

## Weddels Tomoana: A retrospective study of Workplace Reform

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*The Tomoana meat processing company in Hastings was part of the Weddel group that went into receivership on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1994, resulting in the loss of approximately 1800 jobs. The meat processing industry had been going through a series of restructuring measures since the late 1970's as the result of a sharp decline in sheep numbers and trading difficulties. Weddels implemented a range of what they termed 'Workplace Reform' measures, including adopting International Standards Organisation (ISO) measures, Organisational Safety and Health (OSH) measures and Total Customer Services (TCS) ideals. Retrospective research of Weddels shows that 'workplace reform' did not occur, rather that the reform was something quantifiably different, which may have contributed in its failure to resurrect the struggling business. \**

### INTRODUCTION

This study concerns the workplace initiatives that were introduced at Tomoana (Hastings), one of Weddel New Zealand Limited's five meat processing plants, at a time when the meat industry was experiencing a very difficult trading environment. On 19 August 1994, the Weddel group went into receivership, resulting in the closure of their five plants. Tomoana's closure saw the loss of approximately 1800 jobs.

Prior to its closure, Tomoana was the largest of the five processing plants operated by Weddel, providing around a third of the company's killing capacity for beef, and half of the company's killing capacity for lamb and sheep (Perry, Davidson and Hill, 1995). Over the last three decades and especially since the early 1980s production and markets were declining for the Tomoana plant. In addition to the above there were also problems with quality, performance, and reliability. To counter these problems, Weddel decided in 1991 to embark on a customer oriented approach titled Total Customer Service (TCS).

TCS was largely based around a more dedicated approach to operations management. The workforce was broken into 50 groups, and volunteer committees identified 50 key improvement areas. These groups, and recommendations were supported by the president of the Meat Workers Union (MWU) as well as management. Although the entire workforce was not involved, key members from all areas of the organisation were incorporated into the committees. The intention for workplace reform was good, but as often happens, for reasons that we will discuss further in this paper, reform was not, or could not be carried to its final conclusion at Tomoana.

As the implementation of Total Customer Service proceeded, measures were introduced involving International Standards Organization Certification (ISO), Safety Hazard Teams and a programme known as Towards 2000. The Towards 2000 programme was introduced because costs were not being reduced and production levels were still below expectations. It was a forum set up to air industrial relations issues and promote ways of enhancing profitability to secure the long term viability of Tomoana (Perry 1995). Suggestions were canvassed from employees for cost cutting measures and over 3000 responses were received.

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In May 1993, management announced a series of plant restructuring measures. These included: redundancies in areas that did not yield sufficient savings; a 13% reduction in direct labour costs; a skill-based payment system with a commitment that it would be designed and implemented over the next 12 months; and a team-based working environment. These measures were later to be included in a plant agreement eventually agreed to by the staff after a period of internal staff conflict which saw the union shed president lose his position and the union secretary hold on to his by a slim margin. The team-based working environment was a success in some departments of the plant and not in others. Because of operational and financial constraints the skilled-based payment system was never implemented.

About the same time that Weddells started to implement these measures, a debate was ongoing in New Zealand and overseas, that work practices in some organizations were different from the past. These organisations have tended to be progressive and innovative. In New Zealand and Australia this debate has gone under the banner of workplace reform.

Also at the time of the workplace reform experiments in New Zealand, there was a dearth of research to ascertain what the participants in workplaces where these experiments were being carried out actually thought of the process. While the literature revealed no one best way for organizations to approach change in the 1990s and beyond, what has emerged is a new vision of transformed or high performance work systems. These work systems all appear to have an organisational goal of a quality product and service, a commitment to a highly skilled workforce and a labour/management relationship built on involvement and consultation. At the centre of the argument on workplace reform is the question of whether these goals are achieved.

#### DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKPLACE REFORM

Workplace New Zealand (1992) characterises workplace reform as being about working smarter, and achieving sustainable improvements in productivity and competitiveness. (p3). Eaton and Voos (1992) characterised the 1980's as a decade in experimentation in work organisation, compensation systems and labour/management relations. (p173). Thus a number of theoretical areas come together to offer an opinion on precisely what is Workplace Reform. All point to a distinct shift in the way organizations are or should be operating in an ever changing regional, national and international business environment. (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Lash and Urry, 1989; Mathews 1989, 1994; Frenkel, 1994, Rasmussen and Lamm, 1999, Mealings and Rasmussen 2000.) Harvey (1989) describes the situation,

“A vast literature has indeed emerged, from both left and right ends of the spectrum that tends to depict the world as if it is in the full flood of such a radical break in all these dimensions of socio-economic and political life that none of the old ways of thinking and doing apply anymore. (p.190)

The literature over the last decade and a half involves a debate about 'Scientific Management' and the emergence of post-Fordism. This literature highlights that markets are now demanding a quality product and service and new production systems are needed. (Mathews 1989, 1994; Badham and Mathews, 1989). Critics of this approach Gahan, (1991) and Fields and Bramble (1992) believe these theories are flawed because they do not represent a clear break from the past but are a reinstatement of many of the ideas found in *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (Kerr et al. 1960)

Osterman (1994), argues that insufficient evidence is available to formulate a clear picture of evolving workplace reform, while Katz (1993) is of the opinion that decentralised or local bargaining is the key to informal interactions between management and labour. Katz and Darbishire (2000) found further that managers have a preference for particular reform strategies as a result of influence by national, industry and technological factors. Applebaum

and Batt (1994) believe that for a diffused transformation of American workplaces fundamental changes in labour and capital markets may be required.

Huselid (1995) introduced the concept of high performance workplace practices. This proposition argued that the only way forward to improved performance in the workplace was through a collaborative effort between workers and employers to achieve the most desirable outcomes. While High performance work practices share many of the characteristics of workplace reform, including the use of performance management systems and skill based training, its focus is on supporting company strategy, rather than enacting workplace reform. Ryan (1995) is of the opinion that there is little evidence that the constellation of changes thought to be involved in workplace reform has been pervasive in New Zealand. Enderwick (1994) suggests that there is a real danger that New Zealand companies could embark on the reform path at the same time as downsizing or cost cutting. Critics of workplace change (Parker and Slaughter, 1988) agree with Enderwick's concerns. This case would appear to be poignant example of workplace reform as a means to cost cutting rather than an end in itself.

It is interesting that following the rash of debate that ensued after the restructuring of the 1980's and 1990's, debate is less vigorous and wide spread in the late 1990's and new millennium. This may suggest as the work environment begins to stabilise, that reform becomes less of an issue for both employees and employers. Indeed the debate has focussed more closely on the issues of high performance work practices first mooted by Huselid in 1995.

A search of that literature that impacts on this area result in a number of characteristics that can be considered to define workplace reform.

1. A formulated pay structure, and an agreement that is cemented in the pay structure. This can be negotiated either locally or on an industry wide basis
2. Job redesign with an emphasis on autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups
3. An organisation that has an orientation to improvement of product, employment and service.
4. A pluralistic framework where joint regulation, (by both employer and employees) of the enterprise is envisaged.
5. A move toward training, where that training is placed in a skill-based training environment
6. New management tasks that give workers greater say in planning of day-to-day operations in the areas they work in.

(Deeks, Parker and Ryan, 1994, Enderwick 1992, Perry et al 1995, Rasmussen 1997, Ryan 1994, Walsh 1995, Workplace New Zealand 1992)

These six characteristics are areas of concern not just for the owner/customer relationship but also for the employment relationship in a quality regime, hence the orientation to improvement of all aspects of the process. For workplace reform to be successful an environment that includes all stakeholders is a necessity, in which all must recognise their rights in the relationship.

Given the literature that informs the field of workplace reform, questions then arise, were the changes at Tomoana workplace reform at all, or were they an entirely different beast, which may have lead to their failure to achieve the desired outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper sets out to determine whether or not in the light of the restructuring at Tomoana the participants in Perry's (1995) study subsequently had differing views on workplace reform than those reported in the original study. Dr Martin Perry carried out a study for the now defunct NZ Institute of Social Research and Development on workplace measures

implemented in Tomoana. The workplace initiatives have been identified as starting in 1991, and continuing up to the closure of the plant on August 1994. While Perry's study was firmly placed in a climate of ongoing improvement and change, the researcher in this study was dealing with business that had failed to attain the espoused objectives of the reform.

The methodology used was a qualitative research approach, using unstructured interviewing. Selection of participants was predetermined by the selection of candidates by Dr Michael Perry. This allowed some longitudinal analysis to occur. Perry's original study included 25 stakeholders, of whom 18 consented to be reinterviewed. Seven other stakeholders were added to the original eighteen, resulting in a total of 25 interviews undertaken. Two important stakeholder groups were not originally assessed by Perry, including external stakeholders and employees. To this end two rank and file workers were chosen at random and interviewed, as were five external commentators of workplace reform. Another foreperson (team leader) was added, and it is important to note that the Shed President had changed in the interim between the two studies. These extra stakeholders were added with the intention of providing a richer picture of Tomoana and the attitudes of all participants post-closure.

The study had an ethnographic approach, and as such analysis included observation and content analysis of the interview data from each participant. Analysis occurred on the individual level, and on an aggregate level where content from stakeholders from the same group, i.e. managers, was analysed to look for patterns emerging.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The management structure at Tomoana prior to the workplace changes was bureaucratic, and the style of management was autocratic. Both structure and style at Tomoana applied from the Plant Manager down to the foreman on the chain. Therefore change on the scale that was introduced at Tomoana was not going to be easy, especially for some of the longer serving members of management. They had to cope with an environment of inclusion, changes in the way that the product was now consigned, emphasis on quality and continual improvement of the product and staff relationships. However most of the managers interviewed supported the concept of TCS. The quality issue was at the forefront for most of the period but at the back of the minds of management was the question of cost. This impinged on all of the defining elements of workplace reform. To improve the output and quality and reduce wastage the company encouraged the development of project teams. This elicited both criticism and praise. Middle management agreed on the need for flexibility but the idea of quality in a processing plant, where the animal numbers were dropping, was more problematic.

The most successful reform exercises have been in premises that have involved 'genuine' employee involvement (Enderwick, 1994, p.31). At Tomoana this was not the case. A minimalist approach to involvement for the employees was practiced. Tomoana, being a large meat processing works developed a culture that, as in other meatworks of a similar size, had ingrained values and goals that were generated over many seasons. Some of the workers had been doing the same job for over forty years and these workers had normally attracted the higher rates of pay. But then there was a core group who, because of their lower seniority based on length of season and type of work, had shown a desire to become involved in the change process that was attempted at Tomoana.

Union involvement in workplace reform in New Zealand and internationally is uneven. A number of examples of this unevenness can be cited; Perry et al (1995) highlights a low to moderate union involvement in the New Zealand companies; the US Department of Labour's Office of the American Workplace's Project reports a low union involvement in 'best practice' companies that are registered with them. There appears to be a number of reasons for variable

union involvement; the different industries that unions cover, labour legislation, the desire and willingness, or lack of, by unions, their members, and their officials to become involved.

At Tomoana these characteristics did appear in some form or other. The Meat Workers Union (MWU) at Tomoana, because of the degree of autonomy that it held, was able to introduce the changes discussed above with a certain degree of independence. However there was some ambivalence within the MWU at Tomoana. The local shed president was a strong advocate of TCS and believed that the company had to introduce the T2000 measures in order to survive while acknowledging that it was going to be hard to change because of the "mentality" within the meat industry.

His replacement as shed president was not happy with the company's approach to TCS, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and some to the measures of T2000. He also felt that the union had distanced itself from the members.

Their Meat Workers Union representative believed that workplace reform is built on a unitarist fallacy and that the stakeholders in an organisation have different interests. Employers see labour cost and profit as their main concern, whereas workers pursue wages that reflect a reasonable return on their efforts. Shareholders want a return on their investment. The meat workers union participant also believed that it is an illusion to expect that management is going to relinquish their hold on the organisation.

The Engineers Union participant believed that workplace reform would not work until management and the workers/union are prepared to commit themselves to an agreement that locks all parties to a long term goal and a set of principles that all can subscribe to. It did not mean capitulating "to the boss."

The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU) believes that workplace reform goes much further than just at the workplace. Its future will be determined by whether or not the union movement and those parties that call themselves "social democratic" can develop a model of management that has democratic themes and can operate in a capitalist system.

#### Characteristics of workplace reform.

Analysis of stakeholder responses yielded some interesting results with regard to whether or not what happened at Tomoana was an exercise in workplace reform, or something measurably different. Each stakeholder group had distinct opinions on the presence, and/or success or otherwise of each of the dimensions of workplace reform.

##### 1. The Employment Contract

The union supported the changes that were going to enhance the job security of the workers. However there was a clash between the ideology of the president at the time and the rest of his organization. The new president and many delegates felt that the company was not being true to their word and were using some of the contract clauses as disciplinary measures. Unfortunately with Weddels' negative cash flow problem they were unable to deliver to the workers the skill based pay system agreed to at negotiations. The team based concept of leaders and captains, even though agreed by both parties and embedded in the contract, was not a success in some of the crucial departments. The agreement that was negotiated supported a programme of change and provided a chance for workers to become involved in the process. However it fell down because neither party could see a way to implement some of the agreed proposals, such as skill-based pay and the team processes.

##### 2. Job Redesign

This was not a success. Middle management experienced difficulty coming to grips with the concept of involvement after many years of authority and control, and saw their positions being undermined by team captains. Not all union officials were convinced that the team concept was going to work while the same personnel were present. This, of all the issues,

caused the greatest concern to the new president and while it was agreed that in the smaller departments it was working, in the larger departments this was not the case. The concept of teamwork was not working in most departments because of the inaction of team-leaders and the refusal of certain departments to nominate team captains. Departments where it was working to some degree had team captains who ran the operation because the team-leader wanted no part in this type of work pattern. Workers could see no visible change in the operation and many felt that working in teams and changing the foreperson/supervisor to team-leader was only cosmetic as the same person still controlled that section.

### 3. Orientation to product and service

The initial push from the shed president, (who was to be deposed because of worker dissatisfaction with his performance) for a better way of providing a quality product had run out of steam by the time the workers had time to digest the contract implications. The newly elected president believed that it was fine on paper but applying it in practice was another issue. Once all of the staff had been put through the process of TCS there was a rush to implement problem solving groups (forty to fifty were established). Prior to the plant closure, however, the numbers had reduced to five. The majority of workers were not involved in these groups and those that were felt frustrated that when a proposal was put to the senior management it was usually turned down because of cost. The need to focus on the customer internally and externally was appreciated in the initial stages but as time wore on workers started to lose interest. The workers interviewed fell into two distinct groups when discussing quality. The first group was skeptical of the way things were progressing and appeared to have little faith in the process. The second group was supportive of the direction Tomoana was taking with quality assurance and were believers in the TQM philosophy, which made it easier for them to accept Tomoana's direction. Even though quality was to the forefront, some of the interviewees felt that quantity was still the more important feature. What senior management thought was working didn't appear to be the reality on the shopfloor. There were successes in the smaller departments where the rapport with the supervisors and the workers was more congenial and there was a desire to improve the quality of the product. But in the larger departments the decision of the labour process didn't allow for this to happen.

### 4. Pluralistic Working Environment

The TQM approach does not lend itself to conflict, however "constructive." Management even though showing a desire to work closer with the union/s, still led from the front and the union/s were the followers, indicative of a more unitarist approach to the work environment, where the common goal or good is achieved through management. However with the company prepared to involve the local unions in most of the development of TCS, some form of conflict was inevitable, especially if the company wanted to negotiate a contract with the union. The company still had a strong hand on the TCS approach. They directed the negotiations when they announced to all the staff that there would be major changes to the new contract an announcement which effectively pre-empted constructive negotiations. This was an issue that most felt strongly about. The freezing industry doesn't lend itself to including the unions but when an opportunity did arise to become involved as a recognised party the president at the time jumped at the opportunity. But once the issue of cost saving came back in and the wages were reduced the other officials felt betrayed. The above president admitted that the contract negotiations were totally led by the company that didn't allow for constructive discussions.

### 5. Training and Skills Formation

This was an area that the union would have liked to pursue but the major component was blocked because of the lack of funding. The company, however, didn't balk at providing funds to get the philosophy of TCS across to the members. Commercial realities did not allow the next important step of passing on the benefits to workers with enhanced skills, as this would

have been an additional cost. The training was more inclined towards quality awareness and very little in the way of new skills to enhance their work skills. A small number of workers were involved in problem solving techniques, ISO procedures and interpreting unit costings which they were able to take into new places of employment. There was an attempt to introduce a skills based payment system but this failed because of disagreement over fundamental implementation issues.

#### 6. New Management Tasks

Of concern to senior management was the seeming reluctance of middle managers to embrace the culture of inclusion. Individuals were seen as an impediment to advancing the team concept. Some were made redundant in the May 1993 announcement and the ones who were left were given extra encouragement. There was a tendency by senior management to play one department off against another to enforce this new environment of inclusion. Senior management believed that it was having the desired effect. The workers were very skeptical about middle management, believing that they still had the same attitude towards their department workers. The workers interviewed believed that middle management were one of the main blockages to a successful implementation of constructive involvement. Some did admit that the introduction of functional managers made things flow a lot easier as there were fewer channels to go through and the functional manager could make immediate decisions. This was an area that had potential, but because of the structure of the plant and the long serving managers, all union officials believed that it was a near impossible task to get management to change their old habits of control. However they were aware that some of their members weren't helping matters.

### SUMMARY

Recognition was made that changes needed to be made to ensure both workers and managers could see the results of an improved workplace. To this end, management and Union officials became more consultative rather than conflict based. Contracts were changed, and modes of upward communication were established. The attitude change of managers desiring 'up-skilling' and 'multi-skilling' of employees was recognised both in contracts, and in the introduction of 'improvement' courses.

However, these changes were set against the background of rapidly increasing costs and unhappy banks threatening to foreclose Tomoana. Not only was there no money to reorganize the 'teams' into real teams, management were forced to cut wage costs by 20%, and cancel skill development courses part-way through. Those workers identified as being 'change unfriendly' were laid off, causing disharmony and resentment within the remaining staff. Two weeks later Tomoana closed for good.

So it seems that the intentions of workers, unions and management were aligned to the continuing success of this organisation. All were committed to change and development. Workers spoken to post-redundancy still saw the positive benefits of the changes implemented at Tomoana and cited application of those ideals in both their personal lives and the work lives elsewhere. So given that commitment, why didn't the reform work?

It appears that the financial situation at Tomoana was so dire that any substantial change would have been difficult. The workplace redesign that needed to accompany the work practice design was impossible. The process needed to have been started earlier. Successes had flowed quickly from the job empowerment given to employees. Some workers had redesigned a pallet more appropriate to their industry, and were invited to share that innovation with Massey University and the academic community at large. Workers had an

obvious flair and willingness to innovate and improve both their organisation and their industry.

Although there was an espoused co-operative and consultative approach to management, their attitude was still an underlying unitarist approach, whereby managers were best able to identify and lead the workers to the one best solution. This best indication of this was the removal of the workers with opposing ideas when required to slash wages by 20%.

Finally there was not a shift in the attitude of middle managers, which subverted the process and the gains made by workers and senior managers. Foremen still displayed explicit antagonism and distrust of workers.

An analysis of the Tomoana case shows that what occurred at the freezing works was NOT workplace reform. Although it may have contained some of the elements of reform, such as the redesign of work practices, many of these were not carried out to their conclusion, they were not accompanied by a broad change in attitudes throughout all levels of the organisation, and they were not accompanied by redesign of the actual work place.

The initial stages of TCS involved all the staff and unions and this was certainly a milestone for the meat processing industry. However operating in an environment of debt placed Tomoana at a disadvantage. Introducing a series of cost cutting measures interspersed with workplace reform characteristics, and then renegeing on some of the agreed elements was a recipe for discontent. The trust that had been built up in the early stages diminished and never recovered.

Therefore the concept of workplace reform was not compromised at Tomoana because it never fully met the criteria as defined by the characteristics that can be discerned from the literature. Consequently the Weddel experiment was indeed something considerably different from workplace reform.

Workplace reform is about genuine participation and cooperation through the involvement of managers, workers and union officials, in the running of the organization. If companies are just going to pursue a quality agenda with cost cutting measures introduced into the process then workplace reform will fail. This is because the trust built up between the parties during the initial implementation will quickly dissipate if the workers cannot see any benefits. Therefore the analysis demonstrates that for the concept of workplace reform to be successfully implemented a genuine model of participation and co-operation must be present.

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