

The Air Canada Strike (Appears) To Be Over

– Now The Restorative Work Must Begin



Air Canada and its employees have reached a tentative settlement agreement, bringing an end (for now) to the strike action. For the workplace, it is likely that this agreement deals primarily with issues such as terms of the return to work for employees and issues that triggered the strike, for example, wages and compensation. However, such settlements do not usually consider or cover the effects of the strike action on the workplace. For that reason, typically, after a strike, or threat of a strike, remedial actions should be taken to restore the workplace so that people can get beyond the conflict and return to productive work. Unfortunately, however, this step tends to be overlooked. The result is that workplaces often suffer from the effects of strike action for a very long time after it has ended, some time even years after. As Air Canada resumes its operations, a restoration process should be part of its strategic plan. Here is what I think they, and any other organization dealing with strike action, should be considering.

1. Navigating disruptions caused by work backlog

What is known to be generally true is that, following strike actions, there is often a backlog when employees return to work. The existence of that backlog, without more, can create disruptions in the form of frustrations for clients/customers and for employees, and there may consequently be a direct impact on productivity. So, it is one of those things that should be planned for and managed, not just from an operational perspective, but from a human resource standpoint. Part of the planning may involve identifying where the backlogs will be, who will be affected by the backlogs, and what mechanism may need to be put in place to support impacted employees in their ability to work through what will be a challenging time for them. What the restoration process also offers is an opportunity for those impacted to share how they view the situation and what would be helpful for them. Not only does this engagement help to proactively deal with the issues caused by the backlog, but it also presents an opportunity to reopen the door of communication between the organization and the impacted employees.

2. Responding to the emotional effects of strike action

Strike action can be an emotionally taxing experience for employees and leaders. As such, organizations should plan for the manifestation of those effects when operations resume. In a restoration process, employees can be afforded the opportunity to share emotional effects so that the organization can determine what

supports may be offered to them. The restoration process creates the space for effective, proper, and ongoing communication to minimize the emotional impacts for staff and management. Very often this limits the likelihood that relational breakdowns will subsist for years.

3. Addressing responses of anger towards the organization and leadership

One of the most likely reactions that will be observed in the workplace after strike action is anger and frustration towards the organization. The recipients of that anger and frustration will often be the organization's leaders. The natural effect of strike action is that it creates an "us versus them" type of environment which is not conducive to a positive working environment. Leaders will not always know how to deal with the responses that they face, and employees, given how they are feeling, will not necessarily be sympathetic when those frustrations are expressed. So, while the strike may have ended, the difficulties are often far from over. As organizations prepare to resume operations after a strike, a workplace restoration process can be incorporated into the planning strategy to prepare for this issue proactively. For example, there should be consideration of the messaging that needs to be given to employees to avert the "us versus them" mentality, the mechanism that may be put in place for them to safely and effectively raise concerns, mechanisms of support for leaders in those situations, etc.

4. Navigating changes in processes

Following a strike action, depending on what transpired during the strike and the outcome, it is not uncommon for there to be some process changes in the workplace. Employees are not always receptive of those changes and that disagreement may lead to further disruptions. In anticipation of resuming operations, it is necessary to consider what the impact(s) of those changes will be and how they might be received. A restoration process can be used to ensure that the necessary messaging is given to employees.

If these issues are considered as part of an organization's strategic plan for restoration, it likely sets the organization on a path to effectively and productively resuming operations after a strike action. It facilitates collaboration between leadership, employees, and the union, which is quite the opposite of what it would have been during the strike.

The workplace restoration process will consider the likely areas of impact, the individuals who will be impacted, how they should be engaged in the process, and the steps necessary to proactively deal with the identified areas of impact.

Unionized organizations, like Air Canada, are encouraged to consider the utilization of workplace restoration as part of their strategy to resume operations following a strike action.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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