the importance of the unions' historical roots, as seen by the following two quotes:

'ABVV [socialist union] has more historical roots in (...) class struggle and they see it as less of their responsibility to think along with an employer. And that's just a historical difference. (...) We, instead, are grateful when an employer creates jobs. (...) In our view, team-working programs will come anyway. You'd better make the best out of it, influencing them instead of standing on the side-line while they're being implemented (...) The most important thing (...) is to create a win-win situation. What is important for the employer and what is important for the employee. I think we have reached that situation.' (Union representative)

'ACV [Christian union] often goes more along with change. Historically, we [socialist trade union] are more combative against employers.' (Union representative)

A second reason mentioned was the involvement of the unions in the development of the team-working program. Union representatives agreed on the following aspects of implementation: (1) the employer came up with the idea of implementing teams, (2) meetings with the unions were held by management to inform them about the change, (3) separate meetings on this topic as well as follow-up meetings were held, and (4) meetings to discuss the upcoming changes were officially held with the social partners. The unions and management were invited to sign an agreed document on what the program involved after the first meetings.

The unions disagreed however on certain crucial aspects, leading to different views on the program's consequences. A representative of the socialist union stressed that the trade unions were only informed about the change after the most important decisions had been taken. The consequence was that the union could only suggest minor changes, as no major changes were possible. Yet in the view of the interviewee the latter was crucial for gaining union support for the change program. As the employer only involved the union to a minor degree, the socialist union was against the program and refused to sign the document.

The Christian union representatives confirmed that the unions were involved in shaping the content of the team-working program too late. They however stressed that the unions had still been able to change certain aspects of the program: the unions were not merely informed about the change but could also influence the content. Moreover, the employer had in their view listened to the unions and integrated some of their demands. For instance, training programs had for long been requested by the unions, and were now implemented as a part of the program. The representatives also argued that the Christian union supported the program because this allowed them to influence the content of the program and let them know what the employer planned to do. These were the main reasons why the ACV representatives signed the document on the proposed content of the change program. The following quotes reflect the views of representatives of both unions:

'We [ABVV] are slightly more conflictual than the ACV [Christian union]. That's the way things are. It is for sure an important aspect. However, it's a nuanced story. (..) If you want to do something together (...) you also have to negotiate together. As equal partners. Otherwise, you cannot call it a joint project. The overall picture was already set by the employer and we just added colour to it.' (Union representative)

'A commission was set up to take care of the change program. As union officials, you can do two things. You support or you don't support the program. But if you don't support it, you have to know that management will decide everything and you will have no control. (...) You will also not encounter anything unexpected. I thought that was important, to know where the employer aimed to go.' (Union representative)

7. Discussion

The implementation of autonomous teams in organisations is a contested topic. Views differ from it benefiting employees and employers alike, to a focus on the disadvantages for employees and/or employers. This variety of views is also reflected in the opinions of union representatives. When organisations decide to implement team-working, unionists have to decide what position to take regarding the pros and cons of the proposed changes. Representatives have to decide whether they oppose, constructively influence or just accept moves towards team-working within their organisation. This is evidently no easy process, as this study shows. Based on a case study in a food-processing company, it concluded that the variety of views on teamwork found in academic papers and policy papers is reflected in the views of union representatives. Both benefits and disadvantages for the quality of working life or a company's performance are mentioned by the interviewed union representatives. For instance, while some representatives argued that team-working reduced stress for employees, others stated the opposite.

When asked about the motivations for the different union views on the implementation of team-working, the representatives explained that the different beliefs mainly stemmed from the unions' historical roots as well as from the extent of union involvement in implementation. First, the historical roots explained why one union was more critical of the chances offered: it had always been more combative than the other union, which preferred to look for a win-win situation for both employees as employers. Second, union representatives clearly argued that the involvement of union representatives in the early stages of a team-based work program was important. Union representations needed to have the opportunity to bring in constructive suggestions right from the start. Interestingly, views on whether unions were involved early enough seemed to depend on a union's historical roots, with representatives of the one union saying that union involvement was 'too late', while the others adopted a 'better late than never' attitude.

7.1 Research implications of study findings

We see four main future research directions. First, this study only interviewed union representatives working within the same institutional context. The main benefit of this is that the union representatives studied

came from the same institutional field, i.e. differences between union views could not therefore be explained by institutional differences. Hyman (2001) shows that union identities differ between countries. In this study, we looked at how union identity differs within a country. However, institutional differences between countries may also lead to different union identities, in turn leading to differing union views on teamwork programs. Although we acknowledge that there are already studies on this topic (see for instance: Pulignano 2002), research on union representatives' views on the relationship between teamwork and the quality of working life should be enhanced. Studies could for instance compare research findings in a specific country with our single-country findings. Studies can also compare union representative views in different countries. Because of differences in the institutional context, it may be that in some countries most unions have a dystopian view of team-working programs, while in others a utopian view dominates.

Second, studies could look deeper into the factor of unions' historical roots (and ideological orientations). We suggest that more studies look into whether workers joined a union because of their societal view or whether they adopted a specific societal view on joining a union. Workers' views on team-working may differ between those who gained a specific societal view from their union and those holding views independent of their union.

Third, this study examined the views of union representatives on a team-working program in a local subsidiary. More research is needed on social bargaining levels other than the local company level when studying team-working. We outline two future pathways: (1) The influence of the central and sectoral social bargaining levels on the views of local representatives was not looked at. These views may however be influenced by the team-working views of sectoral, national, European and international union representatives. Future studies could look at how different levels influence representatives' views. (2) The introduction of team-working programs may be triggered at levels other than the local company level. Social bargaining at these higher levels may influence the motivation of union representatives to support the introduction of team-working.

Fourth, this study looked solely at one organisation within the Flemish region in Belgium. Five union representatives were interviewed. The findings could be deepened by interviewing a larger number of representatives or increasing the number of organisations studied. It would be good to know whether the findings also hold true in other

organisations or when a larger number of representatives are interviewed. However, the uniqueness of the case at hand was the fact that representatives from two different unions in the same company were interviewed about the same program, allowing the motivation for different views on team-working to be investigated and compared in detail.

7.2 Policy implications of study findings

We see three main policy implications. First, this study found that unions do not necessarily agree on whether the team-working is beneficial or harmful for employees and organisations. One main reason for this was that the unions disagreed over whether they had been sufficiently involved and had had adequate time to suggest changes to the program. We suggest that trade union practitioners look into whether it is possible to create a list of requirements regarding union involvement in the introduction of team-working. What is a minimum standard of union participation? At what stage should employers have to involve trade unions? What factors lead to union involvement being considered high, medium or low? What are best and worst practices regarding union participation in such programs?

Second, the study findings suggest that employers wanting to avoid problems when introducing team-working should involve unions in its implementation. It is in practice not yet that clear how employers should do this. We suggest that employers and employer associations look into strategies for involving unions in such programs. These could include the creation of criteria and guidelines.

Third, unions need more knowledge on the benefits and disadvantages of team-working, potentially leading to a harmonised union vision on the topic. Such a vision and knowledge would help local union representatives make a conscious decision on whether to oppose or support such a program in their organisation. This could be done by means of a checklist of the relevant benefits, disadvantages, do's and don'ts of team-working programs, helping local union representatives to easily identify their pitfalls and potential strengths.

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