

CHAPTER 5

CONSULTATION AT THE PERSONAL LEVEL

Background

5.1 The existing system of formal consultation between management and staff at the central and departmental levels is supplemented by other channels of communication through which management and staff groups or individual civil servants can exchange views. They include the following : -

- (a) direct access to departmental management by individuals or staff groups for consultation;
- (b) staff complaints procedure;
- (c) the Staff Suggestions Scheme;
- (d) civil service publications such as the Civil Service Newsletter;
- (e) regular liaison and consultation between grade associations and grade management, and between staff groups and the Staff Relations Division of the Civil Service Branch; and
- (f) goodwill visits by departmental welfare officers or by senior officials.

5.2 In our 1980 review, we identified a number of shortcomings in the personnel management in the civil service. They included the insufficient attention given by senior officers in some departments to the well-being of staff, and the lack of time and authority on the part of the departmental secretary to deal effectively with some staff problems. Consequently, we recommended the setting up of special units to handle staff relations/management matters in large departments.

Staff Relations-Welfare Unit

5.3 At present, a few large departments such as the Medical & Health Department, the Education Department, the Royal Hong Kong Police Force and the Correctional Services Department have specialized staff relations-welfare units. 19 departments have designated Staff Relations-Welfare

Officers on their establishments. In the other departments arrangements are made for some officers, usually the Departmental Secretary, to look after staff relations and welfare matters as part of their duties.

5.4 We note that progress has been made in setting up Staff Relations-Welfare Units in the larger departments, and that the establishment of these units has contributed to the improvement and development of staff relations in these departments. We therefore recommend that further efforts be made by the Administration to encourage a greater number of departments to form similar units to take charge of developing staff relations and promoting staff welfare.

5.5 It may be impracticable or unnecessary to establish such units in the smaller departments. But as a general policy, departmental management should designate at least one officer to look after staff relations and welfare. Where practical circumstances do not permit the establishment of a dedicated post, the Departmental Secretary or an equivalent officer may take up the responsibility. Moreover, it is preferable that all officers responsible for staff relations matters should have received appropriate training in personnel management, and possess an adequate depth of knowledge of the relevant policies and practices in the civil service.

Liaison and Consultation

5.6 The Staff Relations Division of the Civil Service Branch maintains constant liaison with grade associations/staff groups and consults them on a need basis or upon request. At the departmental level, liaison and consultation between management and grade associations/staff groups are on either regular or ad hoc basis, to discuss matters specifically affecting them. Grade management, such as the General Grades Division of the Civil Service Branch, has regular meetings with individual associations of the various Executive, Secretarial and Clerical grades. On the whole, we share the view of most respondents that these arrangements are satisfactory, although there is still scope for further improvement in some departments.

Informal Consultative Arrangements

5.7 We have high regard for the approach taken by some departments to develop informal channels of consultation with staff through which both senior management and groups of staff or individual officers can exchange views in an

informal manner. Such channels form an important part of a good and effective staff consultation system and should therefore be widely promoted.

Staff Complaints Procedure

5.8 Following our recommendation in Report No. 4 to establish a formal staff complaints procedure, the Civil Service Branch issued in 1982 a set of Guidelines for Staff Complaints Procedure to assist departments in setting up a procedure for dealing with complaints from staff. Different departments, since drawing up their procedures, have adopted different means to publicize them. These include re-circulation of the procedures periodically and incorporating them into the department's standing orders or departmental instructions, etc.

5.9 It has been drawn to our attention that in some departments the staff, especially the more junior ones, are not sufficiently informed of the staff complaints procedure and do not know to whom they can voice their grievance. Moreover, some respondents claim that they have been aggrieved because the officers who are to receive their complaints are the same persons to be complained against. In a few cases, the complaints made have not been answered.

5.10 We consider that the existing staff complaints procedure is quite effective and has largely met the objectives set out by us in that it should be simple, effective and well-publicized. Nonetheless, we recommend, in the light of the comments received, that the existing Guidelines for Staff Complaints Procedure should be suitably expanded to include the following : -

- (a) Bearing in mind that junior officers may be reluctant to approach a very high ranking officer to lodge a complaint, departments should be required to designate appropriate officers for receiving complaints from different ranks of staff. The Administration should also consider whether in addition to the staff complaints officer, staff should be informed of the name of a more senior officer who could be approached should a complaint be made against the designated officer, or when the individual concerned is dissatisfied with the way his complaint is being handled. In departments where there are regional or branch offices, the

staff complaints officer should, where practical circumstances permit, be stationed in the same office as the officers for whom he is responsible.

- (b) In addition to the claim that some members of staff have not been adequately informed of the staff complaints procedure, we also note that in some departments the procedure is only circulated among staff on an ad hoc basis. A good procedure is useful only when all staff are aware of its existence and use it whenever necessary. We therefore recommend that a section on publicity should be incorporated in the Guidelines mandating certain publicity arrangements, for example, that the procedure should be read by all staff on first reporting for duty in the department, and should be circulated periodically, say once a year.

Staff Suggestions Scheme

5.11 The Staff Suggestions Scheme has been in operation since 1975. It is administered by a Staff Suggestions Committee made up of representatives from several government branches and departments as well as from each of the three constituent member unions of the Senior Civil Service Council.

5.12 The objective of the scheme is to encourage civil servants to make suggestions for improving the efficiency of the civil service. A suggestion may cover any area of civil service activities but those that are part of the proposer's specific duties are excluded. Upon receipt of a suggestion, the Committee will send an acknowledgement to the proposer. After the Committee has considered the suggestion, the proposer will be notified of the result and the brief reasons for the decision.

5.13 Some respondents opine that the administration of the scheme should be devolved to the departmental level so as to encourage more staff to participate. The view is also expressed that the present scheme does not provide sufficient incentive to staff to make use of it. The financial award is negligible and the publicity of the awards made is inadequate. It has also been suggested that the proposer should be afforded an opportunity to state his case and answer any queries before the Staff Suggestions Committee.

5.14 We value highly the concept of encouraging staff in the work place to make suggestions for improving the efficiency of their work. This concept has been applied quite extensively in many industrialized countries both in the office and on the production floor, resulting in enhanced efficiency and sometimes substantial monetary savings. Thought has therefore been given to how the present Staff Suggestions Scheme could be further expanded or improved.

5.15 We see the following merits in the proposal that the administration of the Scheme should be devolved to the departmental level : -

- (a) staff suggestions can be evaluated directly by the department concerned;
- (b) it will be more convenient for the staff to put forward their ideas on how operations of the department can be improved; and
- (c) as a result of the direct involvement of departmental management, the scheme could be operated on a larger scale, with more resources being put into promoting the scheme and publicizing the awards made.

5.16 One possible drawback of the proposal may be on the question of impartiality which needs to be carefully addressed. But we support the proposal in principle and recommend that the Administration should examine its feasibility.

5.17 Furthermore, the present policy that a suggestion which falls within the proposer's scope of work will not normally be rewarded in monetary terms needs re-examination. While it is reasonable to expect an officer carrying managerial responsibilities to review existing work practices and formulate new procedures if necessary to improve efficiency, the prevailing policy has the effect of discouraging officers whose duties are mainly operational to make suggestions on how their work may be improved. We feel that these officers, by virtue of their first-hand experience on the shop floor, can often make simple but valuable observations on how a certain procedure or practice could be modified to result in substantial benefit. We consider it inappropriate that the suggestions made by these officers to improve their work should be excluded from consideration for monetary award.

5.18 A departmentally based staff suggestions scheme, if established, should be simple and well-publicized. Considerations should be made to facilitate staff, particularly the junior staff, to convey their suggestions to the management in a convenient way. Nominations for award may also be made by the management if a staff suggestion that merits commendation is made in the normal course of business of the department. In addition, the principle of confidentiality presently being observed by the Staff Suggestions Committee should be maintained. As in the existing practice, proposers should not be restricted to members of the department concerned.

5.19 To ensure that staff suggestions are considered impartially, we recommend that a departmental staff suggestions committee whose membership include Staff Side representatives from the departmental consultative committee and the relevant staff associations should be formed.

5.20 We consider that adequate feedback to proposers is an important aspect of the scheme in encouraging further suggestions from them. The present practice of informing the proposer of the brief reasons for a decision (especially when a suggestion is rejected) should therefore continue. We also recommend that where a suggestion involves complicated considerations the proposer, subject to his or her agreement and notwithstanding the principle of confidentiality, should be invited to make a presentation before the relevant staff suggestions committee. This could provide an opportunity for the proposer to explain more fully his ideas and to answer any queries.

Civil Service Publications

5.21 The Civil Service Newsletter came into existence in April 1982 since when 14 issues have been published. Its function is to communicate with and educate staff on government policies in an informal manner.

5.22 Apart from the Civil Service Newsletter, the General Grades Division of the Civil Service Branch also publishes grade-based newsletters to members of the Executive grade, the Secretarial grades and the Clerical grades. Many departments also have their own departmental newsletters for circulation to their staff.

5.23 We consider that the Civil Service Newsletter could be a useful channel through which the Administration can disseminate information on new developments of the civil service and explain policies which affect civil servants. We therefore share the view of many respondents that the Civil Service Newsletter should be published more frequently. But the newsletter may serve other meaningful purposes apart from simply disseminating information and educating staff as it presently does, especially when it is published more frequently. We therefore recommend that its editorial policy be reviewed, particularly paying regard to whether the newsletter should regularly have a column for contributions from staff. If such a column is created, active promotional efforts should be made to encourage staff to express their views through the newsletter.

Goodwill Visits

5.24 The Secretary for the Civil Service pays regular visits to departments to make personal contact with departmental management and staff representatives from all levels. On each visit, a session is usually dedicated to meeting staff representatives for the discussion of service-wide as well as departmental issues of their concern.

5.25 Officers of the General Grades Division make regular outreaching visits to individual members of the general grades posted to various departments. Senior staff of departments also pay goodwill visits to branches/sub-offices to get in touch with their staff. In our view, such visits would enable the management to have a better understanding of the problems at the work-place, where grievances and aspirations of staff are often first ventilated. It would also enable senior management to make personal contacts with individual officers to discuss matters which affect them directly. We share the opinion of respondents that these visits boost morale and could do much to improve staff relations. Departments should therefore be encouraged to institute such exercises formally into their departmental consultation system.