

AN APPROACH TO THE ROLE OF A PERSONNEL OFFICER

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Much discussion has taken place in the country on the role and status of a personnel officer in industry. The various terms: labour officer, labour welfare officer, or welfare officer become synonymous with the term personnel officer because a close analysis of the duties of the two reveals that all are concerned with the "human engineering" aspect of the industry. They indicate the presence of a "human specialist" in industry. A welfare officer becomes a legal need in a factory which ordinarily employs five hundred or more workers under the Factories Act 1948.

The need for a personnel officer in industry is based chiefly on two assumptions. First, the personnel officer with his knowledge of 'human engineering' will help in obtaining good relations between workers and employers supervisors and fellow workers, which is essential for establishing a willing collaboration from, and satisfaction for, all concerned. Secondly, such a willing collaboration will lead to a higher production which will fetch higher dividends to the industry. Hence the necessity of a personnel officer in industry is realised by employers or management in the quest of higher production. The writer assumes that the expenses of the presence of a personnel officer will be borne by the employers of the industry because they are the ultimate gainers from the higher production.

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The role of a personnel officer becomes harder owing to the fact that he has to deal with human beings. Man is a psychological creature and apt to react to any change in the environment. Man as a factor of production differs from the machine because he has sentiments and feelings and any change ought to be viewed by the man, he reacts to the changes and gives definite responses. On the other hand, the machine does not take notice of any change unless and until it is intimately related with its working procedure. The personnel officer as a specialist in the field has to recommend such changes, whose reactions on man are likely to stimulate positive responses for higher production.

The duties and functions of a personnel officer vary widely from industry to industry. Each industry defines his duties and responsibilities to satisfy its own needs and whims. A close analysis of the various duties and functions of different personnel officers working at varied industrial situations reveals that they are likely to fall under three heads: 1. a spokesman of the workers; 2. a third-party agency between management and

workers; and 3. a part of the management executives. This categorization is not fragmented into water-tight compartments and at times they may seem overlapping. But still they help us to see the integrated personality of the personnel officer in parts and then as a whole. In any industrial concern the personnel officer is likely to be functioning as any one of these or a combination of two or all.

(1) *A Spokesman of Workers.*—In many industrial situations the personnel officer is supposed to be the spokesman of workers and advocates their cases before management. He is to be on the guard that the workers' attitudes and their demands are relayed to the ears of management who frame policies. In many cases, in the event of any grievance before the management the personnel officer argues from the workers' angle in order to avoid the changes of a partial decision. The inscription of such a role to the personnel officer is stipulated by two basic ideas: (a) the management who is busy in framing policies regarding the running of industry is likely to be more interested in the material

aspects of production. In quest of higher production management may adopt lopsided policy which may adversely affect the workers. Hence the personnel officer as a human specialist is to watch such policies and advise accordingly so that shortcomings may be overcome in time. He is to serve as a 'safety-valve' for the management. (b) In the case of any intricate grievance the worker may not be able to represent his case rightly. Besides that management may also be likely to curve the decision according to its own convenience. On either case justice is denied to the aggrieved party which may prove suicidal to the better understanding between the two parties. In order to eliminate the chances of any such happenings, the personnel officer of the factory is supposed to argue the case of the worker and screen all the facts of the case before management, so that a just and human redressing to the problem may be effected.

Such a role of a personnel officer in any industry assumes the non-existence of any trade union of the workers. The personnel officer tries to fill the vacuum created by the absence of the trade union. The shrewd management encourages such a role so that trade unionism in that industry may not grow rapidly. The attempt is to shift the faith of the workers from the trade unions and store it with the personnel officer who is a man of the management. The success of such a role will depend on so many counter-reacting factors and the extent to which the personnel officer can play his role effectively.

In an industry where there is already a trade union in effect the success of the role is questionable. The trade union and the personnel officer are put in a juxta-position, the latter posing many of the functions for the former. The trade union envisages the personnel officer as the biggest hurdle in its way and may try to turn every stone to knock him..

out of the scene. The two come in direct collision with each other. Under such a pretext the relationship between management and workers is put at stake and may inflame at any opportune moment.

Recent industrial developments hardly recommend such a role of the personnel officer. The role may fetch some dividends in the near future but in the long run the outlook is grim. The trade union is inevitable for any industry which will flourish sooner or later. Hence it is wise to have all the inevitables and then frame the structure of harmonious relations between the parties.

(2) *A 'Third Party Agency' between Management and Workers.*—In some industries the personnel officer bridges the gulf between management and worker and on this plank both the parties come to dissolve their mutual differences and shake hands. The personnel officer plays at once the role of a conciliator, mediator and arbitrator to bring the disputants to a settlement. In order to carry out his role fruitfully he has to win the confidence of both the parties. Besides that throughout he has to illustrate an attitude of indifference towards the interests of various parties.

In practice this role of the personnel officer is modified by the management to keep the cake in its own grip. The personnel officer remains an advisory body to the management. He is to aid the management by his expert advice, the acceptance of which depends upon the intelligence of management. In other words, the personnel officer has to sell his ideas to management depending on the merit of the case. Such a role of the personnel officer is accentuated by the management chiefly on three assumptions: (a) the personnel officer as a third party may be in a better position to win the confidence of the workers. In doing so, he can contribute positively towards harmonious relationship

between the workers and the management; (b) even as a third party he remains the man of the management and so the management can successfully carry out its policies with the cooperation of the workers through the personnel officer; and (c) to avoid the conflict between the personnel officer and the line management persons of the organization, the existence of which may hit hard upon the rate of production by the line authorities.

The personnel officer is sometimes put in a very precarious position while playing such a role in any industry. He is always exposed to delicacies of two sorts: (a) he has strictly to stick to the policies framed by management which is always suspected and critically viewed by workers. Any deviation by him from the basic policy may be suspected as a revolt by management and may be a challenge to his existence in industry; and (b) on the other hand while advocating the policies of management he may be disappointed to accumulate the confidence of workers and thus making his role a marplot.

In a factory where a trade union is in existence his role becomes more stiff. He has to always remain alert that he does not share any of the functions of the workers' organization while discharging his responsibilities. If any misunderstanding between him and the trade union is reared, he may become an object of contempt for the other party. The trade union may suspect him as its rival and may put all possible hurdles to make his functions untenable. In such a situation the personnel officer may become impotent to carry out few of his functions.

Generally advisory functions of a personnel officer are encouraged by the workers' organization. First, the trade unions have little suspicion about his intentions because his job is advisory. Secondly, they find an easy access to management's mind through him. He is considered as a skilled messenger between management and workers.

The success of such a role by the personnel officer depends much upon the attitude, management possesses towards it. It is greatly influenced by the duties and functions imputed to him and the manner in which he is allowed to carry them out. He should be empowered with sufficient flexibility in his jurisdiction to deal with other parties. In its absence the personnel officer may become a simple carrier of ideas from one party to the other. Above all, management support him by reposing confidence in him so that his capacity in the organization may not be belittled.

(3) *A Part of the Management Executives.*—A personnel officer is intimately associated with management executives of many industries. He shares the responsibility of framing personnel policies of industry and is made responsible for its execution and administration. He is armoured with proper authority by management to execute its policies. He is considered as a part and parcel of the management executive body responsible for the personnel field, the extent of which is defined by the top management people. All the problems of his jurisdiction is referred to him and he has the authority to deal with them for good. In every situation he represents management and his every action is considered as the action of the management.

The management of an industry who is always anxious to steer a scientific approach to the problems arising in industry institute specialised bodies with proper skill and authority to dispose of them. This role of the personnel officer is stimulated because of the following advantages: (a) the man who frames the policy possesses a better insight of its details and hence he can execute and administer the same most effectively. Besides that, his experience of execution and administration contributes towards framing of an improved policy; (b) in case the workers

and the trade unions deny to co-operate with him, his utility in the industry is put to jeopardy. The management may not like to risk his skill in that manner. (c) the skill and training of the personnel officer can be used by management to an appreciable degree of effectiveness at many spots, such as grievance handling, collective bargaining, running of various joint committees, etc.; and (d) over and above, the onus of looking after the dynamic human needs, such as those of canteen, water, latrines and urinals, etc., can be attributed to him. In his respect he can be as good as a line man.

With the status of an executive the personnel officer feels himself much secure than in any other situation. This encourages him to take risks and initiate new plans for the betterment of industry. He deals with workers and trade unions with authority and confidence. He remains aware of his distinctly defined duties and functions for which he is likely to be alone responsible to management. He has little opportunity to shift it to somebody else.

Besides that the trade union and the workers also get a clear-cut understanding of the role of the personnel officer. There remains little scope to suspect his intentions which are likely to be those of management. He is never considered as a rival of the workers' organization. The workers also have a confidence and zeal to discuss the problems with him for a final package.

While wrapped up in such a role in industry, the personnel officer is likely to gain little confidence from the workers which is against the basic principles of human relations. He

can no longer counsel the workers and his every action be adjudged critically and unsympathetically. Many a time he may be evaluated as one of the spear-heads of management to penetrate through the workers' interests. Amidst such environment the personnel officer may sometimes find it hard to proceed on the principles of human relations in order to bring his action into effect.

The success of such a role of the personnel officer depends much upon his own behaviour. He has to count much upon the impressions which he creates on the workers by his just and considerate actions. To a considerable extent he has to rely on the co-operation extended by the line men in executing his orders. A great deal depends upon the attitude that management adopts towards his actions.

The Roles in Practice.—As already mentioned above, the ambit of the actions of a personnel officer is circumscribed by each and every industry in its own manner to fit into its own situation. There are many factors which react together to shape the role of a personnel officer. Few of them are given below: (a) the attitude of the management towards the workers and their needs; (b) the economic situation of industry and its returns relative to other industries; (c) existence of a trade union; (d) status of the trade union; (e) the relation between the trade union and the management; (f) legislative frame-works in existence; (g) the nature and extent of human problems arising in the industry; and (h) the composition of the ownership of the industry.