6 *The Return to Work Process at Kaiser Aluminium: A Case Study in the Practical Application of System Leadership Modelling* by Phillip Bartlett

This case study deals with the practical application of systems leadership modelling in a highly volatile situation within the American aluminium industry during 1999–2000. Specifically, this was in planning for the return of a workforce who had been locked out as part of an industrial dispute that lasted approximately two years.

Kaiser Alumina has operated smelters for over 50 years in many places including the Northwestern United States of America. More recently the two remaining plants, dating from pre- and post-World War II, had struggled in terms of technology and price competitiveness in the global market. Both of these smelters are in highly industrialised situations with a long history of largely unionised workforces. Their labour contracts and agreements involve them in a master agreement, which also covers three other Kaiser plants in related industries.

In October of 1998, negotiations commenced with respect to new workplace contracts. This led to a strike, which reached impasse in February of 1999. The United Steel Workers of America (USWA), offered to return to work under the old contract and continue negotiations. The leadership of the organisation decided that this was unacceptable due to the possibility of either another protracted strike or other industrial tactics likely to be applied immediately following a return to work (this had occurred in previous strike situations). They locked the workforce out and, as is allowed under United States industrial law, replaced them with a replacement workforce, to work for the duration of the lock out period – that is, until it was resolved.

The story contained within this chapter deals with:

- the issues and plans surrounding the end of the lock out period and
- the need to reintroduce the workforce who had been locked out across that time, into the workplace.

This was also a workplace that had changed significantly during that period.

As may be expected there was considerable industrial activity during the dispute. While ongoing negotiation occurred between the parties, no settlement or date seemed likely to be agreed on. Indeed, this was the case until very shortly before the end of the dispute. There was

considerable picket line activity, both authorised and unauthorised, and also some incidents of organised violence within the community.

The USWA also engaged in what it labelled a 'corporate campaign'. This consisted of lobbying government and business to take a stand against Kaiser because of what was seen as their unfair approach to this labour situation. Unfair labour practice (ULP) charges were levelled by the USWA against Kaiser, and whilst these charges were initially found to have no merit by the National Labour Relations Board court in California, two of the 47 charges were subsequently deemed to have some merit by a court of appeal. At this date this is still being fought in the court system.

It is also important to look at some of the changes that occurred in the workplace itself during the period of the lockout. This ended up being some 19–20 months, with the dispute in total being across some 24 months.

During that period a replacement workforce was introduced with 90 per cent of these being local area residents and the vast majority being unskilled in the industry. The Mead Smelter incurred a 300 per cent turnover across the two-year period and both smelters were forced to reduce capacity in the short term in order to deal with the lack of skill and turnover issues. Although capacity at Mead reduced to 75 per cent initially, within five months this was returned to the pre-dispute level.

Whilst there were obvious issues with the inexperience (and ongoing turnover) of the workforce, there was an opportunity for the leadership of the smelters to improve work practices and re-examine their systems of operation. The lack of preconceived ideas about ways of doing things in this workforce drove some of this, as did the lack of skill and knowledge in some areas. Many of the new work practices were put forward by the new workforce because of their lack of experience within the industry. If you like, they applied their knowledge from other areas of endeavour to their new situation. Leaders also felt that they had a lot more chance to apply good team process and involve these people in improving the work processes.

Some of the observable outcomes of the period with the 'replacement' workforce were that across the two-year period excellent results were achieved in many areas. Records in terms of both productivity and safety were regularly set. As well, supervisors in particular regularly reported that they felt they now had a role they enjoyed and were keen to come to work to be part of.

Across the two-year time frame there were also significant changes in the management team. At the end of this period, there was a new plant manager and at least two new department managers. Different departmental boundaries and structures were put in place and there were a significant number of new leaders in level I and II roles. Significant for the return to work (RTW), about 12 of the new leaders at level 1 had been promoted from either the replacement workforce or had crossed the picket line as USWA members to take staff jobs.

Overall performance during that time was one of record production and safety performance with significantly lowered costs (25 per cent – 30 per cent improvement in productivity). This was supported by a marked increase of involvement by people within the smelter (compared to previous work practices). Innovative solutions and long-term cost issues were driven by systems that involved the removal of restricted systems and utilised the willing and encouraged input of employees.

Return to work strategy

During this period, a series of working together and leadership development programmes were undertaken with all people in roles with leadership accountability within the NW Smelters. As part of these courses, discussions about potential cultural issues concerned with the RTW process occurred frequently. They dealt primarily with the differing mythologies of the two groups involved and the likely problems anticipated in trying to have a smooth transition.

It is fair to say that many in leadership roles were secretly hoping that the dispute would not end because they did not wish to go back to 'the way we used to operate'. There was significant anxiety among leaders that the return would be a battle with no real winners and that all the gains in workplace behaviour and procedures would be lost. In their mind, this was very much a no-win situation.

A 'return to work' strategy was identified as a critical issue from the programmes and formed part of the work being done by the plant general manager's team at Mead. As part of this work, an analysis was done on the mythologies of different groups about the return to work. In particular, research and analysis was done on the mythologies of managers, supervisors and the existing workforce. Theoretical descriptions of the mythologies of the locked out workforce were put forward and also tested on a small scale with people who had become supervisors from this group.

The task to develop and prepare a plan to deal with the RTW process was assigned by the general manager to one of the department managers in the spring of 2000. This formed part of a series of issues that were being dealt with on a rotational basis by the general manager's team as part of a bi-weekly management meeting focused on leadership and systems development work. An initial RTW plan had been developed in the summer of 1999 but this focused primarily on legal and industrial requirements and training. It was felt that this needed to go further in addressing the anxieties and critical issues being identified as part of the working together and leadership development processes.

The manager appointed to lead the team, selected a team from across the plant. It consisted of six managers in operating and service roles at level II and as well as human resource/organisational development support at level III and level II.

Initial meetings of the team focused around applying the 'team process' to the task as a whole. They started by clarifying the purpose of the task – that is, to develop a return to work strategy that reduced the impact of any of the operational and cultural 'critical issues', whilst maximising the opportunities for continuing performance at the level that had been achieved.

They also addressed the critical issues (for their team) as well as putting together an overall strategy for the project utilising the team process. One of the critical issues for their team that had been identified was to understand the wide range of potential issues within the RTW process. Another very significant issue was the absence of a known timeframe for the task. At this point in time, the dispute had been going for some 15–16 months and resolution appeared as close or far away as it always had during that time.

The strategy adopted was to initially attempt to fully identify the critical issues (that were seen or felt to be associated with the RTW) in a way that involved all of the people who would be accountable for part of that process. It was decided to do this by involving all of the staff working at the Mead plant in a series of small group discussions. All staff were interviewed across a two- to three-week period and asked to identify their perceptions of what could go

wrong; their fears about the return to work process itself; and their concerns about how well or otherwise it would be handled. These were then collated and prioritised.

The approximately 400 'critical issues' identified during the sessions were consolidated

Context changes

As mentioned above, one of the difficult aspects of this process is that it took place within a shifting context. The dispute extended across a much longer period than originally anticipated and there was very little sense at any stage as to the actual timing of resolution – up until very close to the end of the dispute.

Indeed after an agreement had been reached, it involved only a two-week period of an arbitrated settlement hearing which then ruled for the RTW process to be completed in a further 21 days. Additionally, the industrial/legal aspects of the RTW process were arbitrated (or agreed) between the parties only 10 days prior to the actual RTW and some of the actual language in master and plant agreements was still in dispute and subject to accelerated arbitration during the RTW period itself.

As identified, the RTW and particularly the communication and call-back process had been examined and planned for using a number of different dates and durations. Once timespan became known, the plan was consolidated and then implemented. This consolidation took place across a two-week period and once arbitration was final, it was implemented immediately at the end of that period.

Some of the significant changes in context that occurred across the time of the planning activity included:

1. It was originally assumed that a gradual workforce hand over would be able to take place. In other words, that the workforces could be phased in and phased out in order to deal with training and workload issues, therefore affording no loss in productivity and performance in the plant.

    The ruling that was passed down was for a complete 'cold-seat' change (in other words the two workforces did not meet) whilst the plant needed to continue to operate. This was decided about three weeks prior to the RTW. Specifically, a four-hour break between the workforces was decided upon and implemented.

2. Contract language and the overall shape of some of the areas of the industrial agreement were not decided until just prior to the decision to return to work. Seven collections of issues were agreed by the parties to go to binding arbitration. This process occurred prior to the RTW date being agreed. These issues included agreement parameters such as duration and rotations of some shifts, manning levels, combination of some roles, rates of pay across the plant and other aspects of the RTW process itself.

3. Further to this, there was quite some uncertainty around the eventual make-up of the workforce that would return from being locked out. This may seem obvious, due to the impact of retirement, resignation, death and other separations during the two years of the stoppage. It was, however, compounded by the need to reduce the capacity of the plant because of the changes in commercial context that had occurred during those two years. Specifically this was due to the crisis in the power generation industry brought about through a shortage of power in California post deregulation. The plant capacity was reduced from eight lines to five and a half lines.

    A further complexity in dealing with this crisis was the conflict between the language of the master agreement about the application of seniority in re-instatement (based on seniority within the plant itself) and the language of the plant agreement about its application in reducing numbers in times of capacity reduction (based around seniority within particular departments).

This led to the situation where once the people had been initially identified as wishing to return to work that had to be assumed to be starting at the plant based on their overall length of service and then moved from department to department based on the reductions from each department and their departmental seniority (length of service).

4. The organisation had initially indicated that the RTW would take place simultaneously across all the five affected sites. This led to the need to co-ordinate both the systems for recall training and return, and for consideration of the specific contextual issues, surrounding each of the five sites. This decision was changed twice and finally left with each site being able to determine their own return to work timing and process duration within a certain window.

5. The power situation alluded to above had significant effect during this time. As well as the direct impact mentioned above of capacity reduction, it introduced an element of great uncertainty into the whole negotiation and RTW process. People were to return, at least to some degree, unsure of what the future would bring. The business with the handling of the power price increases being a further bone of contention between USWA and Kaiser Alumina itself.

Key activities and events in eventual return to work process

In this section we look more closely at the actual events that formed part of the return to work plan – that is, what was actually done.

Importantly, there was a decision made that the process would be owned and run by the leadership of the business. This was specifically about recognising and attempting to enhance wherever possible, the direct relationship between leaders and their people. This applied from the first contact that employees had after the decision was made to end the dispute, through the introductory sessions, until they were working on the job in a productive fashion.

While the plan included many tasks and activities, some of the key, specific activities that occurred were as follows:

1. SPECIFIC TRAINING FOR SUPERVISORS AND OTHER LEADERS

From early in the process, as critical issues were identified, training and development activities were developed and presented. They were particularly focused on supervisors, as they would be the people that would have to manage the reality on the shop floor during the return. In all cases the training was integrated with the systems leadership models and individuals who had been enrolled in the development of follow-up sessions for the Working Together programmes assisted in the delivery and coaching of individuals. Further to this, managers at all levels were involved in the process to add both context and to coach individuals, as well as being available for feedback and identification of issues.

In particular, the training focused on attempting to predict a range of likely actions and activities that would be undertaken by the workforce upon their return – this in the context of mythologies which have previously been hypothesised. From this specific angle, likely situations were derived, approaches developed, and role-play processes put in place to both de-stress the situation and improve skills.

2. COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING SESSIONS FOR LEADERS

Sessions were held for all leaders within the plant. These focused on:

1. identifying and addressing key fears about return to work process;
2. diving specific information about likely agreement language and therefore authorities and acceptable approaches within the workplace and
3. discussing 'real' issues arising from the first two sessions and formulating agreed approaches to deal with these.

Whilst these sessions drew on support personnel, they were all conducted directly by departmental managers with context set by the general manager wherever possible. Particularly, the third session – dealing with expected and anticipated situations – was run in departmental groups with the department managers having previously discussed with the general manager specific approaches to likely issues, therefore being able to authorise the approach that would be best for their department.

Where obvious inconsistencies occurred, these were sent back to the plant management team for review and further feedback. This step was felt to be essential in terms of trying to address and dispel some of the more negative mythologies identified earlier. For example, one of the dominant supervisor's mythologies was 'they won't support us – again'. Working through all the likely scenarios, provided evidence that management had indeed thought through the correct approach to those issues and also started to provide evidence contrary to the mythologies.

As always, going through processes such as this also allowed critical issues to be re-identified and refined. A fair bit of time was spent identifying the authorised role of employee representatives (and other third parties) and identifying appropriate ways to deal with attempts to act outside this authority.

Importantly as a result of these activities, supervisors reported that after the RTW they felt (for once) that they actually had and were able to communicate information more effectively and more quickly to their people than the union representatives could. They also felt that although there was some variation in consistency, in general 'everyone was trying' and 'people were supporting us when we took a stand'.

3. SYMBOLS REVIEW

Early in the RTW training process, it was identified that symbols would play an important role in pointing out to the returning workforce (and the existing leadership) that the world had moved on since the beginning of the dispute. It was felt that it was important that as many things as possible in the world to which people returned told them 'this is different'.

To this end, both the physical plant and the processes of the pre-return training and physical return to work were examined from the point of view of attempting to 'see the process through the returning person's eyes'. A picture was built attempting to look at each part of that process through this lens, for example, what would someone see when driving their vehicle on site for the first time in two years, parking (the same/different/new place, lighting, painting), walking through the security area, finding their locker, obtaining personal protective equipment (PPE), clocking-in, first meeting with their leader, lunch room, work area, tools, work procedures, right through to clocking-out, shower and the drive out. Significant systems and symbols changes were undertaken based on this study. These ranged from seemingly

insignificant things such as re-assigning lockers on a random basis, through to major efforts to re-paint and improve the housekeeping of previously rundown areas. Other examples included new security and time keeping (electronic) systems, changes in PPE (for example white hard hats with no stickers or defacement) a swipe in and out security system, implementation of no extraneous written materials in the lunchrooms, no operation of mobile phones in the work area, the introduction of the policy requiring all employees to be clean shaven, and many others.

Again, most of these changes had been raised and discussed at the sessions mentioned previously, which allowed for likely reactions and ways of dealing with those to have been addressed. I think it is fair to say that the leadership of the plant would now believe that the impact of symbols and symbolic system changes was underestimated during the initial working with the model. Further, that they would now say that they can be a major contributor to cultural change when applied firmly and fairly.

4. OUTPUT TEAM PLANS TO ADDRESS AND 'OPERATIONALISE' ISSUES

As mentioned above, managers tasked their superintendents to develop implementation plans with their supervisors/team leaders. These were integrated into the department plan at departmental leadership sessions and the issues sent up to the GM team for resolution.

It is also important to note that all of this activity and the outputs from it were continually being sent back to the RTW planning team and integrated as appropriate into the 'manual' and documentation.

5. SUPPORT RESOURCES

Extra support was provided to ensure smooth transition and the ability for leaders to focus on their core work – that is, leading their people.

It was identified fairly early on that, in the initial phase of the RTW, there would be both a significant time requirement for supervisors and other leaders to be training people in their new roles, as well as being aware of the potential for behavioural disruption and attempts to re-establish old work practices. This led to a decision to task people from service and support roles, and other sites, to provide leadership support during this initial return to work period. These people were identified early and assigned to a particular crew. They were also (importantly) allowed time to work in that role prior to the return to work. This meant that when the return to work actually occurred, they knew the role well and had at least a basic understanding of the skill and level of performance required of team members, as well as the appropriate behaviour in a particular area.

Importantly in this process, the roles which each of these people were to play were analysed, and authorities and accountabilities made clear. So for example, discussions were held as part of output team planning as to whether support supervisors 'could', 'should' and/or 'would' counsel people about behaviour and/or issue discipline. In terms of modelling, it was clear that leaders had the appropriate combination VARI authorities (The minimum authorities required by a manager with regard to their team – see Chapter 12), and trainers and support people did not. This was also made clear to their teams prior to their return having been reviewed in detail during off-site training.

In most cases, support requirement was not needed for as long as was anticipated as people returned to their normal roles.

6. IMMEDIATE, PERSONAL RESPONSE TO RTW DECISIONS

Once the return to work decision had been made there was an immediate (same day) and direct, personal response to each of the employees affected by the decision. Communication sessions were also held with existing employees to be very clear about dates, requirements and the desire the organisation had for them to stay on and continue to work up to the changeover.

Letters were sent the same day to people eligible to return to work from the locked out workforce. These letters set out very clearly the organisation's desires for the process and the schedule of accountability of the individuals to indicate their willingness to return to work, as well as a date for commencement. Once people responded to this, contact was normally made by phone with the individuals to explain the individual schedule of training and familiarisation issued to each person. This was to ensure the facilitation of an orderly process. The result was that in most cases, within three days of receiving the initial letter (assuming they responded promptly), individuals had a clear understanding of the requirements for attendance, involvement and training for the return to work. Time was taken to be clear on the expectations about the RTW process being part of the individual's 'work'. As people were being paid for their participation in this process, it was clearly indicated that from the first day of the first off-site meeting, they were considered by Kaiser to be back at work, and therefore systems and behavioural expectations that would normally apply in the workplace would also apply during the RTW.

7. OFF-SITE TRAINING SESSIONS – DESIGNED AND ORGANISED

Whilst the organisation and logistics of the off-site training were important (and impressive), another very important aspect of them was the decision to ensure that the first exposure of any returning people would be with their leaders and managers.

This was focused on clearly establishing the ownership of the process and re-enforcing, as quickly and as well as possible, the company's belief in the need for effective, direct relationships with people.

The first session of the programme that all people attended was therefore with the general manager of the plant. In it, time was spent outlining the current (new) context of the business and comparing that with performance across the last ten years. The GM also reviewed the historical relationships in the plant and provided his view of what was needed to have a future, in terms of cultural and work expectations.

Department managers also contributed to these sessions to describe broad rule and contract language changes as well as other significant broader issues. Also, importantly, pay and conditions, sign-on issues, return to work processes and other 'housekeeping' issues were dealt with during the first half day of sessions.

Care was taken to present this and all other information as 'what the current situation is', rather than 'what we have been able to change since you left'. The sessions were scripted, written and rewritten based on input from a variety of people within the plant who were asked for their reaction to both content and language.

After the initial sessions, the half-day or day was spent with their department manager and their direct superintendent to discuss work processes and practices. These focused on department-specific issues, for example, new jobs that might have been created or combined; new work rules; behavioural expectations; safety processes and so on; new leaders (a number

had changed) and other support personnel; new work teams; and the specific requirements for the first few days back at work.

8. OTHER TRAINING, PRE-RETURN

As well as the above (context setting and briefing), 're-induction' had to occur for all people returning to the workplace. Fourteen groups of approximately 70 per group were trained across the 14-day period.

Their experience included:

- the general meetings and the departmental meetings that were referred to above;
- meeting specifically with the team in which they now were;
- basic skills and knowledge training (generic and also specific to the new role);
- physical screening – drug and alcohol screening and
- training for any particular certificates or operating licences that would be required.

The logistical issues associated with the type, amount, timing and order of activity were examined and decisions taken to match the purpose of the overall exercise – considerations such as the participants' experience supporting the establishment of a clear relationship with their leader. For example, a decision was made that everyone would go through the initial meetings even though, when they subsequently went to a drug and alcohol screening, they may be delayed or suspended from returning to work based on that screening. It was decided to over-engage people, and take the risk of training too many people rather than the opposite.

9. PHYSICAL RETURN TO WORK

As can be imagined, this was the 'test' for the plan itself. The transition needed to include an effectively organised and coordinated process for the last shift of replacement workers to exit the plant (2.00am on Saturday morning) and for supervisors and other staff to hold the operation until the returning workers commenced at 6.00am. The exit process included handing in of PPE, exit interviews and the authorising of their last pay.

All leaders were tasked to focus on effective transition during this period. In particular, as a lot of people had not worked in such a hazardous environment for quite some time, a keen focus was placed on safety and engaging people quickly in the work to be done. As mentioned, each output team had met to discuss the application of the overall standards and systems, as well as the need to do this in a way that would not cause significant negative reaction while maintaining the standards.

This strong intention for consistent application of the new symbols and systems from day one was evidenced by the fact that any variation suggested to them also had to be presented to the GM's team for discussion and decision. Further, as part of this, authorities and accountabilities for action on systems such as on-job coaching and discipline, was taken up at least one level. For example, a supervisor in the plant could not issue discipline to any of their people without approval from, at minimum, their superintendent and in most cases by their department manager. How this was to apply (and exceptions) were made clear for each level through the meeting and planning process discussed previously. For example, superintendents were authorised to deal with issues such as attendance and time-keeping, as well as breaches of a serious nature under the Code of Behaviour (the final decision on these was then referred on). In the short term, all decisions to issue any form of counselling or

discipline were authorised by department managers who met with the general manager on a daily basis to review these decisions and check for consistency.

Obviously, much of the initial time was spent on training people in new roles. The supervisors normally conducted this with the assistance of the support staff that were assisting them. The process was for an initial hands-on demonstration, followed by qualifying future operators through observation, coaching and review. It was a standardised system for this process and it needs to be pointed out that it differed significantly from previous attempts to 'qualify' people to be able to undertake certain roles. Significantly here, individuals who previously would have felt they should or would be 'grandfathered' into roles were refused authority to pursue certain roles and had to be re-assigned.

10. DAILY REVIEW AND SUPPORT

There was a daily review at department and plant level and minutes were provided by e-mail to all staff relating the particular issues that occurred during that day and any decisions about them.

There was an initial plan to develop a 'war room', which would have provided employee relations and other support on a 24-hour basis to augment the above. This was not undertaken as the system described dealt very adequately with all of the issues that were brought up.

Another significant aspect of the transition was role clarity about 'operations', 'service' and 'support' functions. During the initial training sessions with staff, it had been discussed at length that support functions (such as HR and safety) were not to be seen as the rescuer by the leaders or team members.

To that end, significant pains were taken to ensure the leaders were the obvious, timely and accurate channel of communication for all issues, relaying answers and decisions to the team members themselves personally. For example, pay concerns or issues were relayed from the supervisor to the pay office and back, rather than as had traditionally occurred when the team member was asked to go to the paymaster and fix it. Similar examples occurred in terms of grievances, safety issues and other issues requiring support.

11. FOLLOW-UP

Approximately a month into the RTW, a sample of people were personally surveyed about their reaction to the return to work process. This took the form of an individual phone call from people in the HR department and focused on gathering the individual's opinion about how they found the process, what they felt about it, and issues or concerns they may have had with it. It was felt that this was important in again reinforcing the direct connection between managing the business and the people.

Further to this, a review was carried out with a sample of people in leadership roles across the organisation, to ascertain their reactions to the process, as well as identifying any issues and concerns that they saw with the RTW process or with the operating process at that point. Approximately four months after the RTW, a series of sessions were conducted with leaders at all levels in the plant to review the return to work process specifically in terms of the application of systems leadership modelling. Questions addressed included: Where did we particularly use the models well? Where did we use them badly? And where were there opportunities when we could have used them but we in effect failed to do so?

KEY TOOLS

A useful result of the analysis of the RTW process has been to identify which parts of the models were felt to have been the most useful during the process and the RTW itself. When managers from the plant discussed this they agreed that the following models in particular were seen as adding the most value:

1. Persecutor/victim/rescuer (and focus on effective direct relationships)

This was seen as critical in driving the direct relationship, ensuring that leaders had a focus on dealing directly with their people and not allowing third parties to intervene inappropriately.

It was felt that to reinforce the contribution of every employee as a team member, they need to expect the required behaviour from them. The way to do this is to maintain the relationship with them and not allow for a triangulation.[1]

2. Systems design models and methodology (and follow through in implementation)

As mentioned above, a significant number of systems were re-examined and redesigned. An important aspect of this was firstly the consistent work to go through the design process and secondly the implementation of these to develop both ownership and understanding of their intention and operation.

3. Symbols

I think it is fair to say that it is now felt that symbols are a valuable tool for leaders within the organisation in managing culture. Certainly their impact was underestimated early and probably became more apparent as people themselves sat back and looked at what had changed across the time of the dispute. Particularly I think the use of symbols to create ongoing dissonance with the returning workforce gave indication that they were operating in different contexts (whether they were encouraged to believe management verbalisation of that or not).

4. Team process and involvement

It was felt that the specific and deliberate use of the team process to ensure involvement in the initial development of critical issues, followed by the iteration of solutions of approaches, helped not only identify a more robust set of issues and solutions but also drove both engagement and ownership in the process. This also led to a much more shared sense of 'how' we as a group were going to address the issues. Additionally, it undoubtedly led to a greater feeling of support – I'm not alone – in performing key accountabilities across that period.

5. 'VARI' Authorities

As mentioned above, specific attention was paid to lessening discretion for team leaders and managers in order to drive consistency and fairness of application to the new systems and

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1   Karpman, S. 'Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis', Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 1968, vol. 7.26: 39–43.

behavioural expectations. This was felt to be successful and important as this factor could have been a particularly vulnerable area due to a large proportion of the returning workforce holding negative mythologies about how they would be treated by 'management' on their return (that is, looking for evidence to reinforce existing mythologies about lack of trust and consistency of behaviour).

6. Authorities and accountabilities

This model is particularly well used in clarifying the roles, authorities and accountabilities of the support staff who were assisting the supervisors and superintendents in training and supervising returning team members. As mentioned, these people were not seen as leaders of the work group but as trainers and support for the team leader and had a core role in coaching and monitoring team-member behaviour.

Results

From the above, you can imagine a great deal of effort and energy was expended in both the planning and implementation stages for the RTW.

An important question is – was this effort worth it in terms of outputs, both in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and the cultural effect of the process?

The following are observations made by the management themselves about the results, process, and the effect that the implementation of the team process in particular and the other model had on the return to work.

The return to work change and transition was effected at the Mead plant with greater speed and more effectiveness than at the other four Kaiser plants. It was completed within 21 days, which was the fastest of the five plants and this occurred within a more complicated environment (given the power situation and curtailment that had to occur) than that at the other plants.

Estimates of financial and other impacts on the business are:

- In comparison with the Trentwood plant, which is in the same general vicinity (although it is part of the 'rolled products' group and takes some of the Mead plant's molten aluminium output), the return to work being some two weeks prior saved somewhere in the vicinity of US$330 000 in wages impact alone.
- It was estimated by the plant GM that overall cost savings of some US$800 000 were realised.
- Perhaps, at least as importantly, there was no dip recorded in either operating or cost performance with the change over of workforce.
- There was a slight dip in safety performance short term – although it must be borne in mind that a number of people on 'compensation' or 'health' benefits carried over from prior to the dispute, and in many cases people were returning to physically demanding labour for the first time in two years.

Significantly, records were set in all areas including safety and performance for October and November and overall for 2000 year end. This was from a solid base from earlier in the year with the replacement workforce but indicates that the operation lost little in terms of any of these factors with the transition.

Culturally, the judgment of the GM and his team was that that leaders within the organisation felt very much in charge of the process and confident that they had both the authority and the support of plant management to work directly with their people and handle challenges as they occurred.

A conclusion that I believe can be reasonably drawn from this is that the leaders' capability in this situation (whilst it was in part from activity that occurred prior to the RTW) was greatly augmented by being able to work from a stable and confident base in dealing with issues upon the return to work. Unlike the previous reported experience of leaders, standards for behavioural expectations and work processes and so on did not slip during the RTW period and, although there was probably a need for more engagement of people in the workforce, as time moved on, opportunities still existed for that to occur and, in general, lines of communication were not as closed as many people predicted they would be. Certainly there was little perceived 'push back' from much of the workforce during the first few months after the return.

In line with the above, it was felt that the whole exercise reinforced the value and utility of the model as an effective way to support leaders doing the work of their role. Significantly (and this had been a deliberate strategy from the introduction of the model), leaders saw this work as part of their own work accountability, not some extraneous programme of techniques, tips and tricks. Almost all leaders were felt to have gained some value (to a greater or lesser extent) and generally the easy acceptance of discussion around the models and their applications and how each person could improve the way they could use them was taken to indicate that people felt that they were useful and had moved along the road of seeing their 'people' work as significant and important within their accountabilities.

Postscript

Perhaps unfortunately, the story around the return to work process at Kaiser Mead has not as happy an ending as it would appear at first glance. The changes in the electricity production systems within the state (which were alluded to earlier) have meant that the organisation has chosen to completely shut down capacity at both the NW plants and there is significant question over how long it will be until a restart and to what extent that will occur. Because of the controversy surrounding the power issues and the way that individual companies have handled them, there is significant uncertainty and potential unrest amongst both the workforce and the community as would be expected in such an uncertain situation. I think it is fair to say that the USWA is striving to take the high moral ground in this process and it is difficult to know exactly what will happen should a restart occur.