

Background

Based in Burton-upon-Trent, Coors Brewers Ltd (previously Bass Brewers Ltd) produces some of the UK's top beer brands, including Carling, Grolsch, Coors Fine Light Beer and Worthington's. The Company employs 2,500 people in the UK across 8 locations. Around 600 employees are covered by recognition agreements with the Transport & General Workers Union.

I & C practices

Coors had several years' experience of employee consultation on a number of issues when it decided in late 2004 to create the Coors Brewers Employee Forum. Up until then, consultation had been ad hoc, on specific issues as the need arose. The new Employee Forum was to be a permanent body covering a broader range of business issues. The Company publicised the creation of the Forum internally in early 2005 and advertised for 16 Employee Representatives to be drawn from constituencies across the business and representing both negotiated and non-negotiated employees. Constituencies were based on a combination of geography and function, and averaged around 170 employees. Nominees had to be supported by two colleagues, and elections were held where there was more than one nomination.

The first meeting was held in March 2005. The agreed constitution envisages two meetings a year, held to coincide with full and half-year company results, plus special meetings as the need arises. In practice, there have been so many issues on which to consult that 15 meetings were called in the first eighteen months. Coors agreed with the Forum that it would inform all representatives about issues affecting a part of the company, but only consult representatives from the affected area.

Representatives serve for a three-year term. They are not obliged to attend all meetings, but in practice most do. The Forum's bi-annual meetings are chaired by the company's CEO, with the Business Services Director also attending, and a third board director on a rotating basis - every board member will have attended at least one regular meeting over the course of three years. The special meetings tend to be chaired by senior leaders from the HR function, with business leaders invited to present on issues being discussed.

A dedicated Intranet is used to support the work of the Forum, with presentations, notes and action points from meetings posted on the site. Communications arising from meetings are agreed with the representatives, and circulated by them, adding their own "gloss" if they wish.

Business benefits

The existence of the Forum has proved very valuable because it has coincided with a period of significant change at Coors. A substantial downsizing project started in April 2005 and the company engaged in a long period of consultation with the Forum which resulted in the initial proposals being changed. In addition the Forum agreed some key principles for redundancy selection. Since then there has been a further process of change in the supply chain with a reduction in the manufacturing operation, on which the Forum has been consulted and agreed that the same redundancy arrangements should apply.

It has now become established practice that any issue needing to be communicated to all employees which concerns terms and conditions or organisational change is taken to the Forum first for feedback and to help identify problems and concerns that may arise. Subjects that have been dealt with include: two significant organisational change projects; training on TUPE regulations; proposed changes to the company car policy, changes to several policies required as a consequence of the new age discrimination legislation, and proposals for introducing a smoking ban in 2007.. Another important subject that has been discussed is a new employee incentive plan. Coors consulted the Forum about a draft communication to employees explaining the new plan and how it was to be introduced. Many employees found the original communication difficult to understand which resulted in a meeting of the Forum with the CEO, and the decision to rewrite and re-communicate the incentive plan invitation. As a result, a lot more information was given to employees who felt they were more informed about the decision they were being asked to take.

What makes it work?

Coors is in no doubt that what makes their Employee Forum work is a genuine willingness on the part of the company and the representatives to work together and to openly discuss issues and concerns and seek appropriate solutions to business issues. They will do this quite early in the process, even before they have formal proposals to make, giving a "heads up" that an issue is coming over the horizon. At first, there was some anxiety on the part of management about sharing confidential information, but experience has shown this not to be a problem – the Forum has reached

a high level of maturity in a relatively short period of time, and the company feels it can have absolute trust in the representatives.

Ideas for the future

In 2007 there is an intention to revisit the constitution to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and to arrange training for employee representatives on diversity awareness and pensions. In addition, Coors will continue to work with forum representatives to ensure they are informed about company performance and business issues and are consulted about issues that might affect employees or terms and conditions of employment.