

Mowing Hazards

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An article in a Dow Chemical Company publication reports that the department began an extensive chemical control program well aware of but well prepared for potential problems.

Spray crews are trained and guided by agronomists as to legal problems involved, the article stated. Crews make a point of telling land-owners what is being done and why it is being done.

They keep a log showing when and what areas are sprayed, what materials were used, wind direction and velocity, and other pertinent details for future reference.

Test Plots in Kansas

Kansas offers an example of one kind of chemical weed control tests that are going on to reduce rights-of-way maintenance.

Thompson-Hayward Company of Kansas City, set up a dozen test plots, using Casoron, a dichlobenil weed killer. Typical problems areas were selected — interchanges, overpasses, in medians and along fence rows. The tests were started in the winter of '67 and checked last summer.

Two formulations of Casoron weed killer were used. The first, Casoron G-4 (4% active ingredient) was applied to shrubs and trees at the rate of 150 pounds per acre. The second formulation, Casoron G-10 (10% active ingredient) was applied under rights-of-way fences at 200 pounds per acre.

Casoron is a pre-emergent weed killer and is applied during the winter when weeds are dormant. Applied with a hand spreader, Casoron G-4 and G-10 are granular formulations.

Plantings in the test plots included winged eunonymus, pinus sylvestris, maple, pyracantha, honeysuckle and pfitzer, andorra and upright juniper.

A June inspection by Kansas Highway and Thompson-Hayward officials found 11 test plots to be weed free and one with about 85% effective control. There was no evidence of damage to plants treated.

Jack Miller, landscape foreman for the area, commented, "that he was extremely pleased with the results. Good weed control," he added, "has been demonstrated in both ornamental plantings and in fence rows.

"This should mean a savings over hand labor, which is expensive and hard to find."

Listen . . .

STRIKE

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CAN STRIKES be avoided? Not all, but many could be. In my experience as consultant and college teacher, three common management policies often make labor difficulties inevitable.

First, managements assume that the proper policy to follow in personnel and industrial relations is to stick to the letter of the contract—no more, no less.

Second, most top executives believe that the most prudent policy to follow whenever improved methods or new equipment or new rates are introduced is to make no special and extensive explanation to union officials or work force.

Third, management policy usually assumes that union leaders and negotiators accurately reflect the sentiments and demands of union workers.

Legalistic Approach

Consider the first—that a legalistic approach to labor relations is the soundest policy. For example, executives wait for stewards to file grievances which are then minutely checked against the contract. Past practice (i.e., precedent) becomes a key factor.

Too many of these executives do not understand that a union contract is not the same as a contract to buy so many lawn mowers or sprayers,

or bags of insecticides or truckloads of sod. Goodwill is more important than the letter of the contract.

But the legalistic approach recognizes only the letter of the contract since this requires no attention from the head of the company and can be delegated to other people in industrial relations. These latter people usually have no leeway outside the explicit written agreement.

Unfortunately, this conduct leads to continual irritation of union stewards, members and local officials, since union contracts do not cover all contingencies. This conduct also leads to excessive use of arbitration, which arouses such animosity among union members that they often welcome a chance to strike back at management when the opportunity arises at contract renewal time.

No Explanations

A *second* management policy that leads to strike activity is to introduce improved methods and new machinery in order to boost productivity—but not to make any explanation for these moves.

In the absence of advance explanation that the new elements are all being introduced in order to protect the company's future and thus the employees' jobs, the new methods and new equipment are regarded as the forerunners of over-publicized automation and eventual job loss. Under these circumstances, the new equipment reinforces the theory that the interests of management and employees conflict.

LIKES

... Can Be Avoided

Employee Desires

A third management policy that aids and abets strikes is for management to believe that what the union officials demand for their members is identical with what the rank-and-file employees really want. Very little is actually known by most managements about what the rank-and-file employees really want in the new contract. But do the union leaders know?

Labor leaders say they know. But research indicates that union officer preferences often do not coincide with member preferences.

Professors E. E. Lawler and E. Levin reported in one study (*Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, July, 1968) that "the officers (of unions) tend to greatly overestimate members' desire for additional cash. . . . Part of this overestimation can be attributed to the officers' own high preferences for cash, causing the officers to raise their estimate of the members' desire for cash."

Specifically, as the study indicates, in Company A, union officers far overestimated members' desire for higher pay, seriously underestimated hopes of members for longer vacations in proportion to service, and missed completely members' wishes for early retirement privileges.

In Company B, union officers overestimated members' preference for shorter work week and for more money, and underestimated the desire for sick pay and disability pay. Union officers believed that mem-

bers would be wholeheartedly behind a major push for more money, when the members were actually lukewarm on this point and more avid for different benefits.

It is inevitable that any list of union demands will not fit the needs of all members of a union, but as is common, when business agents or union negotiators come from the outside, the chance that they will not adequately reflect the members' wishes is enhanced. The outcome? Rejection by the local members of the contract that is prepared (and often recommended) by the union officers.

Within a two-year period, 1966-67, this has occurred in 1,937 instances, according to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service—and 20 percent of them were followed by a strike.

Members' increasing rejection of contracts and subsequent strikes may be attributed more and more to this union neglect of members' opinions. By the same token, the rejection of contracts may also be attributed to company ignorance of employee thinking.

New Methods

What can be done about these three misguided management policies? A large California wholesale nursery had had a steady sag in profits for no discernible reason. Came time for negotiation of the new contract, the members rejected the recommended settlement and a three-week strike ensued.

A new contract was offered involving a rearrangement of the package (which added 1¢ to the cost). This was grudgingly and only narrowly accepted, and the employees returned to work. Productivity still was lamentable; grievances increased to a high level; arbitration became more costly; and waste, spoilage and customer complaints increased.

A year's project was started under the aegis of a consultant employing the "listen to the employee" technique. This involved systematic interviewing of all 180 employees throughout the nursery with union approval. Within the first six months some interesting facts emerged.

Within the past two years, the nursery had added about 35 employees in order to meet the needs of the expanding economy. These people were added without proper indoctrination or proper training.

The employees said the foremen screamed at them to increase their output to a speed that their equipment was not capable of maintaining. They also said that even if the machines could be run that fast, it would be impossible to do so without a great deal of spoilage.

Older Employees

Older employees resented the wage scales at which the new (and often younger) people were hired, since it gave no extra recognition to the older workers. After a 90-day probationary period, the newcomers received almost the same scale as the old-timers. This was the only way

A Tree Grows in the Darndest Places

This five-foot aspen undoubtedly was the tallest tree in Greensburg, Ind., when this picture was taken!

It adorns the tower of the Decatur County courthouse.

Grover Brinkman, a freelance writer and photographer, took this picture some months ago. He noted that the tree "had been there for a long time."

Some proof of what he says can be obtained from the 1966 edition (and perhaps earlier and later ones) of the Rand McNally Road Atlas, which notes in red above the town of Greensburg: "Tree Growing in Courthouse Tower."

Brinkman was told that the tree has been chopped back on occasion, but the roots are so firmly wedged that the tree hasn't died.



avoid layoffs) was alleviated by setting up a rotation system, so that all employees took their turns. Resentment died away. In addition to all this, a host of petty gripes and grievances were cleaned up—e.g., locker room, better maintenance of their equipment, and so on.

The steady climb of productivity, the fall in waste and spoilage, even the decreased labor absenteeism and turnover—all showed the effects of "listening to the employee" and acting promptly and open-mindedly on that information. A custom-tailored supervisory training course was later introduced to instruct foremen on how to handle such problems in their departments.

Nobody Listens

Many of the common problems of employee morale—some of which erupt into costly strikes disguised as demands for more money—are directly traceable to management unawareness of such multitudinous employee discontents.

The larger the nursery or the wider the area a contract applicator or tree company serves, the more an individual worker feels left out of the picture, the more he feels a need for some method of being able to communicate with someone in management, of someone to *listen* to him.

Trite as this may seem, this observation flows from 25 years of listening to employees in every industry in every area of the country. This is set out in greater detail in an earlier article, "Labor Relations: Dealing with the Rank-and-File Rebellion" by A. A. Imberman, Personnel Magazine, Nov./Dec. 1967. (Single copies are available free by writing to the author care of WEEDS TREES and TURF.)

The First Line

Most managements believe they receive reliable reports about employee morale from foremen. But foremen are kept busy checking and judging the work in their departments, maintaining discipline, enforcing company policies and safety regulations, and dealing with union stewards.

Supervisors must be retrained to become the humanizing influence that has been lost between worker and management. Unfortunately, most managements have turned the supervisors into traffic cops — to push production as their sole duty—with the result that they have no time for anything else.

I recall one Illinois contract applicator that had gone through a

the company could hold the newer employees in a tight labor market.

On occasion, whenever work was slow in any one department, the employees would be "farmed out" to other fields which were busy. This, of course, was a method the company used to avoid layoffs, and hence, the manager believed, would be appreciated by the employees.

However, the employees resented being transferred to unfamiliar work in which they were not adept. As a result, they were constantly upbraided by the foremen. Sometimes younger employees were kept in their original field while some of the older people were forced to move.

From this total situation, festering in most of the employees, came the decline in productivity, and the carelessness that upped waste and spoilage, and so on.

The continuous flow of such information which came from the employees through the specialist interviewer led to some immediate changes.

All new employees, and employees with less than six months' service, were put through a training routine which they should have had at the beginning. They were instructed at their equipment—sprayers, tractors, etc., as if they had never seen them before, their questions were patiently answered, they were taken on a tour of the whole nursery—including the offices—to see how their work fitted into the whole operation.

Recognition

Vacations were lengthened (with the consent of the union) to reflect years of service, so that the older workers no longer felt like the older child when the new baby arrives and gets all the attention.

In addition, service clubs for five, ten and more years of service were started, to give recognition to the old-timers. A modest house organ was started to instill a pride of company.

The problem of temporary transfer from one field to another (to

two-week wildcat strike, led by one obstreperous local union leader. One supervisor, on his own time, sat down with this wildcat leader, and calmly discussed their problem. The story the supervisor received was simple.

The local leader had come from a farm, lived on a farm, loved the farm, came to the city so that he could earn enough to move back to the farm. His mother had died. His father had been on the farm alone, corn dried up, no hired help available, nobody to talk to about it. He was frustrated, and furious with the world. A vast accumulation of trivial employee gripes and grievances without any apparent response from company officials and union officials had triggered his frustrations; his anger at the company and union boiled over.

Upon the wildcat's end, the company sent him home for four weeks to straighten out the old man's affairs. He returned to become one of the applicator's finest men. Had this supervisor had the training and time to listen to the men in his crew as part of his regular duties, this, and perhaps other disputes, may have been dissipated in thin air.

Throughout the country are skilled consultants who specialize in guiding managements in installing such labor-management communications systems. Usually, these men are connected with a college or university. (Interested company executives may secure a list of recommended names by writing to the author care of this magazine.)

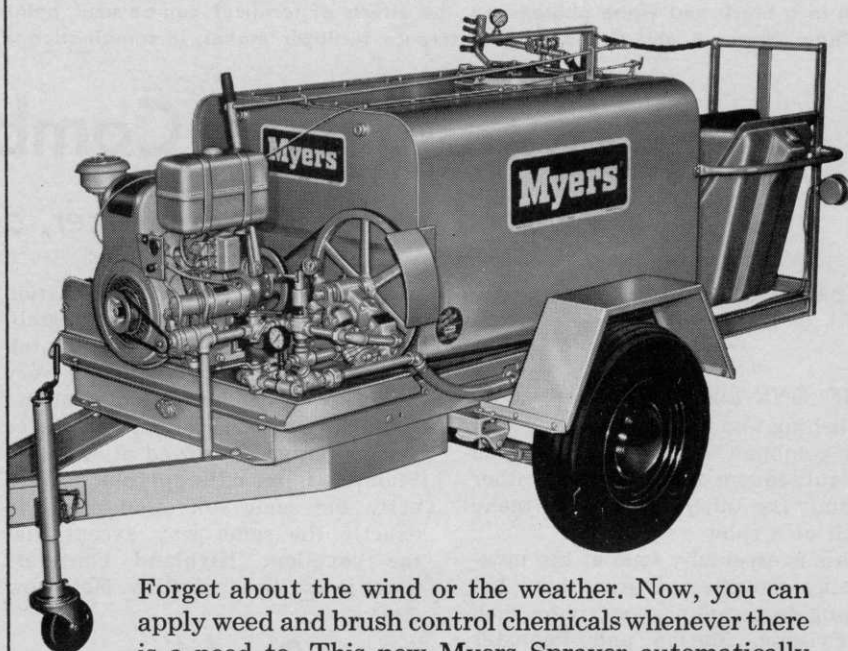
Other Effects

Of course, worker dissatisfaction and dislike of the company do not always find an outlet in dramatic walkouts or strikes. *Dissatisfaction more often is reflected in high spoilage or waste, low productivity, high absenteeism, or high turnover*—and this state of affairs can drag on for years without an outburst. In these circumstances, it is vital for management to listen systematically to employees in an attempt to discover what is really breeding worker discontent.

In brief, a company, large or small, can have good employee relations only if there is a good *two-way* communications system. However, even in managements persuaded of the soundness of starting such a system, there is always a disposition to wait until trouble arrives at the gates. By that time, the situation is too far gone. The time to listen to employees is while goodwill prevails. The trick is to keep it that way.

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