

1 – THE STARTING POINT OF THE SUBJECT UNDER DISCUSSION: A PARADOX OBSERVABLE IN EUROPE ON THE SUBJECT OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE TRANSPORT INDUSTRY

We learn from experience, and often to our cost, that it is better not to be too certain about things, if we want to avoid being brought down to earth with a bump. However, the social psychology of organisations states at least one certainty, a rule to which there are few exceptions, stating that once a project has started, it increasingly goes its own sweet way, and the risk of divergence with the original intentions grows proportionally over time. The result is often surprising. At the end of the day, sometimes all that is left of the original project is the name.

Therefore, before launching into the analysis of the social performance of the transport firms with which I have been in contact for nearly thirty years in France and Europe, I feel I need to make the effort to come back to the original intentions of the social development projects implemented recently in this business sector.

With this in mind, I intend first to provide a psychosocial analysis of the way passenger and freight transport companies operate, and then to explain why a certain number of factors come together to justify using a particular form of social management. This will be my basis for a better understanding of the issues. From there I will suggest principles for guidelines that will help solve the problems identified.

1.1 – A PARADOX: PASSENGER AND FREIGHT TRANSPORT IN EUROPE, A LABOUR-INTENSIVE INDUSTRY THAT PAYS LITTLE ATTENTION TO ITS HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

In the road transport sector, staff costs are by far the highest expenditure in operating passenger and freight transport. However, “Human Resource Management” seems fairly marginal compared with other areas that mobilise far more managerial energy by these companies. Managers pay more attention to technical, technological, commercial and financial development, not to mention other very specific aspects such as fuel costs, tolls, or the latest version of scheduling software.

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

This judgement may sound severe, or even exaggerated. However, social psychology interventions in transport companies tend to show that managers usually work in narrow “silos” such as recruiting, qualifying training, preventing and managing conflict, etc. and very little on broader HR techniques which have become very common these days in other sectors.

The Human Resources Management in transport: Shortcomings in a approach that could be more general and more proactive

For example, little effort is put into areas such as the capacity building needed to improve products and services, or building up staff loyalty, especially among majority groups such as drivers.

In many business sectors, on the contrary, it has become usual to look for a lasting return on the initial investments made in social management (recruitment, qualifying training) while continuing to pursue strategic financial and sales objectives in which performance depends on staff (quality of customer service, cost control, etc.). It is common today in many industries to have projects for building up staff loyalty by catering for their new expectations, for example finding the balance between work and private life. Another example is the attempt to trace out career paths so that staff can think positively about their future. In a similar vein, efforts are made for developing a company spirit, especially when companies merge or are absorbed, as is so often the case today. A further example: acquiring skills improves job prospects, and this is enhanced if the skills are more specialised, such as familiarity with "new" technologies or better customer service relations. Social partners will sometimes consult to produce policies for the prevention and control of psychosocial risks, which improves working conditions. They do this for perfectly legitimate reasons of managerial efficiency rather than for a misplaced philanthropic ideal.

Human Resources Management in a labour-intensive industry: A key factor of competitiveness

In the case of the transport industry, unfortunately, there seems to be a good case for stating that this is a labour-intensive industry that pays relatively little attention to its human resources, because the projects mentioned above are rarely part of long-term policies.

However, it is clear that the technical feat of moving passengers and freight on a daily basis depends very largely on the efforts of professionals who are attached to their company and their trade.

To summarise then, we have the paradox of staff who are clearly attached to their job and put considerable effort into the business, but who are very little involved in the daily life of their company, and even less in its development. It is no doubt always difficult to generalise, but when the same trends are observed repeatedly, it seems justified to state that national cultures have only a limited impact on the social practice of the transport sector. For example, how many passenger transport companies think of including their staff in considering how to improve their service offer? And how many freight companies have

organised feedback from their staff so that they can learn from this? The answer is always the same, and is always just as disappointing, whatever the country.

An external consultant called to assess most transport companies sees a very similar situation everywhere, which begs the question: In these firms, why is social management seen more as a constraint or a necessary evil than as a factor for leveraging performance?

In the current economic climate of increasingly stiff competition, making better use of the human factor, including helping people overcome resistance to change is more than ever the key to competitiveness. So it is important to find ways of changing the paradox that is the starting point of this analysis.

1.2 – RESULTS OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL FUNCTIONING IN TRANSPORT COMPANIES

In order to understand fully the recommendations in the conclusion, it is vital to identify precisely the factors that make it necessary to develop specific social management in transport companies. Here is a list of the main chapter headings.

Key points of social functioning in the transport industry

1. Compounding of difficulties for the most numerous employees (drivers): three-fold psychological difficulties in the working conditions of drivers, i.e. loneliness, isolation and a “closed shop” mentality; difficulties of driving combined with the difficulties of customer contact; typically low wages with variable compensations from other sources (increased work time, different bonuses); destabilisation of professional identity; poorly organised positive social life within companies, reinforcing the individualism of the newest recruits;
2. Lack of easily identifiable hierarchy due to the number of people who impact drivers (depot or site supervisors, schedulers, central Control Station controllers, ticket controllers, etc.); lack of real delegation of decision-making functions for immediate supervisors, meaning that they have no leverage for motivating drivers positively;
3. The ease with which business can be stopped, giving rise to a power struggle culture, meaning that the social model is reduced to an archaic conflict mentality, which has very negative consequences on the mobility of passengers, freight transport, company performance and meeting eco-friendly objectives;
4. Professional culture marked by techniques, safety, compliance with procedures, which has the paradoxical effect of removing responsibility from management, especially immediate superiors (their priority is to ensure drivers stick strictly to the rules);
5. Long-term presence of many “work irritants”, the symbolic value of which is not recognised by the firms, and which make employees more sceptical about the

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

collective capacity for positive changes (location and cleaning of toilets, work schedules, how rest periods and holidays are taken, social premises, information on company life, etc.); Human Resources function usually limited to administrative aspects (recruitment, pay, HR disputes, mandatory relations with employee representatives, training, ...) and very little advice on strategy;

6. Time-consuming and not very constructive institutional social dialogue, almost exclusively with employee representatives, who in fact have a kind of monopoly on communication with employees; trade unions often felt to be not very representative of employees, who are increasingly individualistic; employees who are extremely critical of the way trade union leaders operate, but who still follow their orientations, hoping to get some personal benefits of one kind or another (pay, rest, working conditions, etc.);
7. Discrepancy between, on the one hand, the objectives announced and the method of operation described in the certification processes and, on the other hand, operations as observed in real life;
8. Low professionalisation of executives in terms of running socio-technical projects that mobilise the workforce (expertise in "business line techniques", finances, sales, are an absolute priority);

The specific socio-organisational difficulties which this business sector has to face

The consequences of the factors listed above are very unfavourable for human resource management. The problems caused by the compounding of all these major difficulties are innumerable. Here are some of them.

1. De-socialization of drivers, who are increasingly individualistic and reserved about involvement in the firm; low concern about corporate objectives, and emphasis placed on personal time rather than work time; absenteeism in retaliation, and even going as far as having themselves declared permanently unfit to drive, when confronted with (seemingly unilateral) demands for flexibility on the part of firms;
2. Removing responsibility from immediate superiors, by making their remits strictly technical, practising "bottom up" delegation whenever human and social management is called for, leaving them no real power to act on the "work irritants" of the drivers they manage;
3. Archaic social relations, composed of a "tug of war" mentality and divided trade unions who try to outdo each other and are out of touch with the market forces of transport; repeated and untimely action (strike warnings, wildcat or organised strikes) that are detrimental to customer service, corporate finances and the image of the transport sector;

4. Serious shortcomings in in-house communication, which is admittedly difficult to organise with employees who are widely dispersed in time and space; communication is also extremely compartmentalised between the different branches of jobs in the sector, each branch having a very distinct ethos and identity.
5. Standstill in initiatives of transport employees in direct customer contact due to lack of clearly established guidelines; lack of real customer service standards guiding generalised professional behaviour; very patchy implementation of stated and clearly promised customer service commitment;
6. Reduction in the impact of continuing technological modernisation (tools for communication, business planning, traffic control, public information); and this modernisation is very little used as a driver of social change.

2 – A BUSINESS SECTOR IN SEARCH OF A MANAGEMENT MODEL

Given all the very specific difficulties detailed above, the role of management is both more complex and more decisive than in other business sectors that operate more conventionally. More complex, because it is obvious that some of the aspects we have pointed out are impossible to reconcile in the short term (technical, social and economic, to take just one example); more decisive because, in order to avoid the pitfalls of these features specific to transport, it is easy to imagine that the decision makers have even more power than in other sectors to influence events, for good or bad. The role of management in the transport industry runs into a series of roadblocks that have accumulated over time as the sector has changed.

2.1 – TECHNICIANS, MANAGERS, SALES MANAGERS, STRATEGY MAKERS, LEADERS? MULTITASK MANAGERS LOOKING FOR A DOMINANT JOB DESCRIPTION

As in any industry, the role of hierarchy is to blend all the different aspects of making a company run, and do it as smoothly as possible. But in the transport sector, this is far from easy...

The difficulty of producing a smooth blend

The main problem is the compatibility of the different aspects of organising transport. This is because, in order to provide customers with the service as contracted, many different intertwining aspects of a particularly complex system need to be combined. The degree of success in combining these aspects is directly correlated with the commercial, economic and social quality of transport service providers.

In other words, managers need multiple skill sets to be able to master all the parameters involved and get the best possible balance between the underlying factors, which are technical production, the quality of service provided, economic performance and consideration of the social expectations of employees.

The areas under discussion here are very wide ranging: understanding customer needs; the specific techniques for producing a transport offer; financial optimization; scheduling projects for advancing the status quo; mobilizing employees, some of whom have very distant relations with their employers; negotiating with trade unions, whose major weapon in the power struggle is blocking travel, which is a vital aspect of the economic and social life of a region or country; etc.

A difficult balancing act

So companies are sending out signals that management has difficulty interpreting: technicians, managers, sales managers, strategy makers, leaders? These multitask managers are looking for their main job description, which would clarify priorities once and for all.

Is this to be understood as the cause or the effect of this ambiguous institutional position? It is difficult to say, but in any case, an outside observer cannot fail to see a series of common factors in the behaviour of many senior managers of transport firms, whether passenger or freight, in France or internationally, whatever the size or status of the company, whether public, semi-public or private. Behind these common factors, there seem to be identifiable “representations” that probably undergird the “corporate culture” of the transport sector. I will now analyse two groups of these representations, which are particularly common in transport companies.

2.2 – CLOSE-UP ON SOME HALF TRUTHS THAT UNDERGIRD AND WARP MANAGERIAL PRACTICE IN TWO KEY AREAS: AUTHORITY AND MOTIVATION

The interaction between representation and behaviour is a tricky question in social psychology. This is because in some cases the individual or social images of a reality shape and have an influence on praxis – which is a direct result of it – while in other cases, the opposite is true: A description is built up later, based on social practice, to make the practice legitimate.

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

Whichever way this works, I believe that it is useful to look for certain collective images that correspond to half-truths, false beliefs or genuine illusions. The value of this approach is that these myths are likely to have negative consequences for human resource management in transport firms.

Where does managerial authority come from?

“A real boss controls everything” This is the first half truth, about the way actions of employees are controlled. To explain the particular problem I have in mind, I will start with one of the main results of over thirty five years of corporate consultancy. We have a paradox:

1. It is strange to note that those who do have power ... do not use it, or not really, in the sense that, seen from the outside, they do not use all the levers at their disposal. They prefer a certain laxity, which is not very effective and is diametrically opposed to their very determined speeches.
2. It is just as strange to see that those who are supposed to obey orders do exactly what they feel like. They feel free to criticise management strategy; they are happy to resist change, actively or passively; they implement the bits they like and ignore the bits they don't like; etc.

In this situation, it is obviously understandable that managers make efforts to increase their influence on the organisations they are supposed to be running, especially in such a challenging social and organisational context. But does this give them the right to try to exercise greater control over their company?

It is true that one of the first advantages could be a better self-image as a manager. In reality, this satisfaction does not carry much weight. Most of the time, leaders overestimate the positive effects that this control has on the performance and motivation of their workforce. Most of the time, if employees are put in a favourable climate, they will want to develop their own motivation and skills on their own.

Another problem arises when leaders have too much control of their company. These senior managers, and in this example they are practically the only ones to make real decisions, do not make it easy (or make it impossible) to involve employees in the decision-making process. And when employees are not consulted about decisions, they do not feel particularly motivated about implementing them. There can be excellent decisions thought out individually and... not implemented collectively.

So, too great a concentration of power does not enhance corporate performance or staff motivation. And on the subject of power, it may be useful here to point out an important distinction that is often poorly understood. We will need to take a detour via Roman history to understand this. In the days of Cicero, for example, a distinction was made between two very different but complementary ideas. *Potestas*, on the one hand, referred to the power of constraint, the ability to impose one's will, to demand obedience. On the other hand, *Auctoritas* referred to exercising the right to advise. The advice in question, which was sometimes mandatory (in the Senate, for example), obliged without constraining, that is

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

without anyone being forced to obey. Auctoritas comes from Augere, to increase or augment. The aim of auctoritas is to make grow, it authorises others to act. It is in this sense that "auctoritas is less than an order and more than a piece of advice, it is an opinion that one would be wrong to take lightly". And which makes it possible to get others to do great things. Where power stops is where authority begins, and this is a notion that excludes violence (threat or punishment) or a hard-working argument ("I'm the boss around here") to impose itself. Unfortunately, many managers are very intent on imposing their Potestas without any thought as to what would give them this precious Auctoritas.

Yet in many transport firms, it is worrying to see that an unsatisfactory but lasting balance is maintained between managers, on the one hand, whose (authoritarian) management style is not totally consistent with the objectives announced (which affects their authority) and the workforce, on the other hand, who complain about this state of affairs – but who are not terribly active in looking for solutions to the difficulties they encounter. In other words, it could be that these employees find some sort of comfort in an uncomfortable situation of exercise of power, characterized by a certain removal of responsibility, by the acceptance of constraints seen as not very legitimate, and by feeling that their own professional identity is devalued. This balance of bottom-up delegation could be a symptom: Conventional speeches on the virtues of responsible, decentralised management are not put into practice completely, because false ideas about the nature of leadership insidiously undermine the behaviour that would make it possible to bring about a useful transformation in collective mentalities.

How to strengthen employee motivation?

"If you want to see people respect procedures and operating modes, there's nothing like a good punishment". When no-one checks that a law, a rule, or a procedure is applied and no-one sanctions its transgression, it loses all credibility because, as it no longer provides points of reference, it cannot function as a regulator of life together.

Reminding people that there are limits is therefore legitimate though unpopular. But let us make no mistake, social audits reveal a constant result: it is the employees themselves who are the most likely to be offended when faced with management methods they consider too lax. When a few employees do not respect the rules of the game, their behaviour is seen as a breach of the solidarity of the majority who see it as an attack on their professional image and a source of deteriorating work conditions.

In the area of behaviour, all the companies in the sector have to face certain deviations which originate in an abuse of the possibilities offered by social systems that tend to be more protective than in other industries. Take the situation of passenger transport. The most classic case is retaliation absenteeism: some drivers who are refused leave immediately fall sick, and their doctor, whether accommodating or not, is obliged to observe that the patient is suffering from back pains. Such absenteeism is difficult to counter; it is all the more pernicious as it is likely to generate the absenteeism of colleagues who suffer from the consequences of this behaviour. A chain of events triggers a vicious circle: the number of services to be covered is unchanged, so those who are working need to work even more while the rest periods to be allocated are fewer and the leeway for offering flexibility to people

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

who really need it is reduced, while the fatigue of those who have to absorb the work load of the absentees continues to grow. Faced with this situation, in all networks the vast majority of staff complain that no one, beginning with management, dares take the risk of reiterating the rules and limits, for fear of triggering retaliation by employee representatives, who, in turn, see absenteeism as a result and not the cause of the problems.

In these situations, as in others which I cannot refer to in this article, a reminder of the rules is justified and expected by the work community. However, immersion in the companies reveals that several types of difficulties are often present. Generally, managers are reluctant to remind their staff of the limits, for fear of collective retaliation. The same facts may give rise to very different reactions inside one company (from indifference to sanctions). All this inevitably creates great confusion and a curious paradox: the few people who need to be called to order live in relative but lasting peace, while the majority complain of a management culture that doesn't value them, and in which they are more likely to get punished than thanked.

These modes of reasoning, which are not far removed from a sense of persecution, are reinforced by a second category of behaviours likely to induce a call to order. Behaviour which involve traffic safety, and insurance claims records, particularly related to road accidents. This is a theme that is often seen as taboo. Transgression is not acceptable because what is at stake is the reality and the image of corporate professionalism of the companies, and therefore also their legitimacy, not to mention the cost of incidents (occupational accidents, insurance premiums, workshop repairs, etc.).

Two types of situations emerge from this. The first type is related to a lack of training or inadequate experience. In the first case, a penalty may be less effective than improving professionalism, by various ways and means (technical reskilling, tutoring, ...). In these circumstances, we can assume that upsetting aspect of sanctions will be relatively better accepted than in the second type of situation, which involves more experienced drivers. In case of serious incident or accident, the vast majority of these professionals, if not all, experience something of a "double penalty". It is easy to see that the effect of the narcissistic injury (having failed, not having shown oneself to be sufficiently attentive, not having been equal to the task) is much deeper and lasting than any penalty which, from an institutional point of view, will have sanctioned a misdemeanour.

It seems possible to assert that what these two situations have in common (beginner, experienced professional) is that they share an understanding that still refers to the "human factor" as the weak link in a business organisation. This point of view does not see the value of human resources and is hardly motivational. If the goal is to professionalise the staff, sanctions are probably not the ideal lever. We shall come back to this in the third chapter (recommendations).

"No motivated staff without bonuses, rewards or other profit sharing" After "Who loves well, chastises well", it is logical to consider the alternative option which would be "Who loves well, rewards well"... In transport companies, the hunt for bonuses of all kinds is permanent. By that I mean that employees take every opportunity to try to improve their income in order to receive additional compensation whose justification is supposedly based on a variety of reasons: fair compensation for the hardship of a specific job; legitimate reward for specially

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

meritorious effort, developed on the job or during a project; necessary reparation of an unfavourable comparison with other professionals, from different jobs within the same company, and from the same trades in other companies.

This game, where everyone tries to outbid everyone else, can set employees, managers, and employee representatives on a false trail. A first warning on this subject of financial incentives comes from experience of helping businesses go through changes. Sooner or later, we are faced with situations where we know that if the collective demand is expressed as premiums, bonuses and other financial incentives, it is in fact because no one has been able to perceive and express the true nature of a malaise that has quite different causes. Spelling this out in hard currency will assuredly get everyone's assent. Thus, the social psychology of labour disputes teaches that it is important not to confuse the spark (the triggering event), the symptom (the claim, usually expressed in financial terms) and the deep malaise (the real reasons for the blockage or resistance to change). Easier said than done? My theory and my practice of "work irritants" makes me think that addressing the chronic problems that affect the daily lives of employees (the "work irritants") obtains much better and much more sustainable results, than inventing a "shower bonus" to wriggle out of an agitated social situation.

A second reason to distrust the power of financial incentives comes from the literature on this dimension of corporate human resource management. This literature shows that beliefs and assumptions, deeply rooted and widespread, are misleading both about the effectiveness of compensation policies and what ultimately motivates people to work and make efforts to fit better the expectations of their employer.

For example, it is now clear that the performance of employees who receive incentives does not generally only depend on their individual actions because production systems are now characterized by numerous interactions between different players and trades (matrix organisations, breaking down of "silos"). The fact is that team work is particularly important in the transport business. Similarly, more than financial measures, it is communication convincingly taken up by the hierarchy that can clarify the priorities of the company by pointing to a particular aspect of operations (punctuality, presenteeism, deadlines, cleanliness, etc.). In the field of passenger transport, drivers of a large company will wish to preserve their chances to receive a significant end of year bonus – linked of course to meeting a set of criteria. Studies show however that some drivers no longer reported traffic incidents of which they were the victims, or the cause: they sometimes pay, out of their own pocket, for repairs to a bumper or mirror of a motorist involved in an incident, while others come to work even though they are running a high temperature, etc. Is that really what the company wanted?

3 – HUMAN RESOURCES: A CONSTRAINT OR AN ASSET FOR TRANSPORT COMPANIES? A RANGE OF SOLUTIONS TO CONFRONT THE PROBLEMS THAT ARISE

Accompanying change in the professional transport sector teaches us unequivocally that it isn't easy to go against the unfavourable consequences of the specificities of this industry. To obtain lasting results therefore requires a range of solutions that need to be deployed in parallel, in related areas.

Thus, for example, work structures and organisation need to be considered as key factors for managing human resources, with the goal of empowering, valuing and professionalising the various personnel categories: This implies “decentralising” and delegating practices that are in line with a “Think global, act local” approach. By reducing the size of basic organisational structures it is possible to rehumanise the company in the eyes of employees who will have the impression that the company is closer to their concerns. Another example would be to try to introduce new modes of dialogue and social negotiations with employee representatives. This would facilitate learning to anticipate and building long term relations that rely on agreed methods that fit with a strategy similar to what should characterise external corporate communication (relations with the press). “Let's learn to talk to each other when things aren't going too badly, so that we manage better in situations of tension and conflict that will unfailingly continue to arise...”. Undoubtedly, these first two avenues will help the many employees, whose activity tends to scatter them in time and space, find their place in the company once again.

However, picking up on a question we asked by way of introduction to this paper, if we want to move to a form of management of social relations that is no longer seen as a constraint we need to go beyond these first orientations. To draw the full benefits of an approach in which human resources are seen as a lever for performance, we need to follow a double track that we shall now consider.

3.1 – A BREAK WITH STANDARD PRACTICE THAT IS BOTH SYMBOLIC AND VERY CONCRETE IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

“Presumption of correctness”, “positive reinforcement” and a renewed vision of the “human factor”

More than thirty years of social audits of European transport companies have led me to a conclusion that, when all is said and done, is rather ordinary: the vast majority of employees, including drivers, are keen to do their work well. Yet problems are not absent because, as we have seen in this report, there are plenty of contradictions that can be observed in the way people behave. Particularly under the herd effect, even the best intentions often have difficulty working themselves out in practice.

Yet it is high time for this industry to decide to attempt a genuine, symbolic, positive break with the past and consider that employees are fundamentally professionals who are willing to engage their intelligence and motivation to serve the cause of mobility. The leaders of some of the industry’s businesses have decided to take a unilateral initiative that consists of enacting the principle of “presumption of correctness”. This means encouraging workers to take controlled initiatives that will allow them to see that the company fundamentally trusts their professionalism. Workers and their supervisors know the rules of the game: the company has indicated that it has confidence in its staff; in return, they must demonstrate the expected professionalism. If not, after a first, then a second and eventually a last warning, the pedagogical approach gives way to a more brutal reminder of the limits that cannot be transgressed. But, from this perspective, the sanction is not the most immediate reaction and stands in stark contrast to what social audits reveal is the almost standard reaction. Secondly, the message is conveyed on a case by case basis so as to preserve a positive target for individual and corporate mobilisation.

A second symbolic measure consists of practicing more regularly what is known as positive reinforcement, which everybody seems to agree is good: saying what’s wrong is of course necessary in order to correct behaviour which doesn’t fit with the company’s desired framework; but it goes down even better when you begin by also saying what has gone well. Constructive criticism meets this objective. This is a managerial communication technique which seeks to balance the feedback expected by employees (strengths, improvements) so as to correct behaviour while preserving a high level of motivation. When this technique is used, employees accept the hierarchy’s comments because it informs them about how they are executing their mission in the company without demotivating them: they learn what they are doing well, which encourages them to continue, and they can see possible avenues for improving what they are not doing so well.

As we have seen in previous analyses, the safety dimension is central, and legitimately so, to the operation of transport companies. Yet companies have not yet carried through a third type of symbolic break in the way they perceive the “human factor”, for what prevails today is an approach based on systemic reasoning. The institution is seen as a social-technical system in which the “human factor” is no longer considered to be THE weakest link but rather

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

as an asset for safety. This will be sought for by placing all the system's facets on alert. These multiple facets belong to dimensions that need to be processed simultaneously in order to avoid disasters: technologies, processes, organisation, training, communication, people... From this point of view, identifying the scope of the system and its potential weaknesses becomes the overriding concern in order to imagine the corresponding safety loops. Such an approach accepts complexity as a given. The focus of attention then is on the risk of several weak points in the system simultaneously coming into alignment. From the conceptual outlook examined here, the preoccupation with safety gives a high priority to "quasi-accidents". Such "quasi-accidents", or dangerous situations, refer to events which could have led to various kinds of damages, injuries or losses, but which did not effectively do so because the alignment of several weak points did not take place. "Quasi-accidents" that did not result in injuries or material damages must also be investigated in order to determine the risks that need to be eliminated or controlled. However, the drafting of formal feedback and the permanent updating of references depend first and foremost on the company's corporate culture.

First, it must be able to convince all employees of the priority of the issue of safety: protection of persons and goods transported; well-being of the company employees; professional image of the companies; costs of occupational accidents, etc. In other words, there are plenty of reasons for not playing around with safety. Secondly, the same corporate culture must provide a relational environment consistent with this goal. If the issue of guilt dominates, with its corollaries (the human factor argument, the weak link in the chain, etc.) and if all workers do not feel comfortable about the consequences of what they say, then they will not push for dealing seriously with quasi-accidents.

Role and position of the HR function

At this stage, and with regard to changing professional attitudes, it is worth asking about the role of the human resources function in transport companies. Pretty much everyone today would agree that it is primarily up to the managerial line to build and share a vision of social management, as an inherent part of corporate culture along with other strategic development variables – commercial, technical, economic. If the senior managers of a company have a "shared vision", they will support and implement it all the more effectively because they themselves have developed it. From this perspective, the HR function provides support, but without taking anyone's place.

In this regard, we can say that the HR function has gone through three major stages. The beginning of the HR function in firms was characterized by the low specialization of a small number of players: It was the time of staff management. The professionalization of the HR function then involved the training of a few specialists in human resource management, who mastered the panoply of tools of HRM (appraisal interviews, training schemes, quantitative and qualitative studies): those were the HRM days. There came a third stage in which hyper-specialization was seen as an unproductive sophistication (except in terms of staffing gains with the computerization of the HR process), while the real progress of the HR function was to be sought in the greater involvement of company's stakeholders, especially management, in owning the HRM. This has become the heyday of "developing human resources". For

many companies in the passenger transport business, the challenge may well be to go from the first position to the two others, almost at the same time.

The situation prevailing among transport companies is probably ambiguous. The people who run the HR function are generally seen to be legitimate, professional and experienced. However, not wanting to encroach on the responsibility of managers, HR specialists often tend to stand back and only respond to one-off requests for advice from their hierarchy. Consequently, out of caution (to avoid the risk of rejection) or modesty (to leave the field to managers), the HR function appears too often too discreet when it comes to giving strategic and methodological support to projects.

3.2 – EQUIPPING LEADERS WITH THE CONCEPTUAL AND TECHNICAL TOOLS FOR DEALING WITH RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND OPERATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Following on the above observations, it is essential to take a step back and detail a number of aspects relating to social psychology which if they are taken into account improve business performance. This is particularly true in the transport sector, which is characterised by the special handicaps that I analyzed in the previous pages. Two sets of observations are called for: the first concern the role of local supervisors, the second the levers that companies have at their disposal for changing professional behaviour.

The strategic role of local management

Identity (who I am as a person and who we are as a group) and learning from experience (what I am able to learn from what happens to me as a person or happens to us as a group) are two permanent sources of potential anxiety. This means that seemingly innocuous events can trigger very unpleasant, even stressful questions, among individuals and among groups, whenever identity (personal or social) is questioned and every time the need for change challenges our ability to bear with frustration. To avoid this, people use the institutions to play a mechanism of defence against anxiety. Group life, and social life in the work environment, are used in this way to avoid asking too many embarrassing questions. This protective function of institutions is highlighted in a critical way during periods of change. When institutions change (changing work tools, mergers, etc.), identities are called into question, people are worried (even those who know that their jobs are safe) and the protective frames of reference are destabilised.

Management's role is crucial for supporting of this protective function of institutions against anxiety. The "boss" (leader) is invested with a function that is essential for the social cohesion of members of an organisation. When the situation is normalised, the boss acts as a beacon for affirming the values that unite the community (each member identifies him or herself with their boss) and, simultaneously, it strengthens the bonds between the members themselves, each one being individually reassured by realising that they have a corporate and positive relationship with the boss. This dual mechanism of identification, which is a basic factor of group cohesion, is put to the test in situations of change. The boss's values,

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

because s/he is usually a little ahead of his/her troops, may be at odds with those of the members who are still functioning under the original values. Then when the leader (the boss) turns round he or she finds that nobody is following. Furthermore, the mutual identification of members may suffer from the emergence of sub-groups whose values are at odds with those of the dominant group. Similarly, these sub-groups, which harm the unity of the community, are unable to identify totally with the leader. In all these cases, cohesion is endangered and the protective function expected from the institution no longer plays its role.

In the mechanisms described above, one can easily recognise the threat exerted by a group that isolates itself from the rest of the work community, as might be the case with drivers. Similarly, one can clearly see the psychological stakes induced by any change when such change is analysed in terms of identity. All these considerations justify the carriers giving local management the full importance it deserves. Indeed, whenever supervisors are effectively playing their symbolic function through their operational missions, the results are noticeable both in terms of staff motivation and collective dynamics. This role may be summarised under three aspects.

The first function of supervisors is to remind their people constantly of the significance of the company's missions and of its various trades, to "tell the story" of the community and legitimate the necessary changes. This is the price at which employees will (for the most part) be reassured (protective function against anxiety), understanding why they must change, and accepting to continue working on personal and collective transformation.

Secondly, the steering function aims for the need to state continuously where the company stands in its development. Whether the period is stable or experiencing strong social turbulence, management's role is to listen, to say whether the results are in line with expectations, to make known the path already travelled and what is left to cover, in order to make people get a feel for the challenges and the risks, and build on behaviours that are heading in the right direction.

The third function relates to the essential positive mobilisation of the people in the company, with the aim of bringing everyone's skills to bear on the goals being pursued. Leading by example, communicating, supporting, encouraging, energising individuals and groups: a whole range of actions, each more necessary than the other, contributes to the sense of belonging to the company, particularly in times of change.

The role of local management, which is crucial to the social climate and overall performance of firms, is only effective when borne by a contract that gives it credibility. The concept of "discretionary time" gives a heightened feel for the stakes involved. By "discretionary time" social psychology means the period of autonomy enjoyed (this verb points to the value of autonomy) by an operator, irrespective of their hierarchical position, in their relationship with the boss they report to. This begins with a more or less formalised contract defining the objectives, means and schedule. It ends with a reporting appointment when the subordinate and the supervisor examine together the status of the objectives, means and schedule. The more discretionary time increases, the more operators feel valued by the confidence shown them by the organisation. The chief difficulty lies in the control methods: often, verification in hindsight, which focuses on how the mission went, is in reality a form of continuous control and this empties autonomy, or empowerment, of its meaning.

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

Looking at transport companies today we see the following. On the one hand, the investment that local management implies is often limited: the number of supervisors is limited (from one supervisor for 50 drivers, for example, which is still acceptable, but up to a hundred drivers, which is much less so...). On the other hand, contracting is blurred or nonexistent, and the corresponding benchmarks are not formalized, priorities are not characterized and are in fact multiplied, confusing the meaning of the main tasks, and autonomy becomes very relative.

In this context, we understand the difficulties encountered by the supervisors in these companies, both in ordinary life and during the most turbulent periods in a sector that is marked by recurring conflicts. On a daily basis, the margins of manoeuvre that the supervisors should be able to enjoy in order to resolve the work irritants (the small chronic problems that plague the daily lives of employees) are neither clear nor sufficient (no delegation to act quickly). On the other hand, in times of conflict, these local supervisors are mostly confined to executing a strategy devised elsewhere. It's easy then for them to all sing from the same hymn sheet: if only people had listened to them about the cumulative importance of a number of irritants, the problems would not have escalated; the conflict might have been more difficult to activate by those who had decided to cause trouble, etc. In other words, "No local management of problems for local managers..."

Levers for changing professional behaviour

The description of the obstacles hindering the development of local management shows that it is essential to equip business leaders, both conceptually and technically, for dealing with the issue of social and technical management of change. Change and resistance to change is not only for others.

Closely linked to the field of motivation, which was extensively discussed in the previous chapter, the theme of resistance to change is at the heart of any managerial activity. Managers have generally learned through various, more or less enjoyable experiences, that individual reactions of helplessness and/or collective opposition expressing lack of understanding and frustration regularly contradict the strategies decided in high places. It is as if the attachment to group standards, and uncertainty experienced as too heavy to cope with, were putting a hold on the desired changes. Attitudes of inertia, conscious or unconscious, endless wrangling, in good or bad faith, attitudes of rebellion or even sabotage, noisy or silent: the symptoms may vary but the phenomenon is universal.

To overcome these difficulties, we need to start at the beginning. The most relevant solutions are only valid if they are appropriated by all those who will have to implement them. The necessarily participative nature of any major change in an organisation (a procedure, an operating mode, a work tool, etc.) is a response to two specific objectives.

1. An objective of technical efficiency: designing realistic and applicable solutions

The end users of the change must be associated because they are the ones who will have to implement the new solutions: devising realistic solutions to be implemented in the near future necessarily involves remembering how they used to be done and how they are being enacted

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

at present. Effective solutions imply genuine integration of objective data (technical information) and subjective data (behaviours, attitudes, expectations) on the part of field operators.

From this point of view, operationally bringing together “designers” and “operators” (thinkers/performers) encourages the lasting ownership of new solutions as well as better overall communication. The Taylorised split between design tasks and execution tasks is beaten back for the benefit of a better corporate dynamic that aims for greater effectiveness and efficiency, first technically and then socially.

2. An objective of educational mobilisation: encouraging the learning processes

Explanation of change is a special moment when the various players can actively prepare for the developments that will involve them. Studying and preparing for change is the best way of acquiring new knowledge and experimenting new behaviours: The motivation to learn is built up by participating. This is how learning by experience is effectively made possible, because training, directly connecting with the real world, is immediately applicable.

Gradually, new modes of relating emerge as the players learn to see themselves differently and old images can start to circulate in a context of new cooperation.

These considerations about methodology may be summarised in the following formula: the way the change process is handled conditions the quality and sustainability of the envisioned changes. In this regard, it is here useful to mention the levers which business leaders can activate to get their staff to change. It is the appropriate use of these levers that will enable businesses genuinely to draw on human resources as an asset for their development. The approach proposed here consists of three complementary entry points.

1. When an employee does not meet the firm’s expectations, the first corrective action it rolls out is to train the employee. He didn’t know? We’ll train him and then he’ll know.

However, the benefits of the training are often limited if the trade references specific to the firm are not produced to consolidate the learnings.

2. The employee knows how to meet the expectations because he is now trained and has some references to help guide his actions: but he is unable to put into practice what he has learned. In this case, the response will involve the firm much more because it is the organisation that needs to evolve so that theoretical roles can be worked out in the daily realities of business.

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

Organisational structures and hierarchical lines need therefore to be adapted to the firm's corporate project.

3. In the third scenario, the employee knows and is able but does not want to put into practice what the firm is expecting of him. The solution is then found in the management lever. The answer will be found in the employee's motivation and appropriation. Several resources, which can be somewhat complex to deploy, need to be mobilised at the same time in order to obtain lasting results.

On the one hand, the contractualisation and delegation of responsibilities need to be sufficiently formalised for all the players in the hierarchical line not only to know what they have to do but to commit to standing by their mutual commitments.

On the other hand, if the project is not carefully managed, the players will be tempted to decode in a negative way all the inconsistencies that are bound to occur in the transition process from the initial situation to the target situation desired by the company (for example, statements are made to the effect that supervisors should be responsible, yet they are not consulted; that they must make decisions, but they are not given the necessary powers to do so; and so on...).

In addition, communication will absolutely need to be in line with the project and serve its objectives.

Finally, when the local culture permits, the institutional relations with employee representatives must benefit from a "new deal" because they are the firm's second intermediating body alongside management.

In concluding this study, it seems important to redefine a point to avoid any ambiguity. Local management is not an end in itself. Companies are not charitable institutions, even if it is fashionable today to consider that they should take on "corporate social responsibility". Companies want first to earn money, to invest and grow, and share the fruits of their business (with at least a minimum of fairness). In this context, local management does not seek to bring happiness to local supervisors so that they in turn will seek to bring about the happiness of their teams, including the drivers which this paper has emphasized because of their numbers, their role and their potential desocialisation. In this regard, the first goal of a genuine form of local management is to re-socialize these drivers so as to make them adhere to the strategic objectives of the company and then to help them become a driving force for developing the company.

However, right from the first lines of this paper, I referred to the risk of seeing a project lose a part of its dynamic of social innovation once it becomes institutionalised. And herein lies the real challenge: to use local management in order to innovate socially and increase the profitability of the companies and the quality of service given to their customers.

*Social management of personnel:
A forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport firms?
REVAH Jean-François*

In this context, the modernization of human resource management in transport companies is not a purely defensive measure. It is not merely a question of asking how to avoid strikes and reduce absenteeism. The question is more ambitious: how to take advantage of the professionalism of these frontline “ambassadors” who are in contact with the public. That is to say, how better to involve them in developing local projects, how to build on their experience, how to retain their loyalty through a practice of management that meets modern social expectations. It is by answering these questions that staff, particularly drivers, will be able to better understand the challenges of change, the economic and commercial constraints of the business, corporate strategies, and more. Production staff better integrated in their institutional environment will surely deliver a better service, clearly perceived as such by their various clients (passengers, organizing authorities, contract givers, shareholders).