

BUT IT'S DIFFERENT HERE!

China or Ireland?

Jane Graham-Leigh

“But this is China, China is different” the phrase rings in my ears from my days as Remuneration Manager for the East Asia and Pacific Region of Unilever. Substitute Japan, Korea, Vietnam or any of the countries in the region and the message was similar. How can an Englishwoman possibly seek to apply policies and practices in such a culturally different environment?

Fast forward to my down-sized generalist personnel role in an up-sized life and I find myself thinking (if not yet saying) “but this is Ireland, Ireland is different” – and with the caveat of the adjective “rural”, giving Dubliners the benefit of the doubt, indeed it is.

No frantic pace, no throng of humanity, but in its place a laid-back off-centre approach where people have a flexible attitude to time and play games with serious subjects. Where there is no such thing as a quick question, let alone a short answer, but debate and anecdote on related subjects until a solution presents itself.

In an environment where formal policies are few and custom-and-practice is king, establishing even a rudimentary structure is a long and wearying process. Take, for example, the formalisation of a seemingly random sick-pay scheme in the retail environment in which I work. With 16 shops around the country and employing around 120 employees – most of them part-timers on flexible hours – my belief is that it is important to know exactly what to expect and that costs are controlled. There is a naive supposition that a policy applied to one employee will not be broadcast to others. “Ah, and who’s going to know?” being a standard response when a manager has committed herself to something dubious.

An initial trawl of files and contracts (where they exist) shows a creative approach to the wording of the relevant passage – from a promise that after 3 months the employee will be eligible to participate in the sick-pay scheme, to reference to the Staff Handbook. The Staff Handbook in turn refers to the published Sick Pay scheme maintained in each branch. It isn’t. So where do we begin?

We begin with discussions amongst the management team which start off around the numbers of days off individual employees have taken (“now wasn’t she off for a good long spell last year”)... the illness they have suffered (“and wouldn’t you know my mother/sister/cousin/aunt had just the same a year since”)... how long it took them to recover (“sure and she’s still got some trouble”)... sidetracked into child care (“well Mary took the older one while the youngster stayed with Catherine”)... family size (“a fierce big family – and another due any minute”)... care of the elderly (“the grandmother’s in fine

form, except for the legs”)... a brief discussion of Sunday’s match (“weren’t Cork flying it”)... until the end of the day comes and we must postpone for another session.

In the meantime I have drawn up proposals planned the introduction and communication – but do we have a published Sick Pay Scheme? We do not.

(By Jane Graham-Leigh, June 2004

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