

Organisational Development: *A Technique for Union Building?*

By GINO GOVENDER*



* Gino was until recently with Cosatu's Education Department and is now the Head of the NUM Education Unit. This article is written in his personal capacity.

Introduction

Writing in the SALB two years ago, Bobbie Marie of NUMSA noted that : " There have been significant changes recently in the context in which unions organise in SA, as well as within union organisation itself. These changes have brought to the fore organisational contradictions which challenge the traditions of militancy and democratic participation." (Marie, SALB. vol.16 no. 5, 1992)

No-one has felt the increasing pressure of these challenges more than union staff and in particular, organisers and administrators in our unions.

Other contributions to this issue of the SALB outline the new and complex issues facing the trade union movement in the current period. Union staff are more often than not ill-equipped to deal with these issues. Yet they are called upon to take part in various negotiating fora where they come up against state and employer representatives who have at their disposal resources which tip the debates in their favour. The result is that union officials are experiencing a feeling of disempowerment and this in part is the reason for them leaving the union movement.

One gets a general impression that organisers, who are said to be the engine of our struggle, have become disaffected by the policy development processes and remain on the periphery of these processes. At the Cosatu National and Regional Schools (for middle-rank union officials) we find participants raising problems and concerns about existing policy development processes during debating competitions or in class. Important policy documents, normally not readily available to them, are grabbed and treated like gold. In fact, most learn about substantive policy issues in Cosatu and in their own union for the first time during such schools.

Building Staff Capacity

Such problems are not insurmountable. What is required is a strategy which enables organisers, administrators and branch

leadership to play an active role in union development. We all talk of building capacity. In the absence of any perfected plan, if effort and resources in training and building the capacity of our people at grassroots level were prioritised, it would contribute to resolving our capacity problems at regional and national levels. The advantage would be that resources and attention are initially devoted to the biggest component of union staff and elected office-bearers who operate at the frontline and who could play a more meaningful role in the total life of the union.

Untangling the Knot

What is required is an organisation-building and development strategy. "Organisational Development" (OD) has become the new pet subject in the NGO sector and justifiably so. It is an area that we in the labour movement have too easily taken for granted. The bulk of our daily life is spent putting out fires and

in managing one crisis after another. There is a view which says that this will not change because it's the only union life we know. This is the view expressed right from the general secretary to local officials. However, there is another view which says that through having a proper OD plan we can minimise the time we, especially senior leadership, spend on crisis management.

What is "Organisational Development"?

OD is basically a set of systems, mechanisms and policies that are put in place through a *co-ordinated* effort by all within the organisation to promote and ensure efficient and cost effective methods of achieving stated goals as set out in our constitutions.

It is probably easiest to understand OD by looking at how it came to exist in the first place:

From the late 1970s and early 1980s, most particularly in the United States, OD



COSATU summer school: In-house education is vital but it must form part of an overall development process



Worker college: Student groups from various unions. External Education units can assist internal education efforts

emerged as a new technique for helping troubled companies to handle problems that they were finding impossible to solve through traditional management mechanisms.

Traditionally, the manager of a troubled company would sit down, assess his or her company, and decide on a course of action to set the company right. Bigger companies would make such decisions after holding meetings with a team of senior managers. But the realisation grew that this method failed as often as it succeeded. And if you have tried it a few times and failed each time, what must you do? Must you give up and declare insolvency?

Companies began calling in outside consultants to help them.

The outsiders were not familiar with the *business* as such (i.e. they were not experts on textile production, or in building bridges). What the outsiders brought to bear

on the problem was

1. An *outside* view (more "objective")
2. They looked at the *whole* picture: the people, their aims, the structures for achieving such aims, etc.
3. They focussed on how the different people inter-related, and how the people inter-related with the other parts of the system. Sometimes the outsiders would have to do no more than break a logjam. They would interview various managers and "reflect back" to them what other managers had said to them - things they would never normally say to each other. After this, the company was able to "fix itself".

At another extreme, the outsiders would have to come in and force certain necessary decisions through: i.e. *tell* the management to do X, Y, or Z - something they had put off doing for all sorts of reasons.

Out of the exercise of these practical outside interventions a "school" of OD

theory developed. There were various approaches but what all had in common was the focus of getting organisations to come out of crisis situations and enter into necessary change processes by means of an integrated plan covering all the components of the organisation, by making sure they all worked together in the *same* direction.

At one level this all sounds simple and obvious, and it is.

But the failure to “put it all together” is behind most organisational failure. As we all know, we tend to hide from our crises, pretend that we are fine. And “the boss” in any organisation is no different. He or she can see any criticism of the organisation, or any mention of failure, as a personal attack on him or her. Many organisations have had to collapse because “the boss” will not admit there’s a problem.

How would OD apply to the labour movement?

It is not a new concept for our organisations. We have always spoken about the need to “build and strengthen our structures” in different contexts. Countless workshops and meetings have been held where recommendations have been made to achieve this. In fact, when embarking on a campaign, we have as one of our main objectives, the need to use that particular campaign to build and strengthen our organisation.

The issue is whether there is the commitment, a supportive environment and the necessary resources to implement them

and follow-up action to consolidate gains made.

OD is not a bourgeois management strategy but a neutral and necessary tool for strong and vibrant democratic organisations.

The changing nature of the organisation

A number of articles in previous issues of the SALB have covered the changing role and nature of the labour movement. Unions have restructured themselves into departments, hired specialist staff and the emphasis today is on skills, unlike years ago when one’s political ideology was the main and sometimes the only consideration when taking on new staff. Union structure has become somewhat complicated. The components are typically divided into:

- The Secretariat
- Administration
- Legal
- Media and Communication
- Organising
- Education
- Gender
- Research
- Regions, Branches and Locals

In a session in Cosatu’s Organisation Skills Course the union is compared to a company. Whilst there are stark differences between the union and the company, there are also interesting similarities.

Participants are asked to compare the structure of a public company to the union and the similarities go like this:

COMPANY	UNION
Shareholders/Stakeholders	Members
Shareholders Meetings	National Congresses
Board of Directors	Executive Committees
Managing Director	General Secretary
Board Chairperson	National President
Personnel	Organisers, Administrators etc.
Product	Protection, Bargaining, Education

And the comparisons go on. Union Organisers are seen as sales representatives, National Organisers are compared to Operations Managers, depot and regional sales offices are compared to our own regional, branch and local offices.

Of course, the purpose and aims of the two organisations are founded on the interests of the two opposing classes they represent but we must never be afraid or shy to look for new and better methods of organisation building.

It is primarily the task of senior leadership and education officers to identify new strategies and proven ones in other organisations that could be adapted for our purposes so that we could develop our own internal efficiency and effectiveness.

There certainly are a number of existing practices that we are regularly exposed to in our contact with others e.g. organising efficient meetings from advance notice, good time keeping, dealing with matters arising, running of the meetings and sending out minutes soon thereafter, and following up on decisions.

This does not mean that by copying or adopting a more professional approach the ideological flavour of the labour movement must change. Rather that, if we rid ourselves of these inefficiencies, we will be able to operate properly and provide better services to staff and members.

We have to remember that the words "effective and efficient" are ideologically

neutral until the different classes give their own meaning to them through different practices.

In most organisations there are three main components: people, aims and structures. In the union context it looks like the table below.

The success of an organisational development strategy, in simple terms, is to ensure that our people and structures are harnessed, prepared and supported in our attempts to achieve whatever our "people" aims are at any one given time. The OD "trick" is to link all the pieces/parts/ components together into an *integrated* set of actions.

Whose responsibility is it for the development and maintenance of a good OD plan ?

There should be no doubt that elected senior officials (workers and full-time) must carry the responsibility of ensuring such systems, mechanisms and policies are in place. The survival of unions depends on a pro - active leadership strategy. The appointment of other specialist and technical staff arose out of the need to delegate certain areas of work (education, research, media etc.) to others. Primary accountability to constitutional structures rests with elected officials and this must be supported by non - elected officials.

What is to be done ?

The first essential step is accepting that there is a problem. Then we have to take a quantum leap to enable us to solve the

PEOPLE	AIMS	STRUCTURES
Members	As agreed at our congresses/meetings	Constitutional meetings
Leadership	as set out in our constitutions, to	Sub-committees
Staff	provide a good service to members and	Staff meetings
Employers	working class	Bargaining structures
Unorganised workers		

problem.

Senior leadership must be bold enough to accept that our organisations need to undergo radical transformation in seeing us through the 21st century. An open and honest leadership approach must be adopted. Leadership must be seen to be leading and giving direction. Systems or a lack thereof must come under close scrutiny. This process must be as open and inclusive as possible, in order that the rank and file participate in identifying loopholes and weaknesses in our operations. The outcomes of such processes must be accepted, for inclusivity is futile if people taking part in the process believe that changes can be vetoed from the top.

Re – orienting the Organisation

It is clear that our organising role and responsibilities as well as the people responsible for these processes must become central in our unions. Our organising function has to become the centre of our organisations. The entire union and its resources must be re-oriented towards strengthening our organising capacity.

Our education programmes, administration systems, budgets, executive meetings, research etc must be geared and redirected towards providing support and back-up to our organising programme. For example, we must not train for the sake of training but make sure that such training is clearly linked to a development strategy.

The various functions and departments must be balanced in a strategic and considered way so as to support the overall mission of the union.

For our unions to become more effective we need to focus on the following components that will form part of an OD

“Inclusivity is futile if people believe that changes can be vetoed from the top”

plan :

Building Internal Capacity

Unions need to set up proper systems of staff recruitment. Detailed job descriptions need to be drawn up for all staff members. Staff conditions of service, including disciplinary and grievance procedures, must be written down and made accessible to all officials.

It is also essential that “management” systems are set in place and that efficient office systems, with reliable administrative back-up, are established. Efficient management will involve effective communication systems, include external, internal, verbal, print and electronic communication.

Meetings, both constitutional and otherwise, are an integral part of ensuring democratic participation. Systems of planning and running meetings must be established to ensure that such meetings achieve the purpose for which they are held.

A union based (“in-house”) training programme that supports, upgrades and updates staff on a regular basis will provide back-up to these systems. Unions also need to develop a proper human resource development strategy which produces competent and trained cadres in order to sustain efficient organisation.

Building External Capacity

Unions need to project a positive public image, to members and the broader society. It is essential that unions be seen to be providing a service that members feel happy to pay for. To do this, unions must provide effective representation and advance the interests of our constituency in various negotiating structures. Our positions must be advanced in external forums at national regional and local level. We must contribute to Cosatu’s programmes, meetings and campaigns and ensure that we remain a powerful movement and play a serious role in the implementation of the RDP. ☆