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Innovation & Skills

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

Community Trade Unionism and the
NEC – Contributing to the Union's
Modernisation

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Background

Community emerged from an amalgamation of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) and the Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades (KFAT) in 2005, becoming fully operational from 1 January 2006. It was seen as 'a marrying of minds', combining to produce 'a real community-based organisation', which would be the first trade union to answer people's concerns both at work and in the community where they live. This ethos, central to the new union, is reinforced with its strapline 'the union for life'.

Why this project?

Community's successful Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) Round 1 project focused on full-time officers and senior staff within the union, enabling them to debate the issues facing Community and formulate their vision. Their Round 2 project extended that remit, as Roy Rickhuss, National Officer (and at the time of the project Assistant General Secretary), explains:

'It was about rounding the circle. Community has undergone such a fundamental change that it's been crucial to bring the full-time union staff on board in terms of the direction we're travelling in. Once we had the senior management up to speed, we needed to take the message to the members. To do that, the national executive council (NEC), lay members elected every

three years, needed to have a good depth of knowledge about all aspects of Community, its functions, its finances and the relationship between its projects and the resources needed to fund them. They also needed to understand their own and others' roles and responsibilities within the union nationally, not just regionally.

'No union is immune to the national economic climate. Contributions from union members had been dwindling and we had to have a debate about how to tackle that issue. Every union needs a national executive that challenges effectively – it helps to ensure you get the best solutions and work well for your members. But without the necessary knowledge and understanding, it's difficult for that culture to succeed. We were asset rich but cash poor, so Round 2 of the UMF project injected much-needed funding and was the perfect opportunity for us to pursue this next stage.'

The project involved designing an education programme that covered strategy, culture, marketing and financial skills for Community NEC members. It set out explicitly to:

- bridge the gap in understanding between the Community NEC and its full-time employees
- lay the basis for an induction programme suitable for future elected NECs
- offer broad support to other unions who want to bring their full-time union

employees and lay leadership closer together.

was fundamentally a two-way dialogue.'

Methodology and outcomes

Dr John Lloyd, Head of Policy and Strategy at Community at the time of the UMF projects, designed a five-day training package, carefully constructed after input from academics and close consultation with Roy Rickhuss and other full-time officers. Roy is particularly proud of the union's approach:

'I'm pleased that as a union we've maintained our in-house training programme for our members and officials, rather than outsourcing it, which many other unions have done. It's been specifically designed for our circumstances by our full-time officials, who are very experienced at designing training programmes. Because of their in-depth knowledge of aspects such as finance and policy making in the context of Community, the courses are always relevant. Evaluation after each course then has an impact on any amendments made, to hone it for the next session.'

The training event

The training event was attended by 16 members of the NEC, along with a newly employed admin officer and a lay member of the smaller social workers' union, with whom Community was discussing a transfer of engagements. Senior union officers had input both as speakers and participants. Says Roy:

'This was crucial for the success of the programme, as the whole point was to familiarise the lay elected NEC members with the thoughts and policies of the full-time officers and senior staff, and vice versa. It

The programme was designed to encompass the following:

Day 1 – David Coats, Deputy Director of the Work Foundation outlined the global labour market Community faces and gave an insight into how the union's leadership was reacting to it. He set out the key themes and initiated the discussion. Themes included the importance of understanding the changes in the structure of the UK economy (rather than simply reforming the industrial relations law environment); the changing structure of the workforce (now an 'hour-glass' shape, with higher percentages of professional workers and fewer skilled craft machinists than trade unions had been used to); the potential in the continuing desire among workers for 'voice' at work; and the insight that unions will only be welcomed in articulating that voice if the trade union offer to workers matches their requirements at work.

Michael Leahy, General Secretary of Community, outlined the union's response to these issues, including new representation structures, the union's new work on behalf of members as citizens as well as workers, and the possibilities of welcoming new members into the union beyond the traditional steel, textiles and footwear industries that Community had hitherto been restricted to.

The first evening was spent in groups, formulating responses to these issues.

Day 2 – Groups reported back to Peter Crowe, Deputy General Secretary, and Roy Rickhuss, which *'got the NEC members to share their support for the new persona of Community and also showed the NEC members that the other two leading officers in the union were at one with the General Secretary, emphasising that the leadership was a united team.'*

The key theme of the programme – understanding the roles and responsibilities of the NEC in relation to paid officers and staff – was launched on the second day of the programme, with the union's Finance Officer, Sarah Wold, leading a discussion with slides and handouts on Community's finances. The session covered legal requirements, accounting policies (including the pitfalls of financing the union out of contributions when membership in traditional manufacturing areas continues to fall), and the NEC's related responsibilities, both in terms of the law and of union policy. She went on to explain how the union made key choices in relation to investments, property management and expensive purchasing decisions such as IT and vehicles for union officers. Says Roy:

'There can be no doubt that this session showed NEC members the serious nature of their responsibility for strategic control of these issues.'

In the afternoon of day two, Dr John Lloyd chaired a session using the 'culture web' to look at how the union could change to meet the challenges of the modern labour market and Community's role in it,

emphasising the importance of understanding the institutional culture in the trade union context – an invaluable session, as Roy explains:

'By studying in groups Community's power structures, organisational structures, control systems, the symbols of the organisation, routines and rituals and internal stories that bind people together, the paradigms of the union's values emerged. This helped NEC members by first identifying the elements of the union's current culture and what it might look like in five years' time, and then looking at the challenges associated with getting from here to there.'

Day 3 – Delegates returned to the central issue of union finance in a discussion led by Professor Paul Willman, Professor in Employment Relations and Organisational Behaviour at the London School of Economics:

'Paul was able to get delegates to look at where the union's financial resources come from – both on balance sheet (contribution and investment income) and off balance sheet (local facility time and use of employer resources at work). Throughout the UK trade union world, trade union expenditure per member had gone up much faster than union subscriptions, faster than inflation and faster than earnings. Community's NEC had to decide their financial strategy with all that in mind. This session once again highlighted the NEC's partial lack of confidence in doing justice to their responsibilities to the good financial management of the union, and will undoubtedly be a major

feature of any future NEC induction training programme.'

Day 4 – Professor Stephen Lee from the Henley School of Management spoke on the nature of marketing, with a particular focus on the voluntary sector (an area of especial expertise):

'Professor Lee asked "How can not-for-profit organisations 'sell' their social vision and practical services in the same ways as more commercial organisations?" Not to do so would fundamentally let down the people who want such things – and much of this experience reads across to the trade union world. In particular, in marketing and managing the union, the NEC has to recognise their strategic role while leaving detailed administration and implementation of the strategy to the officers and staff of the union.'

In the afternoon of day four, the union's new regional directors, the senior officials of the union and the leading senior staff re-convened to talk together about what the NEC had experienced that week, alongside what the officers and staff had been through at their UMF Round 1 training programme.

The final session was led by Joe Mann, the Community official who organises, among other responsibilities, the union's work for disabled people and others within the voluntary sector:

'Joe led a final discussion about Community's future relationships with the outside stakeholders of the union. He talked about Community's employers and the third sector partners with whom the

union is now working. Among other stakeholders were the government of the day. Community needs to make its new communitarian work properly understood by all these partners for the future, although the union's work in the workplace will always remain its first priority.'

Evaluation

The evaluation of the training programme was in three stages:

Stage 1 evaluation

The first stage was a session at the end of the programme run by Dr John Lloyd, which asked delegates to answer four questions on Community's redefinition issues, around 'Where are we going to operate in the future?' These comprised:

- Where should Community target its organising efforts?
- What should the union's 'offer' be to the members and potential members?
- Which 'job quality' issues should Community take up?
- What might be the union's top three 'community' interventions?

Delegates agreed that Community should develop packages to explain community trade unionism to young people, starting in the workplaces where Community was already recognised and moving outside to schools, colleges and local youth groups. Says Roy:

'They concluded that we should approach other smaller unions associated with the General Federation of Trade Unions who would be interested in our concept. We should especially concentrate on the care sector and other NGOs and charities – both in terms of the

workers' interests as workers but also in support of the aims of the care/charity organisations themselves. We should organise around non-industrial community issues like anti-social behaviour, school, post office and hospital closures. We should support all local pro-manufacturing campaigns, show people our training expertise and get all recognised workplaces to arrange access to induction sessions for new employees.'

Delegates responded to the second question, about the union's 'offer', as follows:

'We should emphasise professional support as benefits – in education, legal services and access to industrial law protection. We should prioritise our pensions expertise, showing members the advantages of transferring their membership in a cradle to grave way. There remains some purchase in financial benefits, although the union's marriage benefit will have to be altered in line with modern thinking. We should also offer family membership and have a joining package available for new members.'

Roy reports that delegates felt that the union will have to work hard to get conventional collective bargaining to prioritise job quality issues:

'Work rotation, avoiding boredom, showing employers that extra job satisfaction will lead to better productivity are all aspects of this. Above all, we can only offer expertise in these issues by emphasising our experience in

training and staff development issues.'

The top three interventions in the community were identified as marketing the union's capacity to provide education and other professional services; modernising Community's communications so that people know what's on offer; and looking to be supporters of other community activity:

'Issues like travel to work facilities, closures of social facilities and perhaps even organising Community members to take part in other pressure group activities in order to bring our resources to the attention of other organisations are all important factors.'

Stage 2 evaluation

Delegates also completed a conventional assessment of the usefulness of the programme and were enthusiastic about its potential, urging that all new NEC members undertake similar induction.

Stage 3 evaluation

Finally, the NEC meeting five months after the training was extended to consider the impact of the programme. They would then be able to take those lessons forward in helping to design an NEC induction programme for future NECs to complete immediately after election. Roy found these results particularly interesting:

'What was most helpful was looking at how NEC members have used what they learned in the programme. They were very pleased with how useful the course

had been and how they now use that knowledge day to day.'

Looking ahead

If the project were to be sustainable, the union knew it would be important to resource it themselves once the UMF element had been completed:

'We now have an annual training event and every three years will run the event for the newly elected NEC members. Updating the course, ensuring that it remains always relevant, is crucial to its continued success and something we have programmed in – and its an approach that has paid dividends. We have been delighted with what we've achieved in our UMF projects and have met all our objectives. We are now working with ACEVO (the Association of Chief executives of Voluntary Organisations) and have recently secured Round 3 UMF funding in partnership with them.'

Conclusion

Roy has seen the union change dramatically over the last few years, triggered in part by the UMF projects:

'You wouldn't recognise the union now compared with before the Round 1 UMF project. It's totally different. Our members used to be predominantly steel workers but, although we still have a proud tradition of steel, footwear and textiles, and these members remain at the core of our union, we now have a very diverse membership. Social workers and the NSPCC form a significant group of members, for example,

and the executive have embraced that. We now have regional forums, where all members come together, over more industries. That diversity is reflected in union staff – in campaign managers, for instance, and regional directors, two of the four being women. And we have a good percentage of young people. The union's enriched by its diversity and it's part of Community's role to keep up that drive for engagement. We are now a more vibrant, forward thinking union.

'The UMF suggested our direction of travel and we're very pleased with the outcomes. Without its funding we wouldn't have been able to achieve all we have in as short a time. The NEC can only make the right decisions for the right reasons if they're armed with all the facts. More and more of our members need financial support in these times of widespread redundancies. As a direct result of their UMF-supported training, the NEC can now use their understanding of Community's finances and make informed decisions. We're all working together towards a common goal. The training has enabled a dialogue between heads of department and line managers, who sat with the NEC during their training and explained what they do. It has also helped the NEC understand the conditions in their own workplaces, where they've been able to apply what they've learned.'

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