CEO Center for Effective Organizations

**A Little Bit of Participation
Can Be A Dangerous Thing**

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May 1993

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Abstract

The impact of the duration of participation in rotating, voluntary problem-
solving groups on worker perceptions and attitudes was examined in the
context of a quality circle type program in a food warehouse. Findings
indicate that continuous participants showed some improvement in attitudes;
those who never participated showed a decline; and those who participated
but then dropped out showed the strongest decline. Implications for employee
participation programs are discussed.

Introduction

American companies are turning increasingly to the concept of employee participation as a way to solicit worker involvement in the improvement of productivity and/or to improve the quality of worklife of a relatively alienated work force. Problem solving groups such as quality control circles, worker task forces and union/management committees are examples of the group participation mechanisms which are being utilized. Such mechanisms tend to promote voluntary participation which results in the division of the workers into two groups: those who have self-selected into the participatory groups and those who are not in a group. Membership is often further limited by time and resources to a subgroup of the workers who desire participation. This situation is sometimes handled either by rotating membership or by phasing in increasing numbers of participatory groups.

This/ _paper · examines the impact of voluntary participation in which individuals select in and out of participatory structures at periodic intervals. In particular, it examines the impact after ten months of a participatory program involving worker problem solving groups on three groups of workers: 1) those who were continuous members of a problem-solving group; 2) those who were members either before or after a membership rotation which occurred after 5 months; and 3) those who never joined a group. It explores the possibility that such programs may have unintended negative consequences on employees who are not highly involved in the program.

The Effects of Participation Programs

Participation programs such as quality circle programs are often advocated on the belief that they can contribute both to the productivity of the workplace, in the form of cost reduction and quality enhancing

ideas, and to the working conditions, satisfaction and self-development
of workers. With proper training, it is believed that workers can become
meaningful contributors of valuable ideas and in the process will develop
skills, obtain intrinsic satisfaction and become more involved in the
well-being of the company. The benefits which are anticipated include the
development of leadership abilities, improvement of motivation and morale,
increased teamwork and cohesion of the workgroup and greater management
recognition of the contributions and value of workers (Cole, 1980).

Evidence that participation has positive effects on attitudes
and/or productivity is far from conclusive (Locke and Schweiger, 1978). The
large-scale adoption of employee participation groups such as quality
circles seems to be patterned less on research findings that they are
effective than on their use in Japanese industry. Cole (1980) has suggested
that these participatory structures may have different effects in the Amer-
ican culture than in the relatively homogeneous culture of Japan, where
workers identify more strongly with their company than in the United
States. In Japan, quality circles are an extension of an organizational
setting in which workers have continual opportunities to contribute and
participate. In the United States, they are often introduced into settings
in which worker participation is not customary, and where the participation
groups often represent an unusual opportunity both to participate and to
escape the routine aspects of one's job.

Because participation group programs represent a departure from the
normal routine and customary role of the worker, they can be expected to
result in some negative consequences, at least when they are first introduced.
Such programs tend to be introduced with a great deal of fanfare, which

cannot help but raise the hopes and expectations of the workers concerning their potential to exert influence and the potential of the program to benefit them. The program is often slow to start, and demands skills which the workers may not possess and which may not be readily developed in a short training program. It may further require a contextual responsiveness which local or corporate management may not be able or inclined to provide. There is an initial learning curve for all groups involved in such efforts.

The problem solving groups often generate solutions to narrow contextual and technical issues, or to minor hygiene issues, and are often ill-prepared for tackling the more complex workflow, career, power and social issues which may be especially salient to workers. The appropriate domain for worker involvement is generally ambiguous, often resulting in a conservative interpretation of responsibility. Furthermore, unlike managers, workers are not used to and are frustrated by the inevitable bureaucratic delays in approval or implementation of ideas. All these factors point to a possible disillusionment of participants at an early stage of the program.

Programs which are voluntary and/or rotational in nature may have additional unintended negative consequences. If initial participants are chosen from a larger pool of applicants, one can anticipate that there are workers who are disappointed or upset that they were not admitted to a group. Membership in a problem solving groups is a scarce resource which may result in unequal distribution of other resources, such as attention from managers, time released from regular work assignments, overtime and/or status. This may interfere with previous status systems, such as seniority. Furthermore, group membership may violate role preferences of some workers, who do not view productivity-related problem solving as a worker responsibility.

The existence of groups who meet regularly and receive attention from management may lead to an in- and out-group phenomenon, where those not in a group feel alienated from group members and program activities. To the extent that the groups secure management attention, they may detract from managers' time to attend to needs and requests of non-group members. Non-participants may find that they actually receive less information than prior to the initiation of the program, as management now concentrates on communication with the groups. Non-participants may find that management is less available and less responsive than previously.

Although one can in theory conceive of the groups as representatives of the worker viewpoint, in practice such representation probably requires a level of sophistication of communication that is not possessed by the group members at the onset. Workers probably do not have time or skills to carry ideas to and from a constituency. Other studies have found that representational participation results in improved attitudes only of those directly involved in the participatory structures (Macy and Peterson, 1981).

In summary, attitudinal benefits which are anticipated as a result of worker participation programs may be relatively limited if the programs limit participation to a subset of the workers. Such benefits as self-development, increased cohesion and management recognition accrue most naturally to direct participants. Frustration with the difficulties of start-up may lead to disillusionment of early participants who may see their efforts have very little impact on their day-to-day worklife. Those who are excluded from participation may be alienated from the program and/or may experience a decline in their quality of worklife, due to a siphoning off of management attention to attend to the demands of the problem-solving groups.

This study examines the impact of one such worker participation program on workers with varying levels of participation in the program. We expect that those workers who have greater on-going involvement in the program will feel more positively both toward the program itself and toward the company and their job in general. Workers with limited involvement in the problem-solving groups (due to rotation) and workers with no involvement are expected to have less favorable attitudes. Furthermore, those with greater involvement are expected to perceive the program to have greater impact in the work situation than those with limited program contact.

The Study

This worker involvement program occurred in the warehouse of a large retail food organization in the Southwest of the United States. It was very similar to a quality-circle program, in that groups of workers from a department self-selected into problem-solving groups which met for two hours every two weeks to address problems occurring in the work setting. Leaders were selected by management and received two days of training in problem-solving, group process and communication skills. Facilitators from the human resource department provided limited in-group training for the rest of the group members at the beginning of the program. Four teams of ten members each were established in the eighty member department in which the program was implemented.

Only four workers in the department failed to volunteer for the initial problem-solving groups. It was decided that membership would be rotational, with the initial group being selected to be representative of the various work areas in the warehouse and with seniority being used as a selection criterion both in order to insure that members had sufficient experience to

contribute meaningfully to solutions and because the warehouse culture stressed the value of seniority.

Five months after the initiation of the program, workers in the groups had the option to select out and others could select in. Twelve members chose to drop off problem-solving teams. Because of natural attrition and the decision to increase the number of members of each team to thirteen, twenty-nine new members were admitted to teams. Approximately twenty members continued in the groups. New leaders were selected from the on-going group members, and they received the two day training. After several months, a shift change resulted in further alterations in the team make-up. In addition, members dropped off the teams because of disillusionment with the speed of its accomplishments, and other members either transferred out of the department or stopped attending meetings.

The participation program is continuing in the department. It has addressed problems and generated solutions in the following areas: damage control; workflow congestion; equipment maintenance; and new-member training. It has also examined some areas in which changes have not yet been implemented, including worker fringe benefits, the pay system and training and development opportunities. From a productivity viewpoint, it is a toss-up whether the savings resulting from worker-generated ideas or the costs of the program itself are larger.

The program was evaluated in part through the use of attitude surveys which were administered one month prior to program onset and after ten months of program functioning. This paper compares the attitude changes of three groups of workers: those who were involved as problem-solving team members during the entire ten months; those who were members for a portion of the ten months; and those who were never members of a team. In addition to comparing change in general attitudes, we will compare the perceptions of program impact of the three groups, and their attitudes toward the participation program itself.

The Measures

Questionnaire measures assessed attitudes in the following general areas: information and communication; group cohesion and teamwork, problem solving and decision making participation; satisfaction, and other general affective reactions. Within each of these general areas there were several subscales which measured more specific attitudes. For example, in the area of information and communication, separate scales measured the following: general feelings of being informed, satisfaction with information relating to performance, the company and career opportunities, and feedback from supervisors and from the department manager.

The various scales are listed in Table 1, along with their internal reliability coefficient alphas.

In addition to these general attitude scales, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the participation program and their perceptions of change as its consequence. Tables 2 and 3 present a list of these items, which were only included in the final survey administration.

Results

An analysis of variance test was used to ascertain whether the attitudes of the three groups of respondents changed in a different pattern during the 10 months of the evaluation period. This test compares the scores of the three groups at the two times to determine whether the groups are different from each other at both times, whether all 3 groups changed in the same direction over time, and whether there is an interaction (whether the groups change in different directions over time). An interaction effect may be the result of unequal program impact (Nunally, 1975).

Table 1 presents the results of the Analysis of Variance Tests.

In the general area of information and communication, it can be seen that all three groups experienced a decline in satisfaction with specific kinds of information relating to performance, career and company policy and plans. Only the partially involved group experienced a large decline in their feelings of being well-informed and in their perceptions of receiving supervisory feedback. The group which had continual involvement in the program felt there was an increase in the amount of feedback they received from the department manager. This reflects the heavy involvement of the head of the department in program events.

During the ten months of the program, only those with continual involvement experienced an increase in their feelings of involvement in problem-solving and decision making in the department. The other two groups declined relatively steeply on those scales.

The group that had partial involvement in the program decreased significantly in their perceptions of cohesion and teamwork in the department, while both the high-involvement and no-involvement groups remained steady in those areas.

The change in general affective reactions of the three groups showed a similar pattern. Only the partial involvement group declined in general satisfaction, while the other two groups increased.Both partial amd no involvement groups declined markedly in trust in the organization, intrinsic motivation, and belief in the human orientation of the company, while the continual participation group increased in these areas.

Finally, the continual participation group declined in their intention to turn over or to seek internal transfers, while the other two groups increased in both of these withdrawal measures.

In general, it appears that the group which was involved in the program in an on-going manner experienced some improvement in attitudes. Those who never participated experienced some decline in attitudes. The group which had limited involvement because they rotated in or out of the program after 5 months experienced the strongest decline in attitudes. In some scales there was a statistically significant difference in the pattern of attitude changes of the three groups.

Table 2 depicts scores on items measuring satisfaction with the program. It can be seen that continuous participants are more favorable toward the program in general and in these areas: information about the program; involvement in the program; pace of the program. Continuous participants are _less_ favorable toward the rotational system than those who never participated and those who were only involved in one rotational period. Those who never participated are the _most_ satisfied with management responsiveness.

Table 3 depicts the percentage of workers who perceive change as a result of the participation program. In general, continuous participants perceive more change. There are a few exceptions: non-participants see change in areas in which the teams did not make any changes. It appears that the non-participants were responding in a void of accurate information about the program.

Conclusion

Continuous participants in the worker problem-solving groups felt relatively satisfied with the program, perceived program impact, and experienced some attitude improvements. Both the group of non-participants and those who had only partial participation experienced more negative attitude effects and were relatively dissatisfied with the program. Non-participants appear to have had little valid information about the program and what the problem-solving teams were doing. Those workers who dropped

off teams and/or were admitted to a team only at the rotation period experienced the largest decline in attitudes.

These findings bring into question the advisability of gradual introduction of voluntary participation programs which involve a subset of interested employees. There are negative consequences of such programs both on non-participants and on people who go in and out of the program. Obviously these consequences are unanticipated, and management would be disappointed to learn that a program in which they had invested time and resources did not achieve the attitudinal impact they had desired. Participatory programs must be carefully designed to avoid the negative side effects which occur when only a subset of employees are singled out for special attention.

Table 1

Measures of Program Impact: Analysis of Variance

All=Continuous participants
Some = Some participation
None = Never participated

T_1 = July, 1980
T_2 = September, 1981

Mean Scores
(Scale=1-7)

Scale Name and (Coefficient Alpha)		(N=7) None	(N=10) Some	(N=15) All	Significant Interaction Effect?
COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION					
General Information (.70)	T_1	4.4	4.6	4.7	no
	T_2	4.3	3.7	4.6	
Performance information (.81)	T_1	4.9	4.5	4.9	no
	T_2	4.4	3.7	4.0	
Career Information (.83)	T_1	4.2	3.9	4.5	no
	T_2	3.4	3.4	4.2	
Company information(.76)	T_1	4.3	4.8	4.8	no
	T_2	4.4	4.3	4.5	
Feedback from Super-visors (.88)	T_1	4.7	4.3	4.3	
	T_2	4.9	3.7	4.0	
Feedback from Department Manager (.79)	T_1	5.1	4.2	3.8	yes (p=.06)
	T_2	4.8	3.5	4.8	
INVOLVEMENT IN PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING					
Problem-Solving Involvement (.85)	T_1	4.8	4.2	3.8	yes (p=.003)
	T_2	3.1	3.6	4.6	
Participation in Deci-sion Making (.77)	T_1	3.4	4.0	3.8	yes (p=.08)
	T_2	3.0	2.9	4.0	
GROUP INVOLVEMENT					
Group Cohesion (.57)	T_1	5.6	6.0	5.7	yes (p=.02)
	T_2	5.7	5.2	5.8	
Teamwork (.83)	T_1	4.9	5.0	4.9	no
	T_2	4.6	4.3	5.1	

AFFECTIVE REACTIONS		<u>None</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>All</u>	Interaction?
General Satisfaction (.78)	T_1	5.8	6.5	5.4	yes (p=.02)
	T_2	6.4	5.8	5.8	
Trust (.71)	T_1	4.9	4.6	3.8	yes (p=.04)
	T_2	4.5	3.7	4.4	
Intrinsic Motivation (.83)	T_1	6.1	6.3	5.8	no
	T_2	5.5	5.6	5.6	
Belief in Human Orientation of the Company (.61)	T_1	5.9	4.9	4.5	yes (p=.004)
	T_2	4.1	3.8	5.0	
Department Involvement (.82)	T_1	5.6	5.8	5.6	no
	T_2	5.7	5.6	5.9	
WITHDRAWAL					
External Turnover Intent (.84)	T_1	2.0	2.1	3.8	yes (p=.003)
	T_2	3.0	3.1	2.4	
Desire for Internal Transfer	T_1	5.8	4.1	5.4	yes (p=.05)
	T_2	6.6	4.9	4.0	

Table 2

SATISFACTION WITH IT PROGRAM*

		Never	Time 3 Some	Continuous
a.	The amount of information you receive about what is going on in the IT groups (If you are a group member, how satisfied are you with information you get from the other groups?)	4.0	4.1	5.1
b.	Your degree of involvement in the program	4.0	4.9	5.4
c.	Management's responses to worker concerns	5.0	4.2	4.6
d.	The pace at which the program is moving along	4.4	3.9	4.7
e.	The extent to which your views are being represented	4.4	4.6	5.1
f.	The IT program in general	4.4	4.6	5.3
g.	The IT member rotation process	4.6	4.7	4.2

Non-Leaders

		Time 2	Time 3
a.	The amount of information you receive about what is going on in the IT groups (If you are a group member, how satisfied are you with information you get from the other groups?)	3.8	4.0
b.	Your degree of involvement in the program	4.3	4.5
c.	Management's responses to worker concerns	4.4	4.4
d.	The pace at which the program is moving along	3.9	4.0
e.	The extent to which your views are being represented	4.2	4.5
f.	The IT program in general	4.9	4.4
g.	The IT member rotation process	–	4.5

* mean response on seven point scales are reported:
  1 = strongly dissatisfied, 7 = strongly satisfied

Table 3

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS INDICATING
CHANGES OCCURED AS A RESULT OF IT PROGRAM

		Time 3 Degree of Participation		
		Never	Some	Continous
a.	increase in new equipment	26	38	56
b.	maintenance of equipment	63	73	94
c.	building repair	53	56	94
d.	supervision	58	48	88
e.	communication with other departments	58	47	56
f.	pay system	32	9	6
g.	job assignments	42	48	68
h.	work schedules	58	42	56
i.	breaks	53	30	19
j.	number of employees	53	39	50
k.	work flow	42	33	67
l.	supplies	47	39	67
m.	training	42	39	40
n.	information about promotions	23	12	0
o.	the amount of information you get from management	54	21	60
p.	overtime practices	38	25	40
q.	safety and security	54	29	50
r.	benefits	46	38	20
s.	incentives	31	26	10
t.	performance appraisals	69	33	50
u.	damage	62	46	80
v.	congestion	46	39	60
w.	sanitation	62	42	70
x.	break-room facilities	15	25	40
y.	availability of management	54	42	70
z.	suggestion system	31	46	80

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