
THE PRACTICE OF EXCELLENCE

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"Participative management is most of all a way of releasing the natural, inherent enthusiasm and creativity of the entire organization."

Canada's business culture is changing – we are in the midst of a revolution. The great hierarchical structures that were once thought to express the essence of our managerial genius are being disassembled. At long last our addiction to numbers and pure logic is being displaced by a new reverence for the human element.

There are many reasons for these changes: economic hard times, the computerization of information flow, and a realization that manipulating numbers is not the same as making a product and selling it at a profit. Companies are becoming lean. We are learning lessons that will re-energize and globalize our industrial base.

Today, performance is the only criterion for employment in many businesses. Ad hoc groups are being used to solve specific problems and then are disbanded. Many organizations now prefer to allow small clusters of energetic, entrepreneurial people to take on tasks that are close to their abilities and to their hearts.

When the management team becomes lean, it faces a formidable problem: How do you do an even better job running an organization with fewer people? I can respond from my own experience. The simple fact that there are fewer people almost always results in a better job being done.

Competent, self-motivated people do not mind hard work. They thrive on it. What they mind is work that goes unrecognized...or ideas that can't penetrate layers of middle managers who feel the need to be smarter than the people they supervise.

The Manager as Teacher

Becoming leaner is not the entire answer to increased managerial productivity – not by far. The "culture" change that everyone likes to talk about these days must happen, and that is where participative management can play a big role.

Participative management is essentially a way of releasing the natural, inherent enthusiasm and creativity of the entire organization. *Its purpose is to bring total energy to higher levels than old-style, autocratic organizations were able to attain.* Understanding this calls for a new blend of teaching and teamwork; we must find the balance between those two values.

Let's concentrate on teaching. If you have done any teaching, you know that the teacher enjoys near total authority in the classroom. The teacher is number one. That much is also true of the senior person among a group of managers.

But a teacher also has the task of drawing the best out of the people in his or her charge. The word "education" means "to lead out of". It is a process that often teaches the teacher at least as much as the student learns. The same is true of the top business executive in a participative management format. The senior manager's job is to assist others in developing their maximum capabilities and performance – to help them become even better managers.

The teaching role of the senior manager becomes most evident when he or she has aimed a junior manager in the right direction and has established a clear cut goal, only to realize that the path the manager wants to take to reach that goal is not the one the senior manager would have chosen. The manager's choice may even seem to be a partial waste of time and resources.

The participative manager faced with this dilemma will, in many cases, allow the other manager to use his or her chosen method, especially if the manager is enthusiastic about the particular approach. Pilots say that good flight instructors act in this way: they let students make many of the choices about how the airplane is to be handled, but they never allow the plane to crash! Unless allowed to try their own wings, managers will never attain the greatest possible proficiency at their jobs. However, the senior manager must make certain that newer managers don't crash.

Such decisions are difficult, but there are good reasons for making them. First, the junior manager will probably learn something valuable from the experience. If not, the senior manager will. Second, any attempt by the senior manager to insist on his or her methods can only introduce a series of rigidities into the organization. That is the method of the old-style autocrat.

Let's pause for a moment and contrast that old-style autocrat with a modern participative manager. Their greatest differences lie in two areas: how they see people, and how they see their own role in getting the job done. An autocrat sees people as "things" – Douglas

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McGregor's Theory X manager. They are to be purchased and used, much as you might purchase and use a ton of steel or an electronic data handling system.

The participative manager sees people as a resource that can be nourished, improved and learned from; sees people as associates, helpers and teachers; and wants people to gain as much from the job as the company gains from employing them. McGregor termed this as Theory Y management.

In the matter of getting the job done, the autocrat thinks only of the task itself. The participative manager thinks of the task and the people simultaneously, trying to get each to benefit from the other.

It is also very interesting to contrast the participative manager and the autocrat in relation to how they obtain the information they want and need. The participative manager, because he or she operates in a totally open style – even inviting personal criticism - will usually get all the information necessary to manage the job.

In stark contrast, autocrats tend to be isolated. Those who work for them soon begin to offer only information that will merit instant approval. They offer good news and bury the bad news. Every autocrat I have ever known has been forced to set up a personal intelligence service or grapevine in order to get essential information with any degree of accuracy.

Autocrats are always frustrated. You will invariably hear them complain "Don't they hear me? Don't they understand what I'm saying to them?"

Oh yes, they understand. They just don't agree!

Supervisors and junior managers will perform best for an organization when they understand its larger goals, and are allowed (and encouraged) to make a personal contribution. It is by now a tired cliché, but true nonetheless: people are the secret of success in any organization. That is why the teaching aspect of the top manager's job is essential. It is, in effect, a technique that demands a balance between authority and helpfulness – exactly the balance that a good teacher maintains in a classroom.

The Manager as Team Builder

The second side of the participative procedure is teamwork. This also begins with the senior manager. The most important task facing any senior manager is to build the right team to do the job at hand. Implied in that obligation is the need to change the team

when either the job or the performance of the people demands it.

The absolute number one guideline for such team building is excellence.

Every position on the management team must be filled with the best possible person. The situation is analogous to a hockey team. You can be the goalie until a better goalie comes along.

Any top executive who allows friendship, sentiment or any other such consideration to compromise excellence is not doing his or her job. We would all like to believe that there can be exceptions to such a hardhearted rule, but that just isn't possible. Not even for good old Pierre who's been in the job for 30 years. *Excellence is the only rule!*

It is far tougher to work for a participative manager than for an autocrat. It is an erroneous impression that participative management is a variation of democracy at work in the boardroom. Far from it.

The participative manager has no choice but to demand the absolute best you can give. To make that demand, and to make it possible for employees to meet that demand, is the essence of the entire team concept. There is no place to hide if you fail to perform. On the other hand, when you work for an autocrat and do exactly what he or she asks, success or failure belongs to the autocrat, not to you.

An effective participative manager is a good team builder. Several characteristics of the management team that are not usually mentioned include the following:

The team should include everyone except, in the case of business, the competition. Anyone who can help accomplish the team's goals should be a member. That includes (for business) the union, all suppliers, all customers, and consultants, where appropriate.

To mention the union while at the same time talking about team building is, to many, incongruous. One of the essential failures of the old-style autocratic managers was their absolute insistence on the exclusion of unions in the basic process of running the business.

Everybody who can play a role has to be on the team. Suppliers have to understand how their products and services affect your goals. Customers should have a major say about what those goals are. Only the competition should be formally excluded. And even they will teach you some important lessons – sometimes the hard way.

Often, the one person who should be on the team and who fails to join it is the senior manager. He or she may build a superb team,

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a sort of alter ego, but that's where the trouble starts. When the team or any member of it fails to perform well, the senior manager becomes protective rather than using the problem to improve performance the next time.

The practice of excellence and its flip side—the rejection of mediocrity—does not demand that everyone on the team be superstars. Good people who work well together can always beat outstanding people who do not work well together. It is the team quality that counts, and a team is much more than the sum of its parts.

If there is one essential ingredient in good team building, it is trust. The chief executive has to trust people, or else replace them. He or she and the team must be mutually open to one another. That trust brings with it the freedom that all managers require to experiment, learn and grow.

The Manager as Participant

For years, I have been fascinated by watching people who are engaged in their work. I enjoy watching a good worker do his or her job, whether I'm observing a floor sweeper or a top executive. But as a consultant I must confess a special interest in the characteristics that seem to go along with successful management. I have found four basic skills that seem to be indispensable to success as a manager, even though they do not in themselves guarantee success.

The first is *intelligence*, but not necessarily intelligence at the genius level. Geniuses or people who think they are geniuses are easily bored by ordinary mortals, and quickly become impatient and almost invariably autocratic.

The second characteristic of a good manager is *intellectual curiosity*. He or she wants to know why things happen, not just what things are.

The third characteristic is another corollary of intelligence – *the ability to solve problems*. The good manager is a natural fact finder, has good reasoning ability and excellent intuition, and is able to make sound decisions.

The last of the four characteristics I have observed is the most important. The good manager must be a *hard worker*. Hard work is still the road to success, especially for those who genuinely enjoy the hard work.

These four characteristics are not assurances of success in management. You must have them, but you also have to have something else – an interest in and an ability to work with people in order to get the job done.

Let's look at how all of this works in practice.

Participative management does not seem to produce a lot of drama. It is a solid system that prefers to gain ground in small, steady increments, rather than in the big grandstand plays of the autocrats.

Staff meetings following a participative management system are an interesting example. A senior manager is wise to encourage peers to assist in the resolution of another staff member's problems. You obtain different perspectives on the situation, and possibly a better solution. When a manager has to explain his or her methods to a group of peers, everyone plays the role of teacher. The teaching and teamwork aspects of participative management coincide.

For example, use a sort of Socratic method in staff meetings, asking questions like, "Why do you think that approach is better than the traditional approach?" or "What alternatives are there? Can anyone else see a better way?" If there is a problem in a chosen method or solution, someone else on staff will usually spot it and bring it out. Such peer pressure is far more effective than pressure from the boss. Staff members have to work together. They know one another's strengths and weaknesses and need one another's respect. And they are naturally competitive.

One can always tell that teamwork is slipping when managers begin to target artificial adversaries – not the competition, but people within the organization.

For instance, you may realize that one of your managers has begun to make life miserable for some internal enemy, such as the Quality Assurance Manager. He or she will spend hours and even days making life difficult for this poor victim, and in the process divert competitive energies that should have been aimed directly at the competition. Some of this will probably always go on in human affairs, but it is far less likely to occur when communications are open and honest, and when the team is dedicated to excellence.

An environment of change, either initiated by the chief executive or thrust in from the world outside, encourages the art of participative management. In the stormy sea of change, all managers in a particular group can sense themselves aboard the same boat. A spirit of mutual support in pursuit of survival can actually be sensed in the group. This creates a good climate for team building.

A good participative manager cherishes change, whatever its source. She or he is also flexible - both in policies and in response to

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events. Firm, unchanging policies are nearly always unproductive, for two reasons.

First, policies inherently state what *not* to do. They block creativity. Second, they cannot be changed under the pressure of unexpected demands. In these rapidly changing times, a good, open management atmosphere is far more useful than a set of firm policies containing what appears to be the wisdom of the ages.

Finally, another goal that can link any group of managers into a participative entity is an all-out emphasis on quality.

Guidelines for Making it Work

Now let me offer you a few do's and don'ts for senior executives.

If you're the senior manager, *always insist on excellence*. Without that discipline, participative management can quickly deteriorate into a long, dull conversation.

Don't put up with mediocrity. Once you have spotted mediocrity, prune it out immediately, whether it comes in the form of an attitude, a method or a person. One mediocre performer can, like the bad apple, ruin the whole group. Somehow, it is always the lowest perceived level of performance that sets the tone.

Remember that "facts are friendly". Everyone in a participative management group should understand that no fact, however negative, should be hidden away, even temporarily. The sooner a problem is placed on the table, the sooner the total mental resources of the group can be applied to it.

Left in the dark, negative facts grow like mushrooms, and can be just as poisonous. And left in the dark, positive facts may not grow at all. When everyone in your participative management group knows all the facts, they will make the same decision you

have made about what to do. If they don't, then you are probably wrong.

A corollary of the "facts are friendly" idea is the need to open extensive communication between you as senior manager and your people. *Dialogue is essential to participative management. Not talk – dialogue.*

The senior executive must always be tenacious. Participative management is not the fastest way to get results. It is the fastest way to get successful results. Very often, you will have to hold your peace while a member of your team undertakes a job in his or her own way, often in a way that you know to be indirect. But in the end, the personal enthusiasm that comes with that kind of independence gets the ball rolling much faster.

Slow starts, fast finishes – that's one aspect of participative management. Try to regard such initial losses in time and efficiency as strategic investments. They usually pay off.

Value ideas but don't fall in love with ideas for their own sake. The real value of participative management is its ability to implement ideas, which is always a much tougher job than coming up with ideas in the first place.

Perhaps most important of all - don't take yourself too seriously. In participative systems, a big ego at the top is a tremendous handicap. Remember, in addition to being your mother's incredible child, it took a lot of luck to achieve that top job. You're good, but so are the people around you. Be able to laugh at yourself. That single characteristic will open the channels of communication in your direction, and you will gain a measure of personal loyalty that is never granted to people who have forgotten that they are, at the end of the day, just people.