

## **IV. New and Strategic Approaches to Worker Representation: Innovative Union Practices and Other Worker Organizations**

---

### **Results of a Longitudinal Study of Union Administrative Practices: Implications for Member Representation**

**PAUL F. CLARK**  
*Penn State University*

**LOIS SPIER GRAY**  
*Cornell University*

**PAUL V. WHITEHEAD**  
*Penn State University*

#### **Introduction**

In the face of numerous challenges and an increasingly hostile environment, unions are continually searching for innovative and strategic approaches to worker representation, including restructuring, mobilizing, political action, and organizing. This paper raises an issue that is rarely addressed in discussions about how to build more effective unions. That issue is the internal administrative policies and practices of labor organizations.

It is critical that unions develop the most effective organizing strategies, the optimal approach to bargaining, the most powerful message, and the best messaging vehicles they can. But, if behind all of these initiatives is a dysfunctional, antiquated organization, it is going to be very difficult for labor organizations to successfully accomplish these goals.

The study described here contributes to this discussion by shedding light on another piece of the puzzle that needs to be in place for unions to effectively represent their members in a time of declining resources. That piece of the puzzle is innovative and efficient administrative practices.

Administration in any organization is the set of practices and procedures through which work is carried out. The tools of administration in most modern organizations include

1. Management of human resources (recruiting qualified personnel to carry out the work of the organization; matching skills of personnel to tasks to be performed; rewarding employees to achieve maximum effectiveness, etc.)
2. Budgeting of income against projected expenditures with detailed attention toward funding priority goals
3. Strategic planning to assess the environment in relation to priority goals
4. Evaluation of programs to correct course and enhance desired results

In 1990 and 2000, two of the co-authors of this paper asked all U.S.-based national and international unions to complete surveys about their organization's administrative practices. In 2010, the authors of this paper asked these unions to complete a similar survey. Thirty-five of the sixty national unions invited to participate completed and returned questionnaires, for a response rate of 58.3%. This paper reports the results of the most recent iteration of this longitudinal study. Specifically, the paper highlights some of the insights gathered from the survey of national unions and from interviews with national union administrators about human resource management, budgeting, strategic planning, and evaluation practices in labor organizations.

## Findings

Labor unions were initially organized as loose-knit associations of working people (somewhat analogous to the Occupy Wall Street model) and staffed by volunteers, most of whom lacked professional training in the management of organizational resources. In the 1970s and 1980s, academic observers such as Derek Bok and John Dunlop began to call attention to the fact that unions rarely engaged in the human resource management, budgeting, strategic planning, and evaluation practices that characterized other organizations (government, business, and nonprofit) in the United States (Bok and Dunlop 1970; Dunlop 1990). Subsequent studies, including surveys done by Clark and Gray in 1990 and 2000, documented the evolution of union administrative practices (Clark and Gray 1993, 2008; Clark, Gray, Gilbert, and Solomon 1998).

Our research has found that over the past 20 years, unions have increasingly adopted more formal, systematic human resource policies and practices and have continued to turn to consultants to supplement their workforce. They are engaging in more formal budgeting practices, and they have made much greater use of the fundamental administrative tools of strategic planning and assessment.

Table 1 provides survey results regarding the percentage of respondent unions that had written human resources policies in seven areas for headquarters and professional staff in 1990 and 2010. The findings show an increase for all seven in 2010. The table also provides additional data in three areas included in just the 2010 survey. In each of the three, 50% or more of the unions reported that they had written policies. In sum, the data clearly indicate that unions are moving toward more formal, systematic human resources policies.

TABLE 1  
Respondent Unions with Written Personnel Policies, 1990 and 2010

	Headquarters		Field	
	Professional Staff (%)		Professional Staff (%)	
	1990	2010	1990	2010
Equal opportunity/ affirmative action	46	59	42	56
Discipline and discharge	50	78	42	75
Hiring	42	63	40	56
Performance Appraisal	33	41	25	34
Promotion	31	44	27	41
Salary review	35	38	35	38
Training	29	47	29	47
Ethics	n.a.	72	n.a.	72
Sexual harassment	n.a.	81	n.a.	78
Workplace privacy	n.a.	50	n.a.	50
	(n = 48)	(n = 35)	(n = 48)	(n = 35)

Both the 1990 and 2010 surveys asked unions whether they had a personnel or human resources director and/or department to handle internal personnel matters. In 1990, only 42% of the respondents indicated they had such a position or department. By 2010 this figure had grown to 54%. This increase is consistent with the trend toward written policies suggested by the data in Table 1.

The 1990 union administrative practices survey found that many unions made significant use of outside consultants to supplement the expertise of in-house staff. Table 2 indicates the percentage of unions that employed consultants to provide various services for both 1990 and 2010. The results suggest that unions continue to use consultants in many areas, although a comparison between 1990 and 2010 indicates that in five areas unions have increased their use of consultants, in two areas they have decreased their use, and in one area their use has not changed. Where unions have decreased their use of outside expertise, interviews conducted for this study suggest that the unions still require those skills but have sought to reduce their costs by developing in-house talent.

TABLE 2  
Union Use of Outside Consultants, 1990 and 2010

Percentage of unions that use outside consultants to assist with:	1990	2010
Computer services and technology	69	77
Economic analysis	35	35
Financial planning	25	35
Containment of union's benefit costs	46	53*
Organizational analysis	29	18
Personnel recruitment	10	18
Public relations/communications	52	47*
Training	35	53*
Political work	—	29
Lobbying	—	9
Travel	—	44
Legal	—	85
Corporate campaigns	—	24
Organizing techniques and strategies	—	12
	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 35

\*Indicates that slightly different wording was used for these areas in the two surveys.

In addition to the eight areas asked about in the 1990, respondents to the 2010 survey were also asked whether they employed consultants in six additional areas. The use of consultants in these areas ranged widely, with 85% of union respondents using consultants for legal work (a practice dating back many decades) to only 9% of respondents employing outside assistance in the area of lobbying.

Each iteration of the union administrative practices survey included several items focusing on the budgeting, strategic planning, and assessment practices of unions. Both surveys asked the responding unions whether they developed an annual budget with planned expenditures by function or department. In 1990, 65% of the union respondents indicated they did. This increased to 79% in 2010 (Table 3).

The results of the 2010 survey presented in Table 3 depict an even greater increase in the percentage of unions that employed a formal strategic planning process focusing on the future activities and work of the union. In 1990, only 40% of unions responding to the survey indicated they had a planning process in place. That figure increased to 69% in 2010.

TABLE 3  
Union Financial and Strategic Planning Practices, 1990 and 2010

Percent of unions that:	1990	2010
Develop an annual budget with planned expenditure by function or department	65	79
Employ a formal strategic planning process	40	69
Have a systematic evaluation process for planned activities	22	71
	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 35

Another important finding is that most of the unions that engage in strategic planning make a concerted effort to link budgeting to the planning process. This a basic principle of organizational planning taught in every MBA program in the country, but it represents a real step forward for labor organizations that have only begun to widely adopt basic best practices in administration in the past 20 years.

And, as Table 3 suggests, unions have also moved dramatically toward evaluating their planned activities and initiatives. In 2010, 71% of unions responding to the survey indicated they had such an evaluation process in place, up from only 22% in 1990. This represents a 223% increase from 20 years earlier and illustrates the progress unions have made toward adopting a more systematic approach to organizational administration.

## Discussion

How do we account for the trend toward more formal and rationalized administrative practices in unions? While there is no definitive statistical proof of cause and effect, interviews with union officials and observations by other researchers suggest both external and internal pressures have induced American unions to seek ways to become more effective and efficient. The primary impetus comes from shrinking resources in a period of increasing demands to meet the challenges of a hostile political and economic environment. How to get “more bang for the buck” from a declining dues base has focused attention on budgets, environmental scanning, and new ways to recruit, employ, and multiply the impact of human and financial resources. Other external pressures include legislative mandates affecting human resource practices (equal opportunity employment laws, prevention of sexual harassment, family and medical leave requirements, etc.). Changes to the Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act reporting requirements with respect to expenditures have also had an impact.

Innovations in administration are further encouraged by national federations and the examples of other unions. For many years, the meetings of the AFL-CIO executive board and its standing committees have provided a useful, if informal, forum for union leaders to exchange new programmatic and administrative ideas. Likewise, the AFL-CIO has regularly called together its affiliates’ department heads in organizing, political action, and law to share information on productive internal practices. Perhaps most significantly, the AFL-CIO, under the influence of former Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue, began the practice of bringing national secretary-treasurers together to discuss more effective methods of administration. Today this practice continues under the leadership of current AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler. More recently, the human resource directors of AFL-CIO unions have also begun to hold periodic meetings to share information and best practices (Gray 1981; Clark 1992).

Historically, unions have caused employers to adopt better, more systematic, employment practices. Employers do so because unions increase the employers’ costs by negotiating higher wages and benefits and placing restrictions on work rules and process. This provides an incentive for employers, in turn, to search for efficiencies to offset those increased costs. Staff unions (unions formed to represent the professional employees of unions) have had this effect on the labor organizations that employ their members. The

unionization of staff places pressure on labor organizations to standardize union human resource practices (Clark 1989).

This is one possible explanation why some unions have adopted written human resource policies and others have not. As Table 4 indicates, a higher percentage of labor organizations with headquarters staff unions have written policies in eight of ten areas shown in the table than unions without headquarters staff unions. They are also much more likely to also have a human resources director. Similarly, a higher percentage of labor organizations with field staff unions have written policies in seven of ten areas listed. And they are also much more likely to have a human resources director.

TABLE 4  
Respondent Unions with Written Personnel Policies and  
Human Resources Director by Presence of Staff Unions

	Headquarters		Field	
	Professional Staff (%)		Professional Staff (%)	
	HQ Staff Union	No HQ Staff Union	FD Staff Union	No FD Staff Union
Equal opportunity/ affirmative Action	62	56	67	50
Discipline and discharge	81	67	80	70
Hiring	69	33	73	40
Performance appraisal	39	44	40	30
Promotion	46	44	53	30
Salary review	39	33	53	25
Training	46	44	29	40
Ethics	77	67	67	80
Sexual harassment	85	67	73	80
Workplace privacy	50	56	53	50
Has HR director	62	33	67	45
	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 9	<i>n</i> = 15	<i>n</i> = 20

An additional factor responsible for unions adopting more sophisticated and effective administrative practices is that, over time, the proportion of national union leaders and staff who have attended college, and even graduate school or law school, has grown. As a result, more and more union leaders and administrators have been exposed, via higher and/or continuing education, to theories and principles of organizational management. This exposure makes it more likely that they will look outside their organizations for ideas about management and administration and that they will be open to change.

Surveys, like the one focused on union administrative practices discussed in this paper, yield generalizations about trends. However, it is important to note, as Alice Cook (1962) pointed out long ago, that “no two unions are alike.” According to Robert Hoxie (1926), an early historian of the American labor movement, the individuality of each union springs from “pluralistic casual factors” but, he noted, union practices show an “evolutionary quality.” Each union has its own unique set of administrative policies and practices reflecting the history and traditions of the organization, as well as the industry and occupations of its members, its union structure and government, and its leadership characteristics and philosophy.

Behind the general trends in practice are wide variations among unions. For example, from their inception, unions representing actors, directors, athletes, and pilots emulated many of the administrative practices of business and government. They employed full-time managers and hired staff, based on defined qualifications, from outside the ranks of the membership, and they procured professional expertise to meet their financial and organizational needs. In contrast, unions representing skilled crafts and industrial unions in

the manufacturing sector generally elected officials and recruited staff from within their own memberships, while public sector and service employee unions looked both inside and outside for qualified staff and innovative ideas about administrative policies. Given this range of practice, there is a need for data collection that examines individual union practices in depth with an attention to impact on efficiency and effectiveness.

The interviews conducted for this study illustrate this variation. For example, a craft union reported that it continues to recruit from its membership ranks but chooses to hire members having college degrees. Whatever the educational background of its new hires, this union develops all staff through training programs at the George Meany Center's National Labor College or other local universities. This craft union reported having no formal human resource policies or budgeting process, but even as a self-described "traditional" union, it has in recent years conducted a three-day retreat for officers and department heads, probably "a first step toward strategic planning."

By contrast, a large public sector union conducts a strategic planning process that enlists its department heads in a rigorous process. As a result, the human resources director reported an increasingly close "strategic partnership" between the human resources department and top union leaders. One product of this has been an awareness by the union of an impending wave of retirements by senior staff. The union has developed a succession plan and talent development initiative to an extent few other unions have.

Still another example comes from a professional union that follows administrative practices comparable to those of a medium-sized business. This professional union evaluates its employees' performance either annually or semi-annually, links pay to the results of those assessments, and conducts rigorous budgeting and strategic planning processes. The latter, according to the union's human resources director, "helps drive partnerships and dialogue" in the union. "It links our goals and what employees do ... [it's] a carrier of innovation."

Unions benefit in a number of ways from investing in efficient administrative practices. These practices can save unions money, provide better support for individuals and departments carrying out the programs of the union, and encourage greater professionalism in all aspects of the organization. However, the last example points out what may be the most important benefit—the possible relationship between the implementation of more systematic, sophisticated administrative policies and practices and strategic innovation. In their survey of national unions, Delaney, Fiorito, and Jarley (1991) found that innovation in administration leads to innovation in strategy and function. The findings of our study appear to support that conclusion.

## Future Research

While the three surveys conducted in 1990, 2000, and 2010 identify trends and shed light, regarding the evolution of union administrative practices, many questions remain about this facet of labor organizations that can only be answered through further research and analysis. Among these are the following:

- What are the implications of more sophisticated administration for the quality of worker representation provided by American unions?
- Do these practices give members increased voice in how their organizations are run, or do they contribute to a greater bureaucratization of union functions?
- Better budgeting practices and strategic planning might be expected to produce more effective and targeted results from shrinking union dollars, but is there a downside in terms of the decision-making process and its impact on member involvement in supporting organizational goals?
- Human resource management, as practiced in other organizations, should result in the selection of better-qualified personnel and more equitable treatment, positively impacting performance, but how does recruitment outside the ranks of the membership affect membership commitment and morale?
- Consultants supply expertise to increase union effectiveness in political and legislative action, internal communications, public relations, and financial management; however, does outsourcing of decisions and activities threaten democratic leadership and rank and file involvement?

## Conclusion

This paper reports the latest results of a longitudinal study of union administrative practices based on surveys of national unions conducted in 1990, 2000, and 2010. Specifically, the results indicate that over the past 20 years, unions have increasingly adopted more formal, systematic human resource policies and practices, continued to turn to consultants to supplement their workforce, engaged in more formal budgeting practices, and have made much greater use of strategic planning and assessment. The evidence suggests that labor organizations benefit in significant ways from the implementation of these practices.

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler for her assistance and the secretary-treasurers and staff of the national unions who provided the data for this study.

## References

- Bok, D.C., and J.T. Dunlop. 1970. *Labor and the American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Clark, P.F. 1989. "Organizing the Organizers: Professional Staff Unionism in the American Labor Movement." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 42, July, pp. 564–599.
- Clark, P.F. 1992. "Professional Staff in American Unions: Changes, Trends, Implications." *Journal of Labor Research*, Vol. 13, Fall, pp. 381–392.
- Clark, P.F., and L.S. Gray. 1993. "The Management of Human Resources in American Unions." *Proceedings of 44th Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, pp. 414–423.
- Clark, P.F., and L.S. Gray. 2008. "Administrative Practices in American Unions: A Longitudinal Study." *Journal of Labor Research*, Vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 42–55.
- Clark, P.F., L.S. Gray, K. Gilbert, and N. Solomon. 1998. "Union Administrative Practices: A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Labor Research*, Vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 149–161.
- Cook, A. 1962. "Dual Government in Unions: A Tool for Analysis." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 323–349.
- Delaney, J.T., J. Fiorito, and P. Jarley. 1991. *Union Innovation and Effectiveness: Results from the National Union Survey*. Working Paper 91-01. Industrial Relations Institute, University of Iowa.
- Dunlop, J. 1990. *The Management of Labor Unions*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Gray, L.S. 1981. "Unions Implementing Managerial Techniques." *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 104, no. 6, pp. 3-13.
- Hoxie, R. 1926. *Trade Unionism in the United States*. New York: D. Appleton and Co.