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Programs

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IMPLEMENTING QUALITY WORK LIFE
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by

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ABSTRACT

Quality of worklife programs attempt fundamental value and be-
havioral changes in organizational. This requires the estab-
lishment of structures and processes to facilitate learning.
Such structures and processes are discussed.

Efforts to increase productivity and quality of work life (QWL) are a growing phenomenon in American corporations in the 1980s (Business Week, 1981; Fortune, 1981). Organizations in all sectors of the economy are searching for innovative ways to tap employees' creative energies for the solution of pressing economic and productivity problems. People from all walks of corporate life are flocking to conferences and workshops extolling the virtues of QWL in general and of particular techniques such as quality circles, job enrichment, gainsharing, and flexi-time. Almost as prevalent are the consultants who are willing and equipped to "put a program in place."

Quality of worklife programs typically have the dual objectives of improving productivity and employee fulfillment. They are generally multifaceted and may include simultaneous changes in work design, participation in decision making, leadership style, reward systems, and organization structures. The underlying hope is that these changes will make work more satisfying and motivating, and consequently employee commitment and task performance will increase.

Although it is premature to judge the overall impact of the QWL trend, it is expedient to learn from the experiences of the early innovators of QWL approaches. This paper draws on experiences with a broad array of QWL programs and suggests that success is dependent largely on the manner in which the program is implemented. QWL is not an innovation that an organization can simply adopt, but rather it entails new behaviors and assumptions about organizations that people can set out to learn. The practical implications of QWL learning are qualitatively different and substantially more far reaching than those

of innovation adopting, since a fundamental alteration in world-view is implied.

Implementing QWL: Common Misconceptions

"I've read some articles and attended a conference about QWL, and I'm curious about it. After all, we're not performing as well as we could, and I feel that we need a shot in the arm. We've got some real people problems, and a QWL program sounds like a good way to turn things around. I wonder if we could put one in place in the next few months. It sounds like just the ticket for us. Oh, I know we're busy right now, but we can hire a consultant and get started right away. It shouldn't take a major investment of time. All we really have to do is to get some of our people to start acting different. Maybe set up a few of those quality circles or enrich some of the jobs. This will show our people that we care about them, and it might get us a lot of favorable visibility in the company."

With this, another manager or administrator embarks on a QWL program. Unfortunately for many of these people, the road to higher productivity and employee fulfillment contains a number of pitfalls which are more easily identified than avoided. A major cause underlying these often unexpected difficulties is the common misconception that QWL programs are similar to other innovations that organizations typically adopt, such as new pieces of equipment, accounting methods, or production techniques. As depicted in the monologue above, traditional assumptions about innovation adoption include: a) the innovation is clearly defined and understood; b) it can be implemented through a series of specifiable steps; and c) the organization can readily gain the necessary knowledge and skills to utilize the innovation. Below, we assess each of these assumptions in terms of implementing QWL programs.

QWL programs are well-defined and clearly understood organizational innovations. FALSE.

Managers who hear about QWL efforts generally focus on specific design elements. The popular literature is full of testimonials about

the benefits of worker participation groups, enriched jobs, facilitative supervision, skill-based pay, removal of artificial status barriers between workers and managers, and other techniques. Adopting managers identify and try to mandate those QWL components which they expect will be accepted and will be effective in their work setting. This approach presupposes that individual components have an independent effect on desired outcomes, which can be predicted by learning how they operated in other organizations. Studies of the QWL innovations of the 1960s indicate that it is impossible to tell which components of an innovation resulted in positive organizational outcomes. Because an evaluation effort was missing in most QWL efforts, it is unclear whether positive change could be linked to those projects at all (Cummings, Molloy and Glen, 1977). The newest wave of QWL innovations is also characterized by global testimony to the positive impact of complex, multifaceted change efforts. Making design predictions from such a literature is dangerous.

The state of knowledge of QWL programs does not justify approaching a design strategy as a set of innovations which can be adopted through imitation. It has long been known that appropriateness of QWL design depends on individual, technological and organizational contingencies. The fit between various QWL components is equally or more important than the nature of any one component (Nadler and Tushman, 1977). A particular design feature, such as autonomous work teams, will evoke qualitatively different reactions from people and may have very different effects on productivity in various organizations. The lack of ability to predict the effect of various QWL elements makes it foolhardy to approach QWL as a prespecified design.

If QWL is not an innovative design, what is it? It is primarily a philosophy--a set of beliefs that an organization will enhance both individual and organizational outcomes if it stresses worker task involvement, preservation of worker dignity, and elimination of dysfunctional aspects of hierarchy. It includes beliefs that people who become involved in day-to-day task decision making will use their knowledge and skills to make decisions that enhance satisfaction and performance. This set of principles provides criteria for the decisions that are made in an organization and for the manner in which they are made. Approaching QWL programs as the implementation of prespecified innovations violates these very principles of employee involvement and participation. A paradoxical situation is created when an organization attempts to <u>mandate</u> QWL designs to promote worker input and involvement.

In summary, the inability to predict in advance how a particular QWL design tool will impact a given context and the need for design to be congruent with the underlying philosophy preclude innovation through imitation. Each QWL effort will have its unique properties, which will unfold under the guidance and direction of those who know and have a stake in the local setting.

<u>QWL programs can be implemented through a series of specifiable steps</u>. FALSE.

Behavioral science has not advanced to the point where we can predict the immediate and long-term impacts of changes introduced into dynamic organizations characterized by complex interdependencies. The implementation of a change, such as increased worker participation, will inevitably create tension with other organizational variables, such as the reward system (Nadler and Tuschman, 1977). Some of these tensions

can be anticipated. In fact, most QWL interventions deal with multiple system components. However, simultaneous alteration of multiple QWL components is an extremely complicated process involving realtime monitoring and tinkering--hardly a prespecifiable process. The humbling reality is that a planned innovation is as likely to produce either no change or undesired change in behavior as it is to produce the desired effect, particularly if the organization lacks the patience or skills to deal with unanticipated consequences.

Because QWL is essentially a philosophy, its implementation contains yet another level of complexity. Individuals must learn both the underlying world view and the implied behaviors. Design components which commonly occur in QWL projects work only if they are supported by the very values and behaviors they are intended to facilitate. Skill-based pay, for example, is effective only in an organization where people value skill attainment enough to create opportunities for it to occur. Worker participation groups only succeed if workers have skills, knowledge, opportunity and willingness to participate and if managers have skills, knowledge and willingness to respond. Even if we can specify the steps involved in attaining skill and knowledge to support desired QWL changes, it is impossible to know in advance what is necessary to create attitudes and willingness to work through the implementation phase.

QWL is a normative set of beliefs. It implies values, goals, decision criteria and behaviors quite different from those commonly found in traditional American organizations and supported by our culture. We know very little about how to change the way people see and respond to their world nor about the way they attach value to their

outcomes. However, we do know that hierarchically mandating QWL does little more than reenact the status quo and reinforce the traditional world-view. The implementation of QWL must be open-ended, flexible enough to respond to the unanticipated fall-out, and creative enough to devise responses to the dilemmas of change at multiple levels of organization and psyche.

Organizational members can readily gain the necessary knowledge and skills to sustain a QWL program. FALSE.

Organizations tend to underestimate the amount of learning that must take place to sustain a QWL process. The cliches which often mark the onset of a QWL program can mislead managers into thinking that for them the change will be simple or nonexistent. Most managers' already conceive of themselves as "harnessing the energies of their people" or promoting a work environment where "we all work together." The vague "operating principles" of QWL conform to the "espoused theories" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) of many managers. We often hear statements such as, "Our middle managers already act this way. We just need to get our supervisors to change." QWL is often something that upper management tells middle management to tell the supervisors to do for the workers.

The frequency with which people identify the need for change in others and yet proclaim their own behavior as congruent with QWL suggests that the theories-in-use in the organization are probably quite discrepant from the espoused theories of the managers. Paradoxically, we have found that the more paternalistic the organization has been in the past, the less aware the managers are of the extent to which their management style is incongruent with the goals of QWL.

Our experience is that underneath the reflex denial of need to change is considerable fear of the significance of the alterations in behavior that are implied by QWL concepts. This fear is most graphically evident among first-line supervisors, who will have to struggle with the day-to-day reality of such ambiguous guidelines as: "Be responsive to the requests of subordinates," "Give workers a chance to input their concerns and viewpoints," "Let workers help decide how things should be done." This kind of system sounds like extra work, and also sounds like it might undermine the legitimate authority which has often been the major motivational tool of the first-line supervisor. Caught in a system that has historically rewarded predictability and tight control, the supervisor now is being asked to take a risk by responding to subordinates in a new way. The cliches that have caught upper management's eye are hardly sufficient to reduce the ambiguity of supervisors as to what behaviors are expected of them and how to learn to do them.

Middle managers are often unaware that they create the context which requires the directive control-orientation of first-line supervisors, and makes it highly risky for supervisors to attempt the very behaviors which management is asking them to try out. Middle managers in turn respond to contextual demands which are incongruent with the changes in their own behavior, and so on up the hierarchy. Each layer has often developed elaborate strategies for responding to demands for certainty from above. Often these strategies prevent initiative at their own level and stifle the initiative from below. In most American organizations, learning the behaviors implied by QWL entails a shift in

world view to look beyond these present constraints and to envision alternative possibilities.

Implementing QWL Through Organizational Learning

QWL programs are organizational innovations which are not clearly defined, must be implemented through an open-ended process, and involve alterations in both the world-views and behaviors of organizational members. Success in implementing such fundamental and ambiguous innovations requires high amounts of employee involvement and learning. Organizational members themselves must develop a shared view of the kind of organization they desire, and they must learn the behaviors necessary to design, implement, and maintain it. This learning process must be internally controlled and developed. It involves recurring cycles of behavior designed to generate, implement, alter and refine relevant changes. It contrasts sharply with more traditional approaches to adopting innovations which emphasize external expertise and direction, compliance with a prespecified recipe or design, and programmed implementation. QWL programs simply do not permit such external determination or programming.

Given the need to implement QWL innovations through a process of internal involvement and learning, organizational members frequently encounter difficulties with trying to proceed in this direction. They typically do not have relevant role models for organizational learning. Perhaps more troublesome, there may be external pressures to proceed in a traditional manner. Although development of an organizational learning process for QWL implementation is still in its formative stages, we discuss below the known tasks or requisite characteristics that such a process should follow.

Clarify the values that will be promoted through the QWL project.

The values to be promoted through the QWL program must be determined so that the objectives are known to all. QWL processes are generally guided by simultaneous values of productivity and human outcomes. Failure to address this explicitly can lead to frustration as different individuals work to maximize different outcomes. Value clarification that leads to an image of a desired future state or an agreed-on set of principles, such as a philosophy statement, is most helpful as a guide to the design process. Of necessity, the generation of such principles must involve members of the highest organizational level at which behavioral change must occur to support QWL in the operating units.

Diagnose the current situation to decide where the major changes need to take place.

Organizational learning involves the identification of aspects of the current status quo which differ from the desired state of the organization (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Skipping this stage frequently promotes the situation where managers go through the motions but don't really feel dissatisfaction with the status quo. In the absence of explicit change goals, there is little motivation to endure the difficult and challenging task of changing behavior. To formulate an accurate diagnosis the members of the organization must generate accurate data about the current state of the organization.

Generate alternative innovations based on available knowledge and
research.

Those designing and guiding a QWL program should generate a number
of design alternatives from which to choose. This is necessary both
because of the difficulty of discovering a design feature which promotes
both organizational productivity and human values and because of the
difficulty of predicting effects of particular design modifications.
All too frequently we see organizations locking into one design, such as
quality circles, without generating an array of potential innovations to
achieve their objectives. If the implementation of that design yields
disappointing results, the organization tends to allow the effort to
atrophy rather than make modifications or implement alternate designs to
try to reach organizational objectives. Thus, a global concept, such as
employee involvement, is discredited rather than a narrow embodiment,
such as quality circles.

Inability to specify the exact design and the steps of the
implementation process makes on-site change agentry essential. An
organization can anticipate varying levels of commitment to the
objectives, and varying skill and knowledge levels. Real-time trouble
shooting will be required to "work the system," deal with personal and
group needs, and provide an efficient communication system. Successful
QWL processes violate many of the previous norms of the organization,
bring into question the previous status definitions, and disconfirm the
self-image of many individuals. Unlike other innovations, this basic
upheaval is the intent of QWL--not an unfortunate side effect. The
change agentry tasks which are required are complex and continual.

<u>Minimally specify the initial design or innovation and plan to</u>
<u>develop it more fully during implementation</u>.

The manager's traditional need to know exactly what the change will look like and the steps necessary to get there can be death to a QWL program. Choice of the initial changes should be made with the full knowledge that the first steps of implementation will generate information helpful in modifying that design. The more elaborate the initial design, the greater the psychological investment and the greater the reluctance to respond to real-time information that it isn't working as intended. A minimally specified design can be reworked by the people who have on-line information about problems that are being encountered during implementation.

This approach flies in the face of the organizational tendency to reward certainty and efficiency. However, it is both suitable and necessary for system change which brings into question the philosophical underpinnings of traditional hierarchical structures. QWL requires profound alternations in the way members view their organizations, their role and their constraints.

<u>Implement the innovation using data feedback to modify and adjust</u>
<u>it to the situation</u>.

Data about the effectiveness of the implementation of the QWL design provides knowledge of whether the design or the manner of implementation can be held responsible for the outcomes which are being experienced. We have witnessed several QWL projects where management believed design components to have been implemented despite the absence of information as to whether they are in place and operating. Often, what was actually implemented was quite different from what was

intended. In one quality circle program, for example, employee-partici-
pation groups were actually meetings of employees who were favored by
the supervisors and who saw the meetings as a time off work as a reward
for their good job performance.

The collection and discussion of data can provide a basis for
modification in implementation procedures and/or the basic QWL design
itself. We know of no cases where all implementation and design
elements were anticipated prior to program start-up. Real-time respon-
siveness to such needs requires budgetary and scheduling flexibility
that is often lacking in organizations. If QWL programs are implemented
with tightly constrained budgets and with rigid prescheduling demands,
it is difficult for the learning group to respond with the refinements
and modifications necessary to keep the process alive and healthy. Such
projects are likely to wither away.

Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the QWL process in order to
make resource investment decisions.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the QWL effort is clearly a
long-term process, which can't occur until the design becomes relatively
stable and understood by the implementing organization. Experience with
QWL is so recent and sparsely reported that we are just beginning to
grasp the magnitude of the change effort and the length of the transi-
tion phase that is involved. Several years are required for a QWL
process to stabilize in even a relatively simple organization. That
period may be a decade for a more complex organization.

It is questionable whether a "philosophy" can be evaluated. At
some point, however, the organization must begin asking itself whether
and in what form the resources allocated to the QWL program should

continue. This involves a judgment as to the current and expected contribution of the QWL process to the organization's effectiveness in its environment.

Evaluation decisions regarding QWL are complex. It should be understood that they are essentially resource expenditure decisions. It is difficult if not impossible to purposefully "discontinue" QWL if it has achieved any of the intended impacts on people's expectations and behaviors. The removal of resources from the QWL effort is a delicate process, since people's dreams, hopes, and self-concepts are wrapped up in the attempt of a social system to alter its philosophy.

Conclusion

QWL is a conscious effort by American organizations to make the transition toward a new phase in management which is governed by a new set of assumptions. This paper has made the point that it cannot be approached as yet another innovation that can be tried out and discarded. The implications for implementing QWL programs are profound and sobering.

There is a high probability that any given QWL effort will have either little impact or will stir up human forces and local initiative which the adopting manager could not foresee and did not prepare to encounter. A QWL effort must attain three diverse qualities at the same time. It must be <u>systematic</u> and tenacious enough to overcome initial skepticism and long-standing habits. It must be <u>profound</u> enough to bring people to question basic assumptions and take personal risk. It must be <u>flexible</u> enough to respond and adjust to unanticipated challenges and dilemmas.

Clearly the manager who approaches this as a "quick-fix," or feels pressure to "get on the band wagon" is ill-advised. Individuals in units undertaking QWL efforts will be at the same time skeptical of the intentions of their organizational superiors, leery of personal risk, and intrigued by the question "what if this is a serious possibility?" Success requires an upfront statement of willingness of people high in the hierarchy to take such a risk, and commitment of visible and significant resources toward the effort. Most central, it requires clear and consistent philosophical direction from respected leaders, so that organizational members have a sense not only of where the organization is heading but also for the decision criteria to guide their efforts to get there. Finally, QWL programs require competent and consistent facilitation from persons skilled in the process requirements of complex behavioral change.

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