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Keeping the Faith

The organisation of the chapter on Strand Global Systems differs from the preceding three because we want to make it easier to explain how organisations can get things right as well as wrong. We have already learnt about some of these things in Chapters 5–7 but, from this point, we want to adopt a more focused approach. Rather than concentrating on what our employee respondents told us about themselves, the troublemakers and the consequences of ill-treatment, we shall make space for more analysis of those features of the organisation – and not simply the policies explicitly concerned with dignity at work – that might help to reduce and manage trouble at work. Aspects like leadership and workplace culture benefit from a more narrative structure. We hope this structure allows readers to understand that, whether senior managers realise this or not, Strand is actively engaged in a process of managing trouble at work.

We interviewed a senior HR director who worked at Strand's global headquarters, who knew the company she came to work for in 2009 had a global reputation in sophisticated engineering design and manufacture. What surprised her was how loyal the workforce was to the company and how proud they were of its reputation. The way these employees felt about their employer could not have been further from the disillusion expressed by Westshire employees in Chapter 7. As we shall see, Strand was just as complex an organisation – with internal markets, many divisions, worldwide locations, complex multidisciplinary teams and a huge array of products and services – but it had a unified culture that the trust lacked. The first employee engagement survey she had seen was done shortly after the new director arrived, when our interviews with Strand employees at the company's Longstretton location were under way. She found 'the pride that individuals feel in working for Strand is quite extraordinary', and engagement levels far exceeded those in the Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies they liked to compare themselves to. The director believed that the employees considered themselves to be uniquely fortunate to work for such a company. No other business had the same reputation or offered the same opportunities for challenge and fulfilment, but the key to it all seemed to be the belief employees had in what Strand did, a 'belief in what we produce, that it's worthwhile, that it's of high quality and that it's something that they want to be personally associated with'. We found the same thing in our interviews with employees.

In the United Kingdom, this belief in Strand made them an employer of choice for engineering and science graduates, and it was very highly regarded in the day-to-day work lives of their employees. The director said that it provided not only motivation but also compensation for the things people did not like about their work:

[It] gets them up in the morning and that rises above some of the ups and downs that you would otherwise experience quite normally in 'are you feeling motivated today, what's annoyed you at work, what's motivated you at work'. It seems to give a sort of balancing effect that says, well, 'okay I go up and down but do I absolutely believe in this company and want to remain part of it and feel excited about the sort of work that I'm involved in?' That has been an overwhelming 'yes', despite some of the things that we know we need to do better.

This all-powerful assent went a long way towards explaining why Strand employees were less likely to experience ill-treatment or, at the least, less likely to dwell on trouble at work when it did occur.

We found it hard to find employees who would talk to us about ill-treatment at Strand despite our own, the employers' and the trade unions' best efforts, and we decided to increase the proportion of interviews with managers and union representatives in order to find out why there might be less trouble at work. Management practices and policies are therefore given more attention in this chapter than the others in Part Three, but let us begin by exploring the relationship between employee commitment, or belief, and the apparent dearth of trouble at work.

How Strand employees minimise trouble at work

Strand employees tended not to sow or cultivate the seeds of ill-treatment because this would have prevented them from aligning their behaviour with their belief in Strand. In the first place, that belief committed them to collaboration and there were hardly any jobs in Strand which could be managed without it. An engineering team leader and a technician in manufacturing engineering explained that this meant colleagues would give whatever help was needed. The technician also made the point that the way work was organised in Strand around projects meant that collaborations were continually renewed because everyone moved around the company and worked in a succession of different teams. We noted that this arrangement provided fairly frequent points at which people would naturally exit from difficult situations if trouble at work was brewing.

For employees to do their jobs and act on this belief in Strand, they had to get on with people. This engendered mutual respect and care not to give offence. In interviews with all levels of employees, we found people were keen to explain the importance of humour to good working relations and

the sensitivity needed to make sure that colleagues were not offended. Collaboration also required openness and the atmosphere at Strand was described as both open and relaxed. The team leader believed, 'you can tell your manager nearly anything, I think.' From the point of view of senior managers we talked to, openness had to be constantly nurtured because time pressures sometimes made it difficult to give consideration to everyone's opinions. Openness also helped to ensure that if the seeds of discontent were sown, they did not get watered. A project accountant described her PDR as a very open process. For example, she had the opportunity to comment on any judgements made in the PDR which she did not think fair. The importance of fairness was one of the recurring themes in our interviews and we shall return to it.

We have already seen that one threat to openness and collaboration was shortage of time, and the trade union convenor for salaried workers at Longstretton told us how some people might be so overloaded with work that they would not 'see your priority as their priority'. Our interviewees mentioned other threats including organisational politics, power struggles and competition for roles. For the most part, these threats did not damage openness and collaboration because, our interviewees told us, people protected good working relationships by exercising self-control, compromising, not holding grudges, keeping things in perspective and, in an oft-repeated phrase, treating each other as adults. The self-control of Strand employees was also evident in their dealings with corporate customers, some of whom could be very rude and disrespectful, 'but you're kind of up for it, it's customers and it's not something that you take personally', according to a chief programme executive. This was no mean achievement since the executive was referring to a customer who repeatedly humiliated him in public. The situation was made all the more difficult because the customer was also a competitor. Moreover, like other global corporations, Strand ended up in litigation with customers and suppliers now and then, and it might have been that the underlying problems in this case were very serious ones.

Most Strand employees seemed to know, however, that they were required to keep their cool with customers, however difficult the situation – indeed there was Strand training to help them do this. A commercial development manager was scandalised when her boss upset a customer-competitor. She described herself as 'much more of a people person' – a sociologist would say, someone who was good at 'emotional labour' – and the distinction between this and technical competence suffused our interviews. The manufacturing technician introduced earlier was prepared to forgive the dreadful behaviour of 'a team leader who was renowned for probably being very technical but a real crap people person' because of his expertise. Sometimes that team leader might not suffer fools gladly, but that was only because he cared so much about his work, 'but I have to work with him, so I want a reasonably good relationship.

So instead of knocking him every five seconds, I just swallowed the fact that he's quite good at his job and all the rest.'

How workplace minorities cope with ill-treatment

We came across evidence that it was more junior employees, and particularly young women, who had to exercise this kind of forbearance, and there might have been a structural reason for this. As we shall see later in the chapter, strategic thinkers in Strand now felt that promotion solely on technical competence had been a mistake made in the past but which they would have to deal with for some time to come. Strand had also been very slow to recruit women and it was therefore likely that many of them would be in junior positions at the mercy of the poor people-managers. Most of the young women we talked to – like the project accountant we have already mentioned and a specialist illustrator in her twenties with a graphic design degree – were prepared to take this ill-treatment on the chin. The accountant explained to us that she had one rule for work and another for life outside Strand. She would not put up with ill-treatment outside but at work she was worried that if she seemed 'too upfront, too forward or direct, people may see me as being too rude' and her working relations and promotion prospects might be affected. She was aware that there were fine judgements to be made, however, since she had observed that assertive people did quite well in Strand.

A woman logistics manager confirmed it was not just the more junior women who did not make an issue of ill-treatment; other employees would 'take the flak throughout their working life ... I just think they just don't want to make it worse, because then you could be snubbed.' The (male) technician we have already quoted thought that many people would put up with bullying in social situations in Strand and was worried about the long-term consequences for them. We gently probed the young woman accountant to tell us what sort of ill-treatment she been required to put up with. It included bad language in written and verbal communication and jesting which was offensive and which she would certainly object to outside the workplace. As the programme executive, himself with a mixed Asian background, said, it was not 'an overtly PC organisation', and not being a white, British male might entail putting up with an awful lot. For the accountant, with a white father and a Nigerian mother, the offensive jests included disparaging references to her background. If she took offence she would be told it was only a joke, and she should not be oversensitive, and she was learning that the only way to respond was to give as good as she got. Most women in Strand knew this, but most still found it hard to do because, no matter how sharp they might make their responses, they were giving tacit legitimacy to the offensive opinion.

The one woman who was capable of humiliating her tormentors was becoming something of a local legend. As the logistics manager said, 'she is a

one-off, where she will be very abusive and verbally intimidating to the guys.’ This was one of a tiny handful of woman fitters on the shop floor, who told us, ‘there is a lot of banter that goes around and some of it’s a bit inappropriate, I suppose, but it depends on your sense of humour I guess. I find it funny.’ The older fitters with ‘daughters your age and stuff’ did not get involved though they, like the younger men, were unlikely to ask for her help. In her opinion, ‘Male fitters and people like that don’t like to admit that you could probably come up with a better idea than them.’

The young woman fitter said she did not mind fairly constant sexual banter and innuendo because she had ‘quite a male sense of humour anyway, so I’m not really bothered by anything. I’m quite hard to wind up, whereas Danielle, the other girl, finds things a bit harder to take sometimes, and she gets a bit upset about stuff’. She might be better ‘at taking it’ than Danielle, another fitter, but she did not complain for the same reason others at Strand put up with ill-treatment: she wanted to ‘fit in’. ‘If you want to work here with men you could not ask for special treatment.’ That also ruled out joining one of the special support groups that existed for Strand’s women employees. She thought such groups undermined the demand that women should be ‘treated equally’. If women had problems, they should complain to the manager just as the men had to. The logistics manager, a woman with long service in Strand and experience in more senior jobs, thought that managers might be blind to the fact that women in Strand were not treated equally. A male line manager on the shop floor, where the young woman fitter worked, assured us that white-collar female employees had no problems walking through the shop floor even if they were ‘extremely attractive’, but some women told us how ‘very uncomfortable’ it was for women to do this. As for the young female fitters, the line manager had noticed their ‘quite courteous’ treatment from the older fitters but not the looks and remarks that made Danielle rush to the ladies to change out of a specially issued blouse that Strand had asked its female employees to wear for a VIP visit.

To be fair to the line manager, he thought that women white-collar workers put up with ‘absolutely disgusting’ things said to them away from the shop floor where there was more of a gender balance. However, the young woman illustrator, who worked on the staff side with one other woman in a group of 25, preferred a ‘very, very male-orientated workplace ... because you don’t get half as much bitchiness as you do when you work with a bunch of women. It is so good, it really is, it’s a chilled out atmosphere and everybody just gets on with it’. The male technician thought there was not enough respect shown to women in his office: ‘They think oh great I can talk about sex to a woman at work and she’s quite nice looking. So they’re getting a bit of a kick out of that, which as a bloke, for me I understand that, but sometimes, they can take it too far.’ Indeed, he wondered if this might explain why, at the meeting he attended at which we explained our project to Strand employees, two-thirds of

the employees were women. This was the first time in his career at Strand he had been in a room where the majority were female: 'Maybe it's all to do with ill-treatment being towards people's feelings and all things like that. Blokes aren't so open about it, so maybe they don't want to bother with that.'

Thus far, there has been no suggestion of people's careers being affected by their gender – as long as they turned the other cheek – but the engineering team leader we have referred to thought her manager wanted her out of her job, and she did not know whether it was because she was a woman or because she was Greek. The (female) commercial development manager thought women were not always valued in Strand, and her manager had told her he would not employ women if he had a choice 'because of maternity leave'. He also thought 'women are just too emotional'. Like the project accountant, she did not know how much of this was teasing since he was one of the younger, more enlightened men in the organisation. She had heard racist comments made in a similar way: 'they think it's okay to say something like that to you and that you just agree with them basically ... I don't know if it's because they're a manager and you're not going to question them or whatever.'

In her experience at Strand, sometimes with 40 people reporting to her, the logistics manager had found 'some of them didn't like having a woman being their boss', and they would 'blank' her and 'they would actually say as soon as I'd left the office, I'm not taking that from a woman. I don't take it from my wife at home and "I'm not taking it from that bloody jumped" ... what was it, "jumped up little cow" or something'. These days she was more likely to be treated, to her face at least, with schoolboy ridicule. These men were graduates yet 'it's just like kids, where you get two, then they do the little whispering, and then they look at you and they start giggling. And you're thinking you're grown men, for God's sake. And then, there can be a couple of them firing stupid comments at you'. These comments, made when she was making presentations at large meetings, undermined her confidence in her grasp of technical information and, like other women, she felt she had to be 110 per cent on top of her brief, not 70 per cent like the men. If she reacted to the comments, she would be told she was 'hormonal' and at times felt she simply had to walk away. In this case, it is clear that good working relationships were sometimes strained to the limit, and she had seen other women, including the women fitters, keeping quiet in meetings perhaps because they felt intimidated.

BME employees were even rarer than women at Strand, and the proportion of BME employees may even have fallen over the years (despite Strand's much admired community outreach programme) with successive reductions in the blue-collar jobs where there had been a BME presence. Those BME employees we interviewed generally had a tale to tell about the racist treatment they had received over the years. An engineer who had been there for over 25 years told us he had put up with exclusion and disrespect, the company telling him his ill-treatment was all in his mind, and subsequent mental illness for which he

was then stigmatised. The persecution was aggravated because it was from close colleagues and because his family felt similarly isolated and persecuted in the all-white community where they lived and where they had been subject to violent attacks. (The blue-collar convenor confirmed that National Front and British National Party (BNP) members had worked for Strand; indeed he had very recently forced a steward who made it known he was in the BNP to hand in his card.)

Another BME employee, again with very long service, had worked his way up as an apprentice but was now leading a team of white-collar staff. He had endured lots of racial abuse when he was a supervisor on the shop floor, and ‘clearly I think the responsibility lay with Strand, and not with those individuals, to sort these things out, and that didn’t happen.’ He also suffered persistent and repeated racial discrimination in promotion, which others were too weak to challenge and where the ‘right to manage’ was used to head off union intervention and sideline ‘morality’ and ‘honesty’. He thought that Strand ‘need to manage the managers, and they haven’t been able to do that, and they still can’t do that, because it still exists now’ rather than waiting for individuals to change their ideas. All the same, he thought things had got better in the past 20 years. This was partly because he was now well-established (and had greater confidence) and because those he now worked with had better attitudes. Abuse, including racial abuse, still went on, however, even though the company has tried to improve things over the years, and he would agree with the woman logistics manager that ‘you’ve got to be a little bit better than the others’.

How Strand risks creating trouble at work

To recap, the belief in the product, and loyalty to Strand, and engagement in the work, encouraged people to behave well, to sort out any unpleasantness that did arise and put up with ill-treatment when it did occur. This might not simply mean laughing off offensive remarks but also putting up with unfairness and possibly detrimental impacts on one’s career. We discovered that there were reasons why the company had to reinforce the original belief, loyalty and engagement because they were threatened by organisational politics, power games, bullying, misogyny and racism. But we should now add to this list of threats some things that the company itself wanted to do which might put it all at risk.

Insecurity

The senior HR director knew that reputational capital people had when they entered the company could not be relied upon: ‘It gives you, sort of ironically,

is it all there for the losing? So you have a good start but there are a number of other factors that come into play that will mean individuals feel engaged and motivated in the endeavours of the corporation.’ And nothing could be better proof of this than that, when the 2009 employee engagement survey was being undertaken, and we were starting our interview programme at Strand’s Longstretton location, the company was in the process of making lots of its employees redundant, creating plenty of opportunity for squandering reputational capital. However, we had several employees telling us that made them *less* likely to complain and more likely to want to prove how engaged they were for fear of losing their jobs.

Even in the most uncertain times, however, most of our interviewees thought that Strand compared well with other employers they knew from their own experience or had heard about from family or friends (the NHS, a firm in the same sector as the organisation in Chapter 6, a government body, for example). They were ‘thankful to be working here because they do look after their staff, despite what anybody says’ (specialist illustrator). And ‘you’re protected by lots of rules and things’ at Strand (technician in Manufacturing Engineering). As the chief programme executive said of the NHS, ‘you hear the stories and all the strife coming out of there. I really just don’t recognise much of that in here.’ The logistics manager was pretty typical when she said there were few employers who compared in terms of facilities, working patterns and the chance to work around the world. A project officer, who had similar feelings, told us Strand was ‘a great company to work for and over the years I’d never had a problem, never, ever had a problem. They’ve always supported me, whether it’s in training, higher education, they’ve always been there. Great people and obviously great experiences, you can travel the world and there are different roles’. There were plenty of hints here as to how Strand built on the initial reputational capital, and we shall be coming back to them, but we need to know more about the threats to the belief and commitment.

Performance and rewards

At the same time as the redundancies, though not necessarily directly related to them, there were all sorts of changes to reward structures. It was in this area that the chief programme executive thought most trouble at work was likely to happen: ‘I mean the main issues are sort of corporately driven issues.’ One of the most fraught of these issues was Strand’s intention to move blue-collar workers over to some sort of performance management that was individually based (as on the white-collar side) and not done via collective deals. But the issue was not just one of the company risking blue-collar workers complaining of ill-treatment, if collective deals were scrapped, because white-collar workers were already complaining it was unfair. This was what the senior HR director said came through loud and clear in the 2008 engagement survey. We certainly

heard white-collar complaints that some people were still getting something for nothing a year or more later, although the director was proud of the way this problem had been addressed subsequent to the redundancy programme.

The project accountant felt, for example, that real performance was not rewarded (with promotion, for example), whereas Strand rewarded 'pretending to be good' and getting on well socially. She did not think this at all fair, though, of course, we have seen how such a pattern might work well to keep the lid on ill-treatment. The chief programme executive thought that, in an attempt to be scrupulously fair, and give poor performers time to improve, the slow and deliberate way in which poor performers were handled could disrupt team-working and nurture a sense of unfairness. The technician said failing to deal with poor performers on the shop floor could lead to lower productivity amongst their colleagues but suggested that management did not act because they feared 'they'll all drop tools and then they haven't got anybody building anything. Management walk on eggshells with the shop floor'. While it was right that Strand should aim to be a more understanding employer than most, it was not too much to ask for 'an honest day's work'.

In 2009 the process of addressing individual blue-collar performance had stalled. The white-collar convenor explained they were presently stuck with a local agreement for performance pay which was specific to Longstretton and which was far too blunt to discriminate between the performance of individual blue-collar employees. Instead, the bonus was paid to 80 per cent and sometimes 100 per cent of the shop-floor workforce. The lower end of the staff, the ones closest to the shop floor, looked at their tiny bonuses and thought this very unfair when the workers on the shop floor did not seem to be doing much for their bonuses and did not have much responsibility. This perception of unfairness could be exacerbated by the shift-working premiums that works people got (but very few staff worked shifts). He now had members who had shifted from blue-collar to white-collar roles wondering why they had done something so silly.

A specialist employee relations consultant with Strand described a similar 'difficult managing situation' in which the plethora of local agreements at Strand meant that different categories of workers doing the very same job could be 'rewarded on different bases'. This would be an increasing problem because mixing up different categories of workers was exactly what Strand wanted to do as part of its push for more flexibility from the workforce. The old bargaining structure was now creaking because things changed so fast that agreements were very soon out of date: 'The nature of the business now is that people have to be far more flexible, whatever role that they are in.' We shall return to this issue later, but we need to note here that the trade unionists at Longstretton thought that Strand was trying to get more for less out of the workforce by circumventing binding agreements that were still in place.

The blue-collar convenor told us Strand turned a blind eye to individual managers breaking a 40-year-old agreement in which a pay rise had been moderated in return for time off, say to attend the dentist, at the discretion of the manager but without having to make the time up. They were taking advantage of employees' lack of knowledge or reluctance to complain. He thought this happened when managers were 'feeling a pressure always to get the hours out, if they don't get the hours out. But there is a system to use and they should be using the system'. He told us that when members complained to them they put an end to it, and one of our shop-floor interviewees confirmed it happened to her and she got her half day back which she missed because of snow. Not least because of her no-nonsense approach, the story she told us had the clear potential for trouble at work: she believed her manager refused her the half day's paid leave as a way of 'getting back' at her or 'making a point' to show he was in charge, 'It's like you don't have any control and I can screw you whenever I want, basically. So I got the union involved in that and got half a day off.'

The blue-collar convenor gave other examples of Strand taking advantage of its employees. He had members who worked extra hours at management request, to meet a deadline for example, and did not bother to claim the time off in lieu that they had earned. This was extra hours on top of the annual 100 hours' flexibility agreed (for extra pay) in the 'new working arrangements' agreement in order to get new factories sited at Longstretton. The other Longstretton convenor, representing the staff, confirmed all of this. In particular, managers were using the new working arrangements agreement to try to bamboozle the workers and the union into letting them get away with the extra hours. For him, the biggest issue with the company they were facing at the time was when 'the members get pressured when they're trying to claim back extra hours that they've worked'. It was important because he was not prepared to 'allow additional hours to mask inefficiencies or lack of staff'.

The senior HR director explained the company's point of view. The 'new working arrangements' were 'a particular collective agreement that was struck with a number of unions across the United Kingdom, not all of them, and it was struck in different ways site by site. So you had very little similarities', and Strand now wanted standardisation and not just across the United Kingdom. Strand wanted UK blue-collar employees, in particular, to realise they needed to measure what they offered for performance management and rewards against what Strand could get outside the United Kingdom in its increasingly global operation. The key thing was the 'individual comparability' between shop-floor workers, which the 'collective mindset' saw as inappropriate. The director also talked about new manufacturing techniques, which offered massive improvements in productivity, being perceived as a threat by long-serving blue-collar workers who grew up in a UK-only company which prized 'artisan skills'. For the works convenor, the move away from such skills, to

training for a task and not the craft, was short-sighted and would prove damaging to his members' job security and the company's long-term prospects. He thought Strand was being ruined by short-termism, centralisation and rule by accountants (not engineers).

Industrial relations

There was a lot more than rewards at stake here and there were therefore multiple risks to the conditions which minimised trouble at work inside Strand. For one thing, we found Strand a relatively untroubled place to work, due to local agreements and local discretion. They underpinned a partnership in which the union cooperated with management to make sure that ill-treatment did not occur or did not fester into trouble. As the works convenor said, 'usually what I'll say to them is, talk to your manager and if you don't get any success from your manager, come back to us. And nine times out of ten, they never come back.' If they did come back, still unhappy 'we'll have a meeting with the manager and see what's going on.' This sorted it out one way or the other; there was never a need for an employment tribunal. This view was confirmed by a line manager.

The company was risking a lot when it ran into – albeit mild – trade union resistance to organisational change, especially in relation to flexibility, because the unions frequently helped to pour oil on troubled waters. The works convenor summed it up this way: 'We've got a very, very good working relationship with this company, up until now, touch wood, with discipline and people not carrying out their work. And we always have a chat to them and normally ... we don't have to go any further.' But it was not simply managers at Strand who welcomed globalisation and the ending of local agreements. We have already seen how employees referred to the globalisation of Strand with pleasure because of the opportunities it gave them, and many of our interviewees welcomed the changes that came with it. The BME engineer who had put up with years of ill-treatment said that it meant that 'they are having to adjust procedures about dealing with other nationalities'. A BME programme leader thought Strand would now 'pick the best people from wherever they can get them'. He also thought that there was a new openness to other ways of doing things which was more in line with international practice, whereas the only standard used to be how things were done at Longstretton (not even elsewhere in Strand's UK operation).

In effect the programme leader agreed with the senior HR director's view that local agreements were an unnecessary complication – with over 2,000 live agreements in the United Kingdom alone – and not 'fit for purpose'. In Longstretton alone, there were five different grievance procedures. All of this made the role of managers unnecessarily difficult and, unless it was simplified, the devolution of some HR functions, in line with modern HR

practices, would be very difficult and risk causing ill-treatment and/or making it unlikely that ill-treatment could be dealt with promptly. The director may have been right to think this could cause all sorts of problems which could lead to trouble at work, but the danger seemed to have been exacerbated by a lack of resolution on the part of the company before she joined. The staff convenor cited 'a lot of the agreements we struck with the company over the years, talking about flexibility and no demarcations, and everybody doing anything they're asked to do provided they're trained'. But 'the company has never kind of really driven that', so it came as a nasty surprise to some when they found Strand taking flexibility and a 'can-do attitude' seriously: 'just waiting to be told what to do is not the way the company expects people to behave anymore.' He gave the example of Strand vacillating over whether blue-collar workers needed foremen, and the extent to which they were really prepared to empower shop-floor teams to get on with things themselves.

Management roles and responsibilities

In the modified matrix style of management Strand adopted – a long time ago in blue-collar work, much more recently for white-collar employees – employees moved around from project to project with local control over what they did resting with the managers there. At the same time, their careers were in the hands of a 'resource manager' elsewhere in Strand who, amongst other things, handled their PDR and, maybe, helped them rise quickly through a fast-track procedure. In some situations, resource managers had helped employees we interviewed to escape or, at least, cope with ill-treatment from a project manager. But the matrix style is also renowned for creating risks because it contains more potential for conflicts over priorities. The technician, for example, talked about having 'four people that you're answering to really, and you're trying to keep them all happy. And they've all got possibly different agendas ... and they've all got their deadlines. The project's got their deadline and also they want theirs done now'. This placed considerable onus on the people at work on a project to behave in the way that Strand employees habitually describe as 'treating each other as adults'. In other words, the matrix style both capitalised on and put strain on the unity of sentiment and purpose that Strand employees felt.

The complexity of the matrix style of management was recognised as a real problem by the HR consultant. There could be confusion about whom the employee was reporting to, not just in terms of who had priority ('because there is always a competition for resource to get things done') but who they should go to in order to sort out particular problems (so directly relating to trouble at work). A supply chain manager told us he could not keep tabs on his team to understand who might be overworked. He could not know what their day-to-day pressures were and we should be under no illusions

that there were *lots* of pressures in Strand. Managers were highly loaded and, as everywhere, senior managers like the chief programme executive thought being given an unmanageable workload or impossible deadlines was ‘part of the management challenge’. The staff convenor thought that some of this was being passed on, for example, ‘managers put that in the PDR that working additional hours is a good thing’, and

there’s an inconsistency with the way they’re treated as managers, like additional hours is an expectation. So if they’re treated that way then they kind of say ‘well, if you want ... if you want to be a star like me then you’ve got to do the same as me’. So there’s no great surprise that they transmit what’s put on them.

He also thought Strand was adding to workloads irrationally and unnecessarily by giving people things that they did not need to do. There were others who agreed wholeheartedly, for example, the technician who described team leaders having to waste their days with ‘chart engineering’ – making up charts for reports and presentations rather than doing real work that added value, ‘so there’s all those frustrations and the clock’s ticking’. According to the line manager, the shop-floor teams could also be diverted to ‘mundane work’ which did not add value, and held up work on other things, but management would not want to hear about the hold-ups and the team ended up putting in extra hours.

For some managers, part of the intensification of managers’ workload – including their share of charts and mundane work – followed the distribution of some HR responsibilities to them. The line manager, for instance, complained of the workload entailed in handling the teams’ training needs. He was backed up by the staff convenor who said that discharging all of these new responsibilities took time, and the attempt to provide online solutions was hampered because of the complexity of collective bargaining arrangements. When managers reached the wrong conclusions, this created more work for them and the possibility of complaints of ill-treatment. Even if they got it right, there were risks of resentment in the new system: why should employees have to tell their managers all about their health problems if they did not want to? Only the manager could now book an occupational health appointment, though the HR consultant did not think it was a requirement of the system that employees had to disclose the nature of their problems to their managers in order to do this. On the shop floor, the line manager was also displeased by the extra work this entailed. We need to bear in mind that all HR activity, if mishandled, can exacerbate, or even spark off, ill-treatment. The risk of setting fires was increased by putting non-specialists with no knowledge of the law, and shaky knowledge of company procedure, in charge of the matches.

Of course, there was help to be had online and there were also training courses but, as the line manager told us, ‘with my own training, basically

I just work longer hours if I need to fit different training in'. Not that managers could always stretch themselves in this way on behalf of people in their teams. The HR consultant thought that 'sometimes people feel ... that they don't get enough support from the management ... And, in some instances, there's a lack of it because managers are too few and overworked, perhaps. So they don't really have the time to do the coaching that they should do'. The manager of the Greek engineering team leader subjected her to weekly bullying; she said he set her up to fail, and to overwork to try to please him, but at the same time he humiliated her. He was generally bad at giving support to the people he was responsible for: 'Because I was appointed to this job not with loads of experience; it could be because I didn't have loads of experience and he didn't have the patience to deal with me.' She said he complained about being under loads of pressure (though she wondered why he thought this a justification for passing the pressure onto others when she herself did not do this). Elsewhere, the commercial development manager complained she had had little support because her manager thought it would be 'spoon-feeding', and she was stuck with learning the job the hard way when he could have helped her to be more efficient and productive, not making lots of mistakes. ('I think he's once said one thing to me about you did that well. That's in the whole five years I've worked for him.')

Strand's informal approach to trouble at work

Let us take stock. We have seen that Strand counted on a level of commitment from new employees that most big companies could only dream about and that this was an ideal situation for reducing trouble at work. We have also seen how the normal threats to these conditions – office politics and racism, misogyny and other prejudices, badly behaved customers – occurred, and we have seen how Strand's strategies for reducing costs and increasing productivity put the basis of the collaboration and openness at risk. We have covered redundancies, changes in reward structures and work organisation (flexibility, empowerment and intensification), deskilling, changes in HR including the performance and development of employees. We would expect that Strand would take steps to minimise the risks to engagement entailed in all of these.

Some aspects of changes in work organisation were actually calculated to increase commitment. So people may not usually like change but they do sometimes welcome empowerment and other things which increase collaboration and cooperation like flat hierarchies, more autonomous team-working. The supply chain manager, for instance, said Strand had 'gone into self-contained teams as such, and you feel part of the task you're doing'. These things encouraged the more 'adult' behaviours that we know from the interviews that employees

wanted, and which also served to stop sowing or nurturing the seeds of trouble at work. Sometimes this happened in a straightforward way; for example, the chief programme executive enjoyed not being ‘second-guessed all the time’. The way his teams were performance managed – against cost, schedule and quality – also mapped on well to what the individual team members wanted anyway. In other cases, it happened not because adult behaviours were directly encouraged but because people had to build them up to help them follow through on their primary commitment to the product. As we know, the modified matrix put extra demands on workers. The possibility of confusion and conflict increased, and there needed to be a lot more deliberation and decision-taking locally; otherwise there was gridlock. If the employees were already deeply committed to the product, then they would align their own behaviours to make this work. They would demand of each other that they behave responsibly, as adults. But the company also made its own contribution to ameliorating the potentially damaging (to commitment) aspects of changing work organisation.

Leadership

The senior HR director explained that Strand now saw leadership as just as important for managers as technical knowledge (‘it’s no good to us to have somebody who is technically brilliant but actually can’t lead a team of people to deliver’). She wanted to talk about what they were doing to achieve this in 2011, even when they were still grappling with the fact that as in ‘any other large organisation’ people got ‘promoted on the basis of technical excellence’ and then gradually moved up the organisation until they were no longer using that technical expertise but ‘find themselves doing more of the people side of managing and leading that perhaps is not their natural skill set or something that they particularly value’. For the director, the remedy was to tell managers exactly what behaviour was valued, change how they selected people for ‘critical roles’ and change how they were performance managed, making it more about how they managed people than it was at present: making sure they were rewarded for certain behaviours at each level of managers and leaders. While it was a work in progress, some of this had already been in place 18 months before when we began our interviews.

The HR consultant explained that they took on graduates each year for technical/professional development but also, now, a group to be developed as ‘leadership people’: ‘There is work done at early points on in trying to instil in people the understanding that they have to observe what’s around them in terms of the teams that they work with and that they may need to intervene when they see issues going on.’ He told us managers were told to watch out for any behaviour that was unacceptable and report it (and we heard from the chief programme executive that this was now happening in his programme). The HR consultant had to admit, however, that there might be more incentive

for managers to report their teams were running smoothly and hope such trouble fizzled out because reporting problems might reflect badly on their own performance. All the same, the staff convenor was complimentary about the leadership programme that made it possible for the poor people skills of ‘technically brilliant’ managers to be addressed. He also knew that poor managers had been eased out into more suitable technical positions. However, one managing director had been particularly important in pushing for this, and there had been less progress since she left Longstretton: ‘We do have some people who are, in my opinion, wholly inappropriate still managing teams and creating havoc, and not being dealt with.’

Communication

Another priority area for Strand was communication, which had three elements: the physical layout of their workplaces, face-to-face communication and electronic resources. The physical layout, as the chief programme executive explained, was all about making ‘sure it’s easy to communicate and get in formal meetings together’. His team had the typical Strand seating arrangement in the same enormous room: ‘There’s everybody from, I guess myself, down to some of the admin assistants, and we all have the same desks, the same kind of environment, and we all sit pretty much close together. In some natural groupings I guess, but we’re all in that room, pretty much.’ It was not only this executive who thought such groupings important, and the importance of (fine-tuning) the physical layout to help with collaboration and other aspects of what he called ‘complex interaction’ was made clear to us.

Most of our interviewees praised Strand for the great improvements made in face-to-face communication in the past few years; indeed occasionally they thought it might now be a bit over the top. The ex-foreman, now an ‘efficiency sponsor’, thought it was ‘far superior’ to what it used to be with weekly meetings with shop-floor staff and a promise of answers to questions by the next meeting. There might be still room for improvement but the workers could ask any question they liked, and there were also communication boards and a diary showing who would be visiting the area. The young woman fitter on his team was a little less enamoured of the weekly meetings:

Yeah, you’ve got the quiet ones who just sit there and just want the comms to hurry up so they can go to lunch. And then you’ve got the ones who just want to yell about everything. And then there are the ones who are kind of in the middle and actually have a point to make but don’t get listened to because there are people yelling over the top of them.

The project accountant had the same weekly meetings plus regular, individual-tailored briefings for a team of about 30: ‘on what’s going on in the business. And on top of that, we have those ad hoc briefings if there’s anything happened. Yeah. So for employees, we all know what’s going on in the company.’

For Strand, electronic communication meant much more than sending newsletters by email. The HR consultant said everyone had an account on the intranet, but despite some investment in it lately, not all works employees had PCs they could easily access to get on it. There were PCs in resource areas they could get access to, but this was not very convenient. This was important because a lot of the resources the company wanted to make available to employees – for example because of the model of distributed HR responsibility – were accessed through the intranet. Individual employees could use it to find out about

company policies on leave, on family friendly issues, on all sorts of things. It includes such things as harassment and whatever, and it provides information for the employee about what our policy is, where they should go to if they want to follow up something, access to any, if they need any, particular forms to go with something, then links to things like that.

He thought this was empowering because employees could find out themselves without having to contact HR or their manager.

Personal development

While Strand had only begun to pay close attention to leadership and communication relatively recently, one of the long-standing characteristic features of employment there was that considerable attention was given to staff development and multi-skilling. As mentioned earlier, development usually involved people moving round the company, so it allowed them to escape from troubled situations but, more importantly, it reinforced their commitment to, and belief in, Strand. Of particular importance here was the way that the resource managers were able to make the employees they were responsible for feel that their development plan really was personal. The feeling of being treated as an individual was reinforced by the assessment tool Strand used to score employees' development and identify their needs. The kind of people Strand employed thrived on this. Take the supply chain manager who was

trying to grow. When I take a role, I want to try and grow and move as far as I can. So it's not so much just taking a role and saying oh right, I'd be good in that position. I try and think about where does it want to go? Where does that organisation want to go which I'm working for ... have I got the right skills to start off with? And that's the challenge from thereon basically to establish those skills and actually try and enhance what I've got currently, so I can move on to something else.

In a PDR it could be the employee who pushed for this – 'they're open to suggestion and just put your hand up and discuss where you want to go next – or it could be the manager asking if you have thought of trying something different.' Either way, Strand was regularly making sure individuals were 'on the right path or ensuring how they could enhance the individual in that respect'.

The supply chain manager said Strand gave him ‘all the resources and facilities’ he needed to get the skills and an open door to apply for new posts – so far, he had always got what he wanted. He had also taken Open University management courses and, like many others at Strand, his horizons were not limited to Longstretton, and he really wanted to pick up the ‘different cultural awarenesses’ so that he could work abroad and maybe even leave the company. The Greek engineering team leader had the same idea, but first she was taking a break to complete an MBA at one of the United Kingdom’s very best management schools. But personal development was not something that was only available to, or only prized by, Strand employees with Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) (like the supply chain managers) or degrees (like the engineering team leader who already had a master’s in engineering). The technician we have mentioned several times before joined Strand as an apprentice more than 20 years ago, and he was still driven by the need to develop himself, do interesting work, and take on new challenges. He moved away from too much ‘chart engineering’ (see above) a year ago; for example, he did not have

an issue staying at Strand, it’s a good company. But I want to be happier for longer. And I could see the job role deteriorating to a technical dogsbody. So for that reason, I applied for another job, which is the one I’m in now, which is manufacturing engineering, which I am over the moon that I took, because it’s great.

This was normal. As the engineering team leader told us, ‘I get quite bored easily and I move jobs quickly, and the company has allowed me to do so. I think they look at the type of people that work in the company and, depending on their needs, they allocate people quite wisely, I think.’ The individual attention paid to personal development in Strand helped to keep the Longstretton workplace relatively untroubled.

Management of illnesses and disabilities

Another important factor in Strand’s relative success in minimising ill-treatment was their sickness policy and associated good managerial practices. Given the significance of sickness policy in the BWBS and some of the other case study chapters, this is no surprise but, at first glance, there was little to choose between what Strand did and what the other employers we studied did. In fact, the commercial development manager we talked to thought Strand had, as in many things, a

traditional attitude, you have to keep the workers in their place kind of thing. And sickness ... is a big deal ... I learned recently they have some kind of measure, where they measure how often you’re off sick and what days you’re off sick, and they give you a result at the end of it. I don’t know what mine is. Apparently, it’s best to have three days off than it is just to have one day off.

She was referring to the Bradford Score (see p. 209) but we should add that she told us she used sick leave to cover for her children as she was a single parent and could not find alternative childcare. Certainly Strand used a similar framework for its sickness policy to more troubled employers, but the difference lay in how they operationalised their policy within this framework.

We heard a case study of how a manager worked with this policy from the line manager who described the way in which he, with the help of the man's colleagues, carefully and sensitively managed the absence of an employee with clinical depression in a manner which Walker and Fincham (2011) consider to be all too rare. The key to this was low-key but regular communication throughout the many months the man was absent. None of this was seen as invasive because the manager had a 'good rapport with my guys I guess and that helps', but the policy was also well-understood and widely seen as supportive by staff and certainly not as coercive. Nevertheless, he was well aware of the potential problems or pitfalls: 'It is quite a delicate situation, sort of just teeter around it and just have a chat with him to see how he is and how he is getting on, just to touch base really.'

Several employees mentioned the possibility of stigmatisation of Strand employees with impairments. With the potential for the stigmatisation of mental illness, there was always the possibility of non-disclosure and it was fortunate that this employee had told everyone he was depressive, including the manager. That meant 'everyone kind of helped along with the situation really ... and his colleagues kept in touch with him as well and made sure he was alright and just ... because they're friends really'. He actually found it helpful to his recovery to keep in touch and come in occasionally. Not that everyone could be so open; another member of the manager's team had a serious physical health problem and told nobody, not even when he went off for a major operation: 'no one knew where he was basically. And I didn't have his mobile or home phone number because he didn't want anyone to have that either.'

Good practice in the management of sickness absence meant paying careful attention to the return-to-work process. The employee with depression was phased in with part-time working and regular monitoring of how he was feeling. The line manager understood he had to 'tread carefully' and forcing him into full-time hours would have meant 'he's going to snap again and it's not going to be good for him or the company'. We wondered how he had the space to do this and whether there was any pressure on the manager to meet targets and get the work done. How could he afford this leisurely return to work? He agreed about the pressure – describing it in careful detail. Because he and his team worked on several projects at once, they had pressure from multiple sources. The people who were responsible for delivering those projects were all quite capable of pointing out that there was a man missing from the team

working on their projects. The line manager insisted, however, that this might mean juggling, and sending work to some other sections/sites and working weekends, but it would not mean pushing someone to come back to work before occupational health said they were ready.

The white-collar convenor agreed. He thought Strand would 'bend over backwards to try and rehabilitate' workers with serious illnesses. This could include part-time working, changing duties or place of work, 'all kinds of things, provided they can kind of see an end to it'. Strand did not mind their employees managing their illness or condition at work, but they had to see a potential end to a sickness absence or they would move to a dismissal as incapable of the job or ill-health retirement (this was confirmed by the HR consultant). The convenor explained how this entailed difficult judgements; for example, there were some mental health problems that would eventually respond to medication and others that would not. He also told us how Strand HR countermanded a manager who wanted to sack someone diagnosed with bipolar disorder who did have effective medication (and the convenor knew very well that this would have been a DDA case if Strand had sacked this employee).

How did the convenor think Strand fared in respect of the DDA more generally? He had had a few potential DDA grievances that had all been very complicated. He said that once you got into a case it always seemed extremely difficult to see how the DDA could be applied to the benefit of the worker. He implied that this difficulty lay in the nature of the legislation rather than Strand's behaviour, and he told us, 'my genuine impression is that they will try to avoid breaching the law to the point where they're going to get claims against them' and they would make reasonable adjustments. Even though he gave Strand grudging praise in this respect, he thought disability was the poor relation in the equality and diversity field, perhaps because the idea of different treatment was so challenging. In effect, he argued for a move towards the adoption of the social model of disability. The blue-collar convenor was more critical of Strand. He said they did not have many employees with disabilities, certainly on the works side, and those who had become disadvantaged after they joined the company were 'penalised through ... people not understanding their disabilities'. He had one such case at the moment where a young employee who was covered by the DDA had been made redundant several times and was being refused a transfer to a job 'she's quite capable of doing', indeed had 12 years experience of doing it. She was taken off training while having treatment for cancer ... obviously, she's being disadvantaged because of her disability'.

The HR consultant agreed, 'DDA issues will make a case more complex', and it was up to the specialists designated to talk to employees who might be in this position to tease out such issues and, if need be, make the referral to occupational health. He thought they could cope even with a previously

undisclosed DDA issue: 'I believe that we do very well in ensuring that we seek to make sure that we understand any conditions, make appropriate adjustments for those conditions, and certainly wherever possible, make sure that they can continue to be employed.' His examples including paying for staff at all levels to spend time on addiction programmes and for private consultations where employees were at the bottom of an NHS waiting list.

The consultant also thought Strand had been very proactive in making sure employees in general understood the implications of the DDA, including applications to the mental health problems the line manager had told us about ('if you get 25/30 people in a room, chances are that at least one of you is covered by the DDA, but you may not know it'). We could speculate whether such intervention was part of the reason the man's colleagues behaved so well in the case described above. The consultant also pointed to the expert advice available from the management HR helpline if there was uncertainty over whether something qualified as a DDA case or a case of harassment. In addition, there were promotions from the occupational health department about topics such as workplace stress, and the potential mental illnesses related to it, which should sensitise managers to these possibilities. Managers were also heavily dependent on occupational health for guidance (made freely available to the employee concerned) on what was appropriate action in individual cases. They had some success in getting people with mental health problems back to work in this way.

This, naturally enough, raises the question of Strand's treatment of work-induced stress. Most employees we talked to acknowledged that the company paid considerable attention to the topic. According to the supply chain manager we talked to, Strand did 'quite a bit of work there, from that point of view. They regularly communicate and put on courses where people can feel that they can learn about the stress levels and understand what to do about things'. He also reported life-coaching sessions (which were subsequently discontinued) in which employees could be helped to manage pressure across home and work. As this suggests, work-life balance was a potential source of stress that the employer could relieve with flexibility.

Flexibility for commitments outside work

We have already noted that a commercial development manager we interviewed used her own sick leave to provide cover if her child was sick:

They expect you to take a day's holiday because you're not entitled ... you don't have to do legally, but they expect it. And the other thing is that my boss, again, says, 'Well my kids are never sick, we send them to school anyway, no matter', that kind of thing. And I just think well, 'what do you expect me to do when she's got a temperature, you expect me to send her to school?' I wouldn't feel right as a parent.

This manager's attitude might well be experienced as ill-treatment but what was the company policy? Our interviewee thought that they were not flexible and she paid the price for it when she racked up her sick leave and lost most of her holiday entitlement, but she did think other managers might be more flexible. Her resource manager had asked her to 'speak to me about it and we'll try and work something out where you can make up the hours and so on'. Indeed, this was what she did when her children visited their father ('So, I have a week of freedom that I can spend at work. Yippee!'), but this was not always possible because of the structure of work tasks in a 'very defined working week'. She also raised the question of working from home while caring for her children – easy if she had a laptop but Strand was not that 'advanced'. They 'talk about it a lot and certain people have laptops. And they tend to be managers or new graduates who are very valued in the company. But other people don't. And there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason'.

Where in the workplace an employee was situated, and the way the workflow was structured there, might have determined whether more flexibility was available short of working at home. The chief programme executive told us, 'I operate a fairly flexible kind of ... It's not strictly flexitime but a flexible kind of working thing, so I don't, we focus more on deliverables than being at work, sort of thing.' This suggested that local senior managers like him had quite a bit of freedom in this respect, but lower down the hierarchy the ex-foreman simply did what the code he found in the online HR advice told him. If he was allowed to give them time off, 'whether it be for doctors' appointments, whether it be for dental or funerals', he would (though he was surprised to learn that one of his workers was allowed the day off to get married if it was for a *second time*). If the request came under an agreement where he could make up the time, the online code would tell him that too.

The HR consultant explained the policy framework behind this. Long-standing detailed agreements on how many hours blue-collar workers could take off, paid or unpaid, for every conceivable reason, had been overlaid by the 'new working arrangements'. Under these 'the focus went from attendance to delivery', although everyone had to put in their 37 hours. This meant that there was more informality and fewer people like the ex-foreman looking up HR online to find out the code for every eventuality. Indeed, blue-collar workers, like the ones he looked after, worked shorter hours than they did when the old agreements were struck. Since they now worked a nine-day fortnight they were 'encouraged' to take their time off on the tenth day.

None of this was particularly generous and, in the judgement of the white-collar convenor, Strand kept to the 'absolute bare minimum' required by law, for example, on paternity leave, because they were 'quite conservative' and not looking to take the lead. The HR consultant flatly disagreed: he said that Strand had better pay for 'things like maternity leave and all those sorts of things' than the statutory requirement. They allowed people to 'vary their working time

because of family issues before even the legislation came in for the right to ask for part-time ... And certainly, we've got an ever-increasing number of people who are working part-time or varied hours for things relating to either personal issues, family issues, caring issues'. This did cause problems sometimes,

[But he was] not aware of many occasions, almost if any, where we have not been able to provide some flexibility for somebody because of an issue. I mean, the expectation of us as a large employer is, if we have to find a job share to cover two halves to make one, that we ought to be able to do it. And sometimes it's difficult but, in general, we seek to be able to cover that.

The white-collar convenor thought Strand would certainly find it hard to argue in an employment tribunal that such a large company could not afford to cover a few people working part-time. The HR consultant also explained that Strand operated part-time or full-time career breaks.

We asked if managers might reply to such requests by saying 'if you take that kind of contract, you'll never get on in Strand'. The consultant said he didn't think so and, if such a thing was reported, 'we'd take an extremely dim view of it.' However, he admitted that the only way they would hear about this would be if an employee told HR his or her manager had turned down a request, or that they felt the employee's career had been adversely affected by making such a choice. The evidence was, however, that this had not happened because 'we have people who are part-time in some of our most senior positions'. There was 'potentially' some resentment about this from people who did not have dependents. After all, there was even resentment, passed on by the unions, about people taking smoking breaks. The white-collar convenor disagreed about where the balance of this resentment was; for example, in relation to family friendly policies, 'there is a thread of resentment in the company that they don't like that very much. ... less from other employees, mostly from the management.'

The importance of fairness and rationality

Sensible practices on sickness absence and flexible hours may have helped to ameliorate some of the effects of the riskier initiatives Strand was taking. We would argue that it was important that employees saw these practices as fair and rational, and the same applied to all the other policies that might affect employees, including selection for redundancy. The young project accountant was adamant that basing selection for redundancy on PDR was needed to keep her faith in the company: 'It's purely based on performance, not based on anything else. And I think that's very fair.' One of the benefits of fairness and rationality in the policies that employees *did* know about was that those same employees tended to assume that Strand was being fair and rational in

the policies they knew little about. The supply chain manager, for example, expressed his faith in the company's policy on bullying and harassment in just these terms. He was very vague about what the procedure might actually be, but he trusted Strand to behave rationally and fairly because of the business imperatives of such a policy.

It was Strand doctrine that trade unions were crucial to keeping the appearance of reasonableness, rationality and fairness in place. For example, in planning redundancies, the senior HR director said they had 'fairly intensive discussions at early levels with a whole range of our employee representatives, partly because we're very highly unionised, so worldwide we're sort of at about the 70 per cent mark, which is pretty high'. The director said their communication structures with the union were 'gold-plated' rather than the 'bronze standard' required by legislation, and 'we tend to do a huge amount of communication around changing business issues, effect on workplace, trying not to get this element of surprise.' This was not to say that there could not be some difficulties in this relationship. In 2009, 18 months before we interviewed the director, the trade union convenor for hourly paid workers at Longstretton told us that he thought Strand was changing fundamentally, becoming more 'ruthless', and no longer bothered to consider alternatives to redundancy like retraining. The convenor had left Longstretton at the time we talked to the director, and she was undoubtedly relieved he had because relations with the shop floor 'can be a bit of a bumpier road. It will depend much more upon relationships that you have with particular power bases in the various parts of the shop floor'.

Strand's formal approach to employee and public relations

Alongside its relations with the trade unions, Strand operated successive initiatives which were designed to reinforce faith in the company and particularly in Strand's commitment to fair, rational and ethical behaviour. We are going to look at three of these programmes. The first was an integrated Strand People Framework which rolled together and updated the previous policies on such things as equality and diversity, dignity at work, and bullying and harassment. The framework was made available in one glossy booklet and on the intranet. There is no doubt that the employees we talked to were aware of both the framework and its predecessor policies. Although she did not think it made much difference to the behaviour of her colleagues, the logistics manager said, 'the one thing that Strand does really well, I think, is making sure that people who are non-British or of different skin colour or has got a disability of any sort, they bend over backwards to make sure you're okay.' Several of our interviewees told us they firmly believed Strand treated its employees fairly. Eighteen months later, the senior HR director was very happy that the latest engagement survey had some good news about fair treatment, for example,

harassment of protected groups. This was ‘an area universally that we actually see we get very positive results on’ even amongst blue-collar employees.

We asked the HR consultant about the equality and diversity policies, and he, like many employees, found it difficult to ‘remember all the bits and pieces’. All the same, he thought Strand had made big efforts in this area lately: ‘There has been far more emphasis on the need to understand and ensure that we eliminate wherever we can issues around discrimination of any form.’ Admittedly though, this was against a background of heavy male domination of the industry. It was very difficult to get women to think about doing engineering jobs so the machismo and banter remained, ‘which we have to recognise and seek to help stamp out wherever we can’.

He thought it was a tough job breaking down sexism and misogyny and the white-collar convenor agreed – these were bigger issues than racism in the company – but he also agreed on ‘creating a culture where people should expect to be respected, which I think on balance I’d have to say the company does try to do’. He also thought that the company had done its equality and diversity training very well. How did it look to those on the receiving end? The employees we talked to mostly said they would feel more confident about acting on things now. For example, the BME programme leader we interviewed would act on the abusive anonymous letters he received at his home address (but from work colleagues) some years ago. When it happened, he thought ‘am I really totally safe here if I raise this any further?’ A BME commercial development executive would act on the discrimination he repeatedly faced when he applied for promotion. He now thought the system to be much better and he would be prepared to ‘take them to the cleaners’. Like others, he put much faith in the outside, confidential helpline that Strand had made available to its employees.

A woman project officer said that she had not made a complaint about bullying by her manager because she did not think the people whom she knew had witnessed the bullying would come forward, and she did not even want to approach them because she thought they might be ill-treated because they had spoken to her. Moreover, she said, ‘some managers are very cliquey so if you’d have gone to the next level it would have been brushed under the carpet.’ She also feared being ‘blacklisted’ and being singled out for redundancy herself, but these days, she would act because she knew there were support groups and she believed Strand was ‘serious in supporting you’. She was particularly reassured by the ‘external organisation that actually is brought in to deal with bullying’, but she had only heard of this innovation by accident and, in cases such as hers, confidence was combined with vagueness about the details, a vagueness the HR consultant shared.

Some of the principles of the Strand People Framework were cross-referenced in Strand’s Ethical Judgement Policy, an initiative which may have been kick-started by Strand’s growing involvement in the United States where

corporations were covered by the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (1977) about bribing foreign officials. There had also been some unrelated, public relations debacles in the industry. It was unsurprising, then, that the senior HR director explained the point of the Ethical Judgement Policy was for customers to see Strand took its ‘responsibilities seriously, not just in terms of the products we deliver, the communities in which we operate but also around how we conduct ourselves in doing that is quite important. So ethical judgement in that context was a very easy decision’.

We were interviewing at the time the policy was rolled out, and we found that the notion of ethical behaviour resonated strongly with some of the employees we talked to, employees like the commercial development executive who had told us that, no matter what power allowed people to get away with, ‘morality is morality’. Like fairness and rationality, the perception that it behaves in an ethical manner strengthened the faith of Strand’s employees in policies they actually knew very little about. Like the specialist illustrator, for example, they trusted Strand to be moral: ‘They try to do the right thing, ethically definitely they do, which is why they have agreed to this, I am sure’ – ‘this’ was the interview that we were conducting with her.

The chief programme executive certainly saw the connection with people’s belief in Strand when he was hosting a few sessions on ethical judgement:

And clearly ethics is quite a broad subject; it was actually just at the time when *The Telegraph* was rolling out their stuff [a series of scoops which sparked off the MPs’ expenses scandal] – perfect introduction! And part of the ethics training is ethics in the workplace as well. So it kind of touches and emphasises a little bit on the People’s Framework there.

For the supply chain manager, the policy was to do with ‘mission statements such as the ethical and to be trustworthy and so on – respect. So I can imagine it stems from those sorts of beliefs or behaviours as well. I couldn’t clearly state exactly in words what it is’. The project officer we interviewed was quite clear it was about ‘not bringing the company into disrepute. So, for instance, talking to the ... newspaper or something about something you’re involved in at Strand’.

The last of the three strategic interventions that we shall discuss was, according to the senior HR director, intended to educate employees in what mattered to Strand. As she put it, this involved picking ‘stories’ that chimed with employees’ principles and helped to deepen their engagement. As part of her latest Vital Signs initiative, employees might be given real stories about people in life-threatening situations in which Strand employees’ contribution may have saved lives. Vital Signs was explicitly intended to reinforce ‘the reason for being in SGS and the reason for getting up in the morning and coming in and doing the work that you’re doing’ with which we started this chapter. For the director this was quite consciously about connecting with ‘deeply held

values and beliefs'. To achieve this, groups of employees received an interactive presentation 'with a combination of text, picture, intervention ... video, question and answer'.

Strand now did something like this every year. The director said, 'the theme might be the same but it's refreshed. And it's refreshed every year in terms of what is topical, what reinforces, what comes back to that sort of ... that core element that makes individuals very proud to work for Strand.' Her emphasis on the individual was telling and quite conscious, 'and it does sound trite, but it is finding appropriate ways to make every individual who works for you understand that what they do is important', and for the director, this made traditional forms of employee communication useless:

The things that tend to work better in our environment is making it more *personal*, so how do we take the context of what is a very complex business, make it simple, make it relevant for an *individual* and *individuals* at very different levels of understanding of business, interest in the business and awareness of what goes on? How do we get them to a *common* understanding of what Strand is so that when we start to give very specific messages on things that are important to us they have a context?

Strand implemented these annual initiatives by telling managers it was their job to 'start to bring the jigsaw pieces together so that individuals, who would possibly only see one piece, can now see how that connects with a range of others to provide a picture and a story and it becomes meaningful'. They were given training and support to accomplish this, though pains were taken to try to ensure managers did not deliver a standardised experience. They must make it 'compelling' and 'direct, jargon-free', and they had to personalise the package for their teams. We saw some evidence of the way this could be done in the chief programme executive's teams 18 months earlier, and we would agree that for him, at least, it was 'very easy to create that compelling vision of what we all need to do'. The director also expected managers to 'encourage interaction, encourage questioning. So as a business we are reasonably comfortable, compared to the norm, with people challenging and asking questions, and we put a lot of time and effort into constructing avenues for employees to do that'.

Having said all of this, several employees told us that what the company did to reinforce employee commitment was nothing special. The commercial development officer thought Strand had started to make progress, but they needed to do more to communicate 'a bit more of a company kind of feeling ... giving us a bigger feeling of well actually we're part of this amazing organisation'. She and others saw Strand's stance towards its employees as traditional, even a bit backward, not cutting edge, but as having made some real improvements. The project officer said, 'over the years the company has got better, a lot better.' The white-collar convenor could find examples where 'the behaviours aren't right ... [but] probably the company gets it more

right than wrong'. The commercial development officer agreed: Strand was 'progressing' though remaining more backward than her previous employer, 'It's a company that you have a lot of respect for, in terms of what they produce. And technically, I think they're very good but I do think in terms of employee relations, they're still quite behind when they should be.'

This is also a good point to recall the importance of adult-to-adult relationships to our interviewees, and some of them still considered that Strand needed to make progress here, particularly in the way young people were treated by managers and colleagues. The technician we have quoted extensively in this chapter explained the negative and uncooperative habits of behaviour this could breed, and he was happy that nowadays 'everybody's mature and reasonable, like you would have liked it always to be'. Others were not sure. The commercial development officer certainly thought Strand fell short of the mark in the way it treated its staff. Strand needed to show more respect to employees and

treat them like adults and as people who are there, earning a living, running a household, grown-ups ... it feels a bit like ... I have to say a little bit like a teacher/child relationship sometimes, not actually you're a respected adult doing a job.

Strand's formal approach to trouble at work

Both trade union convenors thought Strand did not hesitate to deal with bullying and harassment unless the perpetrator was a manager. In fact the works convenor would have liked a bit less haste, and his preferred option was for managers to leave problems of bullying by colleagues to the union which would sort out the problem, probably by separating the two parties, without anyone losing their job. He had also taken 'statements and put them in envelopes, signed them with a date on. I said if it happens again, I'm going to give this to the company. And in the main, it ain't happened again, it's isolated incidents'. This worked well where, as they often were, people were reluctant to pursue the matter – in fact he thought 90 per cent of cases fizzled out.

We know, however, that ill-treatment by managers is the major element of trouble at work, and both convenors were dismissive of Strand's performance in this respect. The works convenor described how he persuaded a 'young lady' to take a complaint about a manager to a harassment counsellor in the new system Strand had introduced. As a result, she was called to a meeting with the manager in the same room, not a confrontation she wanted at all. He gave another example where, although a racial harassment case against him was successful some years ago, an employee was eventually reinstated as a supervisor. The convenor had no faith in the new policy: 'I think there's a lot of bullying goes on with management here that goes unnoticed, that goes

undetected. I've seen grown men cry in here ... worried about their job.' The white-collar convenor thought that most problems like these did not come to light because 'people don't rush to complain. You know, you don't come to work to create waves, do you? So if you have a bit of an arsehole as a manager, you know, you put up with it generally'.

We have mentioned before that Strand employees who would not have complained about bullying or harassment (or discrimination) in the past were sure that if the same thing happened again now they would act. As the white-collar convenor suggested, however, it was by no means certain they were in the majority. The commercial development officer told us she 'wouldn't go to personnel with a problem about my boss, unless it was something really major. Because ultimately, they're working for the company, they're not working for me. I'd be more likely to leave.' Others said things like 'there are certain things that you don't do in The Company ... I think that your card gets marked. Maybe I shouldn't be saying this.' And they thought that complaints must lead to slow progress through normal channels or the Strand fast-track system.

Like the works convenor, the white-collar convenor believed Strand often acted in haste instead of 'trying to really burrow down and find out what's going on and dealing with the issue'. Investigations were conducted by a case management team (usually an independent manager and the case manager within HR):

But it won't go beyond the statements they give, and they won't ever go out, look out and find out the truth behind it, other than to go back to the management team and say 'Is all this true?' 'No, it's not true'. 'Case dismissed' like.

However, neither convenor discussed the possibility of addressing a manager's ill-treatment through their PDR and development plan. The PDR scoring criteria may have made this a possibility but that seemed to be of scant comfort to those, like the Greek engineering team leader, who were told this would be the way bullying by her manager would be addressed. At the suggestion of her resource manager, she wanted something more tangible on the manager's record, but HR had said this was not possible unless she made a formal complaint. She felt it needed to be recorded to show that there was a pattern if it happened to someone else in future, and she made the link to ethical judgement and social responsibility: did they not require this safeguarding? Indeed, in this respect she thought she might have failed to meet her own moral responsibility by not following through the complaint herself.

The white-collar convenor was no keener on seeing a bullying manager sacked than the works convenor was to see his members sacked for bullying. He recalled a case in which harassment and bullying by a manager had happened in front of two witnesses. The subsequent investigation decided there had been inappropriate management behaviours, but nevertheless there was no grievance.

The rest of the team were so incensed they put in a collective grievance against this same manager, and some also alleged fraudulent behaviour. The company only acted on the latter and simply sacked the manager. The convenor would much rather they had kept him on and got to the bottom of the bullying. The team had not wanted him dismissed, 'they wanted him to behave in a different way. And because of the complete inability of the management team to really get to grips with it, it ended up with this guy being sacked.'

In another case he had handled, there were counter-allegations of harassment between employees but quite clear indications that the much more senior one of the two was more culpable. No action was taken against the more senior person but, if it had been the other way round, the convenor believed the junior person accused of improper behaviours would have been dismissed or disciplined simply on the evidence of a manager's complaint: 'The bullying and harassment policy on paper looks reasonable in terms of best practice. In practice, I don't think it's applied uniformly or fairly.'

What other improvements were suggested? The one thing we heard most often was that Strand did not follow through on the changes it wanted to make, including the initiatives that the senior HR director considered so vital. As we have seen, people could be extremely vague about the detail of what had been rolled out, and this applied to both bullying and harassment and the very recent Ethical Judgement initiative. The logistics manager thought that employees could talk to their trade union representative about bullying and harassment, and perhaps there was a confidential way of reporting it to headquarters. She also said, 'we do ethics and diversity training.' The specialist illustrator was clearer about bullying and harassment because we 'had a booklet recently', but the Ethical Judgement initiative had fallen on stony ground:

We had another thing which was about ethnic recognition or something like that, I can't remember what the title of it was called, but it was everybody had to do it, it was a compulsory course ... Exactly that is what it was about really, is about the company image, essentially at the end of the day but they called it ethnic, ethical, I can't remember but it was ethical something or other because we were all coming back saying oh we have been ethically cleansed. Yes it was treated as a little bit of a joke by the staff I have to say.

She wasn't the only one who told us that nobody in their group took these roll-outs seriously. They frequently described them as 'tickbox activities' and reported colleagues' resistance to them. The commercial development officer told us about the homophobic comments made by managers on diversity training, 'what a waste of time it is and all this kind of stuff. So, I don't think it's well appreciated by the managers, is my impression. They do it because they have to do it. I don't think any of them really believe in it.'

Our technician interviewee talked about such 'negative attitudes to company initiatives' that they might even make things worse, for example, giving the shop floor ammunition to fire at management. He also noted the way the

company neglected to explain the benefit of its initiatives once it had bedded in. Instead it was just one initiative after the other with no information on impact, and that meant people became disillusioned: '60 to 70 per cent of the people walk in there only so they can have a couple of hours off. And some people get around not going at all.' The white-collar convenor also drew attention to process compliance (making sure Strand always follows proper procedures, in other words) as 'one of those things that the company kind of majors on for a bit, and then it all seems to like drift out of consciousness a bit'.

The workforce's concern about all of these things was that Strand did not really care if anything changed or not, and they were putting out whatever initiative it was simply in order to 'tick a box'. As the project officer said,

It's like, what's the latest, I don't know, environmental issues. The company now has issued everyone with a leaflet and so HR were involved in giving out the leaflets because it's a tick in the box. It's a corporate policy that they've got to be seen to have discussed and communicated to the rest of the function ... last week we had ethics training.

In other words, the appearance of doing something was all that was required. Who was the box being ticked *for*? Our interviewees weren't sure about this. Perhaps it was the government (or some other regulator), Strand's customers, public opinion, Strand's competitors, corporate or social fashion. The point was that, even if these were valid reasons, there had to be a business reason for doing it, as the BME engineer said, 'they have diversity policy and things like that, but the main thing behind all this improvement is that the company's realisation of wanting to realise that if the employees feel better then their performance is better and it is better for the company.' The employees we talked to wanted Strand to go the extra mile and find out whether there was evidence for that business case after a roll-out.

The white-collar convenor was one of those who thought it was corporate fashion which Strand was always trying to catch up with. When they did finally catch up with something, other companies had already moved on to the next thing. This meant that before Strand could 'really embed' its latest development, 'the next sort of wave of management nonsense comes along and they kind of leave all that and do something else'. He also thought that another reason for not embedding might be that different initiatives came from different senior managers, and the successive waves reflected the rise and fall of individuals' fortunes in political struggles. You would not then expect to see follow-through as there would be no widespread support at the top: 'Oh, you know, just let them fail and then we'll go back to what I want to do.' We need to bear in mind he was talking about changes which involved formal union agreements in which everyone was fired up to make a big change 'with a huge fanfare and great charts on the walls, and graphics, and seven 'Rs', and workshops'. The fanfare stopped and there was nothing else: 'You start the journey and then stop, you know, at the first services you stop and then never get moving again.'

Conclusions

In Chapter 9 we consider whether Strand's (formal and informal) approach to ill-treatment worked by preserving their employees' faith in the employer's commitment to them as individuals and to general principles of fairness and rationality. When we consider this qualitative support for the quantitative results reported in Part Two, particularly on the FARE score, we shall bear in mind that Strand was able to rely on a reservoir of employee belief, which was shrinking at Banco and may have dried up at Westshire. Strand could still test its employees – by making them fear for their jobs, for example – without damaging that belief. This even applied to those few members of minorities that Strand employed and who appeared to suffer a disproportionate share of ill-treatment. In Part Two, we suggested that minority employees may actually try to avoid workplaces which they suspect might be troubled. If effective, this tactic might lead to some minorities, for example, employees of Asian origin, being under-represented amongst workers who were ill-treated because they were under-represented in troubled workplaces. This chapter helps us to make it clear that Asian workers may still suffer more ill-treatment than white employees in the same workplace no matter whether they work in troubled or less troubled workplaces. Almost all the BME interviewees we talked to at Strand were of Asian origin. They may have suffered much more ill-treatment if they had gone to work in a troubled workplace, but they still had to put up with far worse than most Strand employees. It is worth adding that women (and perhaps also LGB) employees seemed to be in a similar position. The common thread to the ill-treatment received by minorities at Strand also recalls another of the results of our analysis of the BWBS. Members of all minorities reported that they had been told they were no good at their jobs and should not have been hired in the first place. While minority members reported some improvements in their time at Strand, it should be noted that this kind of ill-treatment was not necessarily addressed by Strand's formal or informal tactics for minimising trouble at work. We shall return to this point in Chapter 9.