

# HR Practices & Union Management Relationship

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*While unions are struggling with issues like loss of membership, lack of mature leadership, managements are challenged by the technology and cost factors of business. Though both the parties try to maintain an amicable relationship to sustain and grow, the HR practices are considered to be a threat for the unions. This paper based on a survey responses from 640 respondents conducted in manufacturing industries across different sectors in Odisha tries to explore the perception of workers, trade union leaders and managers about the HR practices and the union management relationship, and the impact of the former on the later.*

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## Introduction

Union management relationship which is primarily based on the powerbase of union leaders and managers is challenged by the innovative human resource (HR) practices by the management. Though both the union leaders and the management collaborate to run the business; they compete to win the commitment of the workers. However, for the functioning of the organization both the management and union must take the initiative to maintain an amiable relationship. But, workers have a different motive than the union leaders and they are even ready to join hands with the management by going away from the union. Against this backdrop, this paper tries to explore the attitude of workers, managers and trade union leaders towards the HR practices and the union management relationship. The paper also tries to study the impact of HR practices on the union management relationship. This study is based on the responses from 640 respondents from seven manufacturing organizations in Odisha belonging to both private and public sectors. It also explores the difference in perception across sectors.

## Workers, Managers & Union Leaders

The industrial relations system has passed through the age of conflicting relations and is heading towards an era of cooperation. Trade unions are not able to protect the workers' interests and are considered a hindrance in business. They have failed to identify themselves as a strategic partner to business. Unions have been slow to embrace many HR practices that could improve union effectiveness, rejuvenate the union movement and sustain it in long run (Rau, 2012).

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The nature of relationship among actors of industrial relations (managers, workers and union leaders) depends upon the power and control exercised by them. Management tries to gain control over the workforce, where as union leaders try to get benefits from management. Workers were loyal to the union, which can provide them better benefits. The nature of the workforce has changed along with its composition. There is a greater interaction between the worker and the management where as the interaction of trade unions with the rest of the actors is decreasing. The status of all the actors in the power dynamics is discussed as follows:

## Management

Management has become more powerful by impeding the trade unions through strategies like downsizing, subcontracting and outsourcing. Increase in the appointment of more contract labor has pushed them away from trade unions and legal benefits. Downsizing the workforce has weakened the trade unions as they lost members, thereby indirectly adding more power to management. The situation has forced them to work hand in glove with the unions to run the business successfully.

## Trade Unions

Research evidence shows that trade unions and industrial relations institutions affect investors in different ways country-by-country, with some unexpected effects on the implementation of flexible employment practices by the investors (Meardi, 2007). Though, trade unions are trying their best to combat the challenges of liberalized economy, consumer courts are intimidating by affirming the supremacy of consumer rights over the labor rights. Trade unions resorting to industrial action, such as strikes, and bandhs<sup>1</sup>, which disrupt public services, are asked to compensate for the loss (Venkat Ratnam, 1998).

## Workers

The new generation of workers is more educated, enlightened, and ambitious. They need more money and leisure. In this

<sup>1</sup> Closing of shops and stopping of work

changing scenario where management tries to rationalize the labor cost, workers are concerned about a secured job, but with less workload (Sheth, 1996). The nature of workforce is changing with the emergence of the knowledge workers who are now able to take care of their own interest without depending on the union.

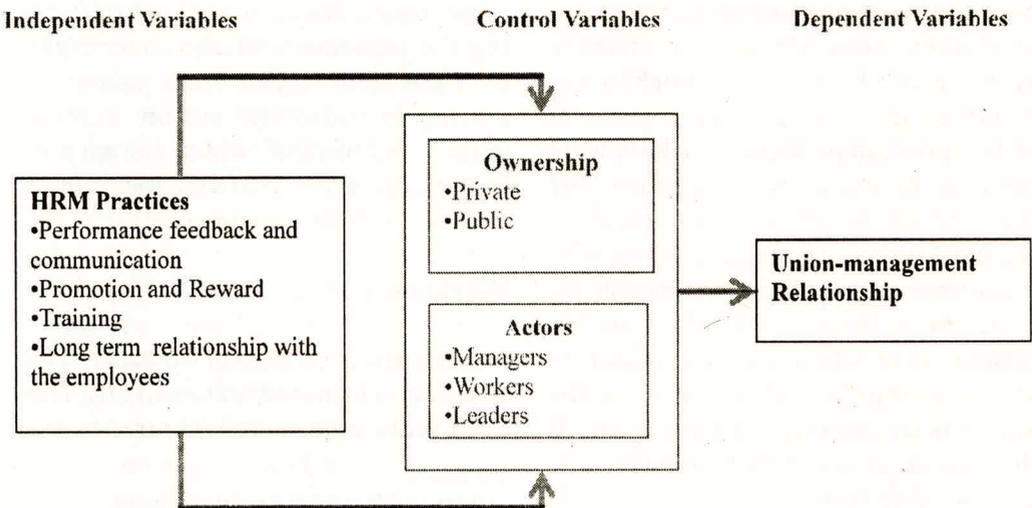
Trade unionists argue that they are the official spokesmen of the workers whose interests can be looked after only by unions. It is implied here that the grievances of the workers are properly represented and their problems are given adequate attention by the unions. A total view of trade unionism can be obtained only by understanding what workers themselves think and feel about their unions (Mamkoottam, 1982). Apart from low membership coverage and the fragmentation of trade unions, there is also a decline in the membership (Sheth, 1993a). There is a growing alienation between trade unions and their members, particu-

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larly due to the changing characteristics of the new workforce (Sheth, 1993b; Ramaswamy, 1988; Sengupta, 1992). As per Ramaswamy (2000) the interests, attitudes, and objectives of the union leaders cannot be assumed to be identical with those of the people they represent. It would be especially fallacious to equate trade unions with workers, for unions can and do have an interest in forging agreements that workers may not identify with or even know about.

Thus, this study tries to explore the difference in perception of workers, managers and union leaders about the HR practices, and union-management relationship. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

**Fig. 1 A Conceptual Framework of the Study.**



## **HR Practices**

Union presence tends to increase (decrease) the adoption of person (performance) HRM practices in organizations (Alvaro & Jose, 2015). Some employers had used the rhetoric of HRM to conceal a deliberate anti-union policy by replacing collective machinery with an individualized employee relationship regime. Innovative HRM practices pose a threat to trade unions in four ways; the individualization of employment contract, the demise of union representation, the intensification of work and undermining of union solidarity through organizational commitment (Bratton, 1999). McGraw & Harley (2003) have found that MNCs are moving towards more sophisticated HR practices but there is no evidence to pursue anti-collective approach to the management of industrial relations. Similar findings were noted by Machin & Wood (2005) that there is no clear evidence of faster union decline in workplace with faster adoption of HRM practices. HRM practices typically associated with high-involvement, high-commitment or high-performance management—including team briefing, team working, formal assessment, merit pay, flexible job descriptions, and quality circles—all increased alongside the evidence on the decline of unionization in the United Kingdom (Machin & Wood, 2005). Godard's (2009) comparative study of Canadian

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and England unionism found that unions in Canada play a largely adversarial role while the English unions play a more collaborative role. The HR practices are positively associated with the likelihood of union representation in England.

Unions have felt very uncomfortable with HRM practices and consider employer's direct link with workers as anti-union (Saini, 1997). The apparently wider use of human resource management policies raised the question whether these policies have increased organizational commitment at the expense of union loyalty (Blyton & Turnbull, 1992). Ng and Maki (1994) found that unionized workers to be less likely to employ a formal performance appraisal system. Similarly, the study by Cohen & Burton (1993) states that union presence reduces the probability of using variable pay plans. However, a contradictory finding states that there is no significant difference between union and non-union firms regarding the adoption of group performance related pay (Verma & Fang, 2002; Verma, 2005).

The literature discussed earlier reflects that there is difference in interest and perception of workers, union leaders and managers. HR practices are perceived to be anti-union and detrimental to growth of union. The present study covers both public and private sectors which are traditionally different in terms of extent of unionism. Hence the first research question of this study is: how do workers, managers and union leaders differ in their perception about the Human Resources Practice across public and private sector organizations?

## Union Management Relationship

In India, the nature of the relationship between trade unions and the management is adversarial (Ramaswamy, 1999). Management has followed strategies like sub-contracting, voluntary retirement, and relocation to low-cost sites in continuance of this adversarial relationship, while labor resisted voluntary retirement, and demanded better retirement packages. Studies also reveal that unions have a negative impact on the use of high performance work systems (HPWSs) by organizations (Liu, Guthrie, Flood & Maccurtain, 2009). However, Gill (2008) found that unions obtain employee trust, commitment and cooperation which are important to the sustained adoption of high performance work practices. Mahadevan (2001) is of the view that even when the unions have cooperated in business processes, management has not been able to change its stand leading to a bitter relationship. Employers' attitude and approach towards workers is compelling the trade unions to lay thrust on the protection of the workers' interests. Even today, the employer's approach to a worker is that of a master to a servant (Mital, 2001). The perception of workers, managers and union leaders can be assumed to be different with respect to the earlier discussion on the difference in interest and goal. Hence the second question which this study intends to explore is: how does perception of actors (workers, managers and union leaders) on union-management relationship differ between public and private sectors?

As the literature supports that management has implemented high performance HR practices, which is perceived as individualization of work and an initiative to weaken the power of union, it is important to test the impact of HR practices on the union management relationship, so also the change, if any, across public and private sectors. Thus, the third research question is: how does actor's attitude toward human resource practices predict the union-management relationship?

## Sample

The sample consisted of 640 respondents from seven manufacturing organizations of Odisha, India. The study included 317 workers, 107 union office-bearers (leaders), and 216 managers from different sectors. The heterogeneity can be well read from Table 1. Participation of trade unions from different political affiliations and different ideologies including the external leaders (office bearers) has added to the diversity.

## Measures

Data were collected by using a structured questionnaire survey consisting of multi-dimensional five-point Likert type scale. The scales were developed and validated based on a pilot survey and calculation of item total correlations. Further the scale was refined by the use of factor analysis and inclusion of items with a minimum loading of  $\geq 0.30$  (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black; 1995). The alpha reliability coefficient for the scale

**Table 1 Summary of Sample Characteristics**

Organi- zation No	Industrial Categorization	Sector	Respondents			Total
			Workers	Union Leaders	Managers	
1	Steel	Public	51	17	34	102
2	Chemical & Fertilizer	Public	50	11	30	91
3	Thermal Power	Public	51	20	30	101
4	Aluminium	Public	48	23	38	109
5	Heavy Engineering	Private	41	20	22	83
6	Refractory Products	Private	46	5	29	80
7	Paper	Private	30	11	33	74
		<b>Total</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>640</b>

to measure the perception about HR practices was .89 (with Mean 37.38 & Standard Deviation 7.77). Similarly the alpha reliability coefficient of the scale

to measure union management relationship was .78 (with Mean 25.85 & Standard Deviation 6.68). A summary of factor analysis result is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Summary of Factor Analysis for Scales Used**

Factor	Eigen values	Variance Explained (%)	Total Variance Explained (%)
<b>Scale for HR Practices</b>			
Performance feedback and Communication (5)	4.19	28.00	53.28
Promotion and reward (3)	1.51	10.01	
Training (2)	1.19	7.95	
Long-term relationship (2)	1.10	7.30	
<b>Scale for Union-Management Relationship</b>			
Management Attitude (6)	3.34	37.14	56.97
Union Attitude (3)	1.78	19.83	

Note: The number in brackets shows the number of items retained in the scale.

Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were performed by using SPSS to examine the strength of the relationship among the variables, and differences among the perceptions of actors.

### Perception on HR Practices (Research Question 1)

The MANOVA results showed a significant difference in the way performance feedback and communication sys-

tem ( $F = 18.67, p < .01$ ), training ( $F = 8.47, p < .01$ ), and long-term employee relationship ( $F = 8.59, p < .01$ ) were perceived by public and private sectors. However, the promotion and reward system ( $F = 3.16, p > .05$ ) did not differ significantly between sectors (Table 3).

The comparison of mean scores reveals that private sector has a better performance feedback system compared to public sector. Public sector and private sector organizations showed no signifi-

**Private sector has a better performance feedback system compared to public sector.**

cant difference in their practice of promotion and reward system ( $F = 3.16, p > .05$ ). In both the sectors, merit cum seniority i.e. suitability of the individual is taken into account for the promotion. Private sector differed significantly with the public sector with regard to the effectiveness of the training ( $F = 8.47, p < .01$ ). It shows that the skill up gradation

is given more importance in the private sector. The management in public sector is more concerned about maintaining long-term relationship with its employees compared to private sector. The results showed that managers, union leaders, and workers had differences in their opinion on performance feedback and communication system ( $F = 5.23, p < .01$ ), promotion and reward system ( $F = 26.90, p < .01$ ), and long-term employee relationship ( $F = 55.53, p < .01$ ), whereas no difference was observed with respect to training ( $F = .57, p > .05$ ).

**Table 3 Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) of Perceptions of Actors in Public & Private Sectors on Human Resource Practices.**

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
OWNERSHIP	PFC	335.56	1	335.56	18.67**
	PR	30.63	1	30.63	3.16
	TRS	32.48	1	32.48	8.47**
	LER	25.14	1	25.14	8.59**
ACTOR	PFC	187.96	2	93.98	5.23**
	PR	521.36	2	260.68	26.90**
	TRS	4.38	2	2.19	.57
	LER	325.01	2	162.51	55.53**
OWNERSHIP ACTOR	PFC	283.60	2	141.80	7.89**
	PR	162.12	2	81.06	8.36**
	TRS	51.11	2	25.55	6.67**
	LER	10.89	2	5.45	1.86

\*\* Significant at .01 level

Abbreviations Used: PFC – Performance Feedback and Communication

PR – Promotion and Reward

TRS – Training System

LER – Long-term Employee Relationship

The actors differed significantly in their opinions on the issue of promotion and reward system. The managers expressed their satisfaction over the promotion and reward system compared to the union leaders and workers. Management claimed that the promotion is based

on suitability, individual's performance and competency rather than favoritism which were not subscribed by union leaders and workers. There is no significant difference in the perceptions among actors regarding the training facilities provided by the organization. The manag-

ers, union leaders as well as workers had a consensus that the training programs are meant for upgrading the skill base of the workforce. Training programs have not affected the workplace unionism, or its function in any manner.

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Management tried its best to maintain a long-term relationship with employees whereas union leaders and workers differed in their perceptions. The results showed a significant difference between the union leaders and workers regarding their perceptions of management efforts to maintain long-term relationship with employees.

Thus, actors had differences in their opinions on the performance feedback and communication system, promotion and reward system, and long-term employee relationship between the public and private sectors, whereas no significant difference was observed with respect to training. The current result is in line with the earlier studies that unions are uncomfortable with the innovative HR practices through which management tries to win the loyalty of the employers. The HR practices that can motivate the workers and alienate them from union can be characterized by performance feedback and communication system, an innovative promotion and reward system, training, and management strategy to maintain long-term employee relationship (Saini, 1997; Mital, 2001;

Blyton & Turnbull, 1992). The only change in behavior of union noticed here is the acceptance of training as a tool not only for skill development but also for survival and growth so that the workers are not becoming obsolete.

### **Union-Management Relationship (Research Question 2)**

The MANOVA results (Table 4) showed that union-management relationship differed significantly on account of union initiative to maintain the relationship ( $F = 29.4, p < .01$ ), whereas there was no significant difference in management initiative to maintain it ( $F = 1.85, p > .05$ ).

The management in both the sectors believed that workers were provided with ample welfare measures. Union leaders were given enough opportunity to discuss the problems of the workers. Management felt that they had fulfilled all reasonable demands of the workers. But there was a significant difference in union initiative to maintain union-management relationship between the public and private sectors. Unions found to be interfering in the decision-making process more in the case of public sector compared to the private sector. The necessity of unions in maintaining the union-management relationship was felt more in the case of private sector than in the case of public sector.

The analysis also showed a significant difference in the perception of managers, union leaders and workers regarding the management initiative to maintain union-management relationship ( $F =$

90.93,  $p < .01$ ). The managers had a strong belief of meeting all the reasonable demands of the workers and discussed labor problems with the trade unions. However, union leaders and

workers believed that management tried to victimize active union workers. They also perceived that management patronized a particular union and tried to create rivalry among unions.

**Table 4 Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) of Perceptions of Actors in Public & Private Sectors on Union-Management Relationship**

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
OWNERSHIP	MI	36.10	1	36.10	1.85
	UI	209.34	1	209.34	29.41**
ACTOR	MI	3553.08	2	1776.54	90.93**
	UI	1165.23	2	582.62	81.84**
OWNERSHIP	MI	119.93	2	59.97	3.07*
	ACTOR	UI	22.08	2	11.04

\*\* Significant at .01 level \* Significant at .05 level

MI – Management Initiative, UI – Union Initiative

Similarly, the actors also differed significantly in their perceptions over the union initiative to maintain union-management relationship ( $F = 81.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The managers felt that union activities interfere with an employer's ability to run the business but didn't recommend amending the laws to limit the power of the union. Union leaders and workers perceived that union activity is neither a hindrance in the process of the business nor created any adversarial relationship between the employer and the employees. It showed that leaders, particularly the workers need the presence of unions and expect them to act as a catalyst in maintaining better union-management relationship. The consultation with the unions regarding the policy matters is more frequent in the case of private sector in comparison with that of public sector.

The literature showed that the trade unions were taking the initiative com-

**The adversarial relationship is still persisting in public sector as per the present study.**

pelled by the market forces, but not reciprocated by the management (Sinha, 2001). But, this can hold good in private sector where as the adversarial relationship is still persisting in public sector as per the present study.

### **Union-Management Relationship (Research Question 3)**

In order to answer this question, multiple regression analysis was used incorporating the HR practices as predictor variables and union-management relationship as a criterion variable. As the objective was to assess the effect of the actors and ownership also, a stepwise regression was used by incorporating the ownership and actors in the first step and

**Table 5 Summary of Regression Analysis Results Incorporating HR Practices as Predictors & Measures of Union Management Relationship as Criterion Variable**

Predictor Variable	Criterion Variable											
	MI					UI						
	B	SEB	$\beta$	Multiple R	$R^2$	F	B	SEB	$\beta$	Multiple R	$R^2$	F
HRP												
PFC	.190	.047	.16**	.53	.28	61.93**	-.08	.032	-.12**	.37	.14	25.70**
PR	.49	.063	.31**				.08	.042	.09*			
TRS	.34	.089	.13**				-.14	.060	-.09*			
LER	.36	.096	.13**				.59	.065	.36**			
Constant	5.92**						5.60**					

\*\* Significant at .01 level \* Significant at .05 level

Abbreviations Used,- MI – Management Initiative, UI – Union Initiative, HRP – Human Resource Practices, PFC – Performance Feedback and Communication, PR – Promotion and Reward, TRS – Training System, LER – Long-term Employee Relations,

**Table 6 Summary of Step-wise Regression Analysis Results Incorporating Independent and Control Measures as Predictors & Management Initiative to Maintain Union Management Relationship as Criterion Variable**

Predictor Variable	Model 1					Model 2					Changes		
	B	SEB	$\beta$	$R^2$	F	B	SEB	b	$R^2$	change	$R^2$	F	
Ownership	.21	.371	.02	.19	75.28**	-.35	.337	-.03	.38	.3865	.16**	.19	48.80**
Actors	-2.44	.199	-.44**			-1.94	.191	-.35**					
Constant	23.06**	.695				12.78**	1.118						
HRP													
PFC						.24	.045	.21**					
PR						.37	.059	.24**					
TRS						.33	.083	.13**					

\*\* Significant at .01 level \* Significant at .05 level

Abbreviations Used,- MI – Management Initiative, UI – Union Initiative, HRP – Human Resource Practices, PFC – Performance Feedback and Communication, PR – Promotion and Reward, TRS – Training System, LER – Long-term Employee Relations,

**Table 7 Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis Results Incorporating Independent and Control Measures as Predictors and Union Initiative to Maintain Union Management Relationship as Criterion Variable.**

Predictor Variable	Model 1					Model 2					Changes		
	B	SEB	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	F	B	SEB	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change
Ownership	-1.45	.23	-.23**	.19	76.46**	-1.16	.230	-.18**	.24	.24	33.33**	.05	9.68**
Actors	-1.31	.12	-.38**			-1.04	.130	-.30**					
Constant	12.59*	.43				10.46**	.762						
HRP													
TRS						-.13	.056	-.08*					
LER						.38	.065	.23**					

\*\* Significant at .01 level \* Significant at .05 level

Abbreviations Used, - MI – Management Initiative, UI – Union Initiative, HRP – Human Resource Practices, PFC – Performance Feedback and Communication, PR – Promotion and Reward, TRS – Training System, LER – Long-term Employee Relations,

the other predictors which were taken earlier in the second step to find the change in predictability. The results are presented in Tables 5, 6 and 7

The HR practices accounted for 28 per cent of the variance in management initiative to maintain union-management relationship (F = 61.93, p < .01) and along with ownership and actors it explained 38 per cent of the variance (F = 65.16, p < .01). Actors had a significant but negative contribution ( $\beta = -.35$ , p < .01) towards management initiative to maintain union-management relationship; whereas the effect of ownership was not significant. Performance feedback and communication ( $\beta = .21$ , p < .01), promotion and reward ( $\beta = .24$ , p < .01), and training ( $\beta = .13$ , p < .01) were the significant predictors of management initiative to maintain union-management relationship. By providing performance feedback, recognizing and rewarding the outstanding performance, and training for upgrading skills, management can win the commitment of workers, which would help in maintaining a cordial relationship with the union.

To the extent HR practices are concerned, performance feedback and communication, and training negatively predicted the union initiative to maintain union-management relationship, whereas promotion and reward, and long-term employee relationship positively predicted the same. These factors altogether explained 14 per cent of the variance (F = 25.70, p < .01). But when the ownership and actors were included in the regression equation, training ( $\beta = -.08$ , p < .01),

**Across organizations, performance feedback, and promotion and reward system had contributed significantly towards union initiative to maintain union-management relationship.**

and long-term employee relationship ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) emerged as significant predictors explaining 24 per cent of the variance for the dependent measure ( $F = 33.33, p < .01$ ). Across organizations, performance feedback, and promotion and reward system had contributed significantly towards union initiative to maintain union-management relationship. As training had a negative impact on union initiative to maintain union-management relationship, it seemed that training was used as a tool for shaping the attitude of workers towards the management, which hampered the union initiative. Long-term employee relationship had a positive impact on union initiative to maintain the relationship even after retirement.

With regard to HR practices, it was found that performance feedback and communication, promotion and reward helped management in maintaining the union-management relationship. Workers and unions expect that training should upgrade their skill as well as help them in retaining the job in a changing environment where old technology, and existing knowledge and skills are gradually becoming obsolete and redundant. The perceived effectiveness of the HR department in its two operational roles (administrative expert and employee champion) and in its role of change agent has a positive and significant influence on

the perceived general effectiveness of trade union representatives (Winne et. al, 2013). Voos (1989) found that union-management cooperation influences the quality of labor management relations. Effective union-management relationship is a blending of traditional/adversarial and innovative/cooperative elements (Huszcz and Hoyer, 1994). While performance feedback, promotion and reward system of the organization can be an enabler for better union management relationship the management should also focus on the long-term employee relationship measures which can act as a cooperative element in strengthening the relationship.

**Union-management cooperation influences the quality of labor management relations.**

## **Conclusions & Implications**

The major finding of this study is that the HR practices are not adverse to the union management relationship. Performance feedback, promotion and reward systems helped both union and management in maintaining a cordial relationship. However, the training system is perceived negatively by the unions as a mechanism for building direct relationship with the workers. Unions have to leave the path of confrontation and cooperate with the management for their sustenance, as well as for organizational growth and development. Union should concentrate on their effort to improve the industrial relations climate, rather than hold firmly to an adversarial position (Angle & Perry, 1986) keeping in

view the challenges of changing economic scenario.

This study has implications for the union leaders in the public sector to shade their attitude and play a collaborative role in the organization which can be instrumental in building a positive union management relationship. As the HR practices are not adverse to the union management relationship the management in both the public and private sectors must try to adopt more and better high performing HR practices by taking union into the confidence.

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