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Perspectives and Directions**

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PERSPECTIVES AND
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by

David Nadler
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ABSTRACT

Quality of Work Life as a variable and concept is explored throughout its different stages of development. A working definition of Quality of Work Life is proposed as well as key conditions for success. QWL efforts are seen as requiring effective projects, changes in management behavior, and appropriate changes in management systems.

It has been more than a decade since the phrase "Quality of Work Life" (QWL) was first introduced. During this time, we have seen a mass of academic papers, experiments in different settings, and recently, an increased interest among both managers and the popular press in QWL. At the same time, we have witnessed increasing confusion about what QWL means, and what its implications for action are. It now appears that QWL may become another victim of the managerial fadism syndrome which strikes so many innovations. This year's innovation quickly becomes passe as it ceases to be new and loses the attention of the press and of managers who have been told to do it. We feel it would be a major mistake if this pattern were repeated with QWL because it could lead to important concepts and valid approaches being dismissed with the passing of the fad.

One antidote to fadism, in this case, is for us to have a clear assessment and definition of QWL. That is, a sober realization of what it is, what can be done, what can be expected, and under what conditions one might truly expect quality of working life efforts to succeed. This paper is an attempt to add to the informed dialogue by providing such a perspective. We will discuss the origins of quality of work life as a concern, as well as the various definitions that have evolved. We will provide our own working definition of QWL, with the goal of focusing the discussion. Then we will raise certain issues and concerns relating to the current state of the art, and finally, we will discuss factors which our research indicates might predict the success of QWL projects.

Origins of the QWL Movement

As we look back over the past 10-15 years, there seems to have been two distinct phases of QWL activity. The original phase occurred during the period 1969-74, when a broad group of researchers, scholars, union leaders, and government figures became interested in the issue of how to influence the quality of the experiences that an individual has on his or her job. There are several reasons why this concern emerged at that time. In the larger, generally affluent U.S. society, there were growing concerns about the effects of employment on the health and well-being of employees, and about job satisfaction. At that time we were also becoming aware of European experimentation with autonomous work groups and other innovations.

A series of studies conducted at the University of Michigan, first in 1969 and then in 1973, helped draw attention to what was called "The Quality of Employment," or the sum total of the effects of the job experiences on the individual. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare sponsored an investigation of this issue which resulted in the widely publicized book Work in America (1973). At the same time, the pressures of inflation prompted the government to address some of the same issues. It created a federal productivity commission, which in turn sponsored a series of joint labor-management QWL experiments that were jointly managed by the University of Michigan Quality of Work Program and the newly formed National Quality of Work Center.

This initial excitement and activity continued through the mid-1970s and then experienced a lull during the late 1970s as other issues, primarily inflation and energy costs, diverted national attention. Starting in 1979 and continuing to this day, a second cycle

of interest in QWL emerged. What caused this? The most important factor probably was international competition. Americans were facing increasing competition in international markets, and at home from foreign-made goods. Previously, it had been easy to dismiss these foreign goods as the product of government subsidies or low-cost labor. But, we began to recognize that perhaps other countries were doing something different managerially which might have something to do with their effectiveness. The Japanese stand out as the prime example of this phenomena.

We began to become interested and, indeed, fascinated with the notion of alternative management styles and the prospect of other countries having developed management (once viewed as a U.S. preserve) to a higher level. At the same time, many of the Quality of Work Life projects in companies that were started during the early 70s had matured and begun to bear fruit. In particular certain high visibility initiatives, such as those by General Motors, began to catch the public eye. These coincided with the increasing national concern with productivity as a major issue to produce a critical mass of QWL projects in the U.S. The result was that by the early 1980's, quality of work life had once again become a major concern and people were trying to understand exactly what it was and how they might use its concepts to improve their organizations.

The Definition Problem

It would be an understatement to say that there has been and continues to be confusion about what the term quality of work life means. It has been used to refer to a wide range of concerns and projects, and it has been defined differently by its most articulate

champions. Indeed, some of its staying power may be due to its ambiguity since it can be, and has been redefined as times have changed and as different people have used it. One way of thinking about this term and the movement is to review the definitions that have evolved during the last 10-15 years; what we see is six potential definitions of QWL.

The first definition to emerge during the period 1959-72 was QWL as an Outcome. In the original discussions, conferences, and studies, many of us working in this area saw quality of work life as an individual's reaction to work, or the personal consequences of the work experience. So we talked about an individual's quality of work life, or how to improve QWL for an individual. What was unique at that time about the QWL perspective was that it focused upon individual outcomes, such as job satisfaction or mental health, with an emphasis on the impact of the work on the individual and with the suggestion that organizations should be evaluated on the quality of work life they provide.

During the period 1969-74, a number of projects were initiated, aimed primarily at getting labor and management to work collaboratively to improve the quality of work life. These included the General Motors/UAW project at Tarrytown and the Harmon Industries/UAW project at Bolivar, Tennessee. As a consequence of these projects and their subsequent publicity, the term quality of work life became synonymous with certain approaches. So a second definition emerged that defined QWL as an approach. As in the earlier definition, there was a focus on the individual rather than organizational outcomes, but at the same time QWL tended to be seen as meaning joint labor management cooperative projects, particularly those aimed at improving outcomes both for the individual and the organization.

During the same period another definition emerged, stemming from some of the non-union experiments that were conducted using different innovations. In particular, the projects done in the highly publicized Topeka General Foods plant, and other similar projects in Proctor and Gamble, drew attention to specific ways of changing the workplace and its impact on individuals. These projects led to the third definition, QWL as methods. People using this definition talked of QWL as a set of methods, approaches or technologies for enhancing the work environment and making it both more productive and satisfying. QWL was seen as synonymous with concepts such as autonomous work groups, job enrichment, or the design of new plants as integrated social and technical systems.

As we mentioned before, the late seventies was a period of decreased QWL activity. Many of us felt that interest in the subject had waned with the onslaught of economic problems and the energy problem. During this time, a number of people were concerned about maintaining the momentum that had been created, and in identifying a coalition of interests that would support the continuation of QWL activities. Meetings were held among people doing experiments, aimed at identifying that broad coalition of people or groups who might have an interest in the continuation of QWL projects. Organizations were formed to further the ideology of QWL. Out of these activities emerged the fourth definition, QWL as a movement.

QWL was seen as more of an ideological statement about the nature of work and the worker's relationship to the organization. The terms "participative management" and "industrial democracy" frequently were invoked as ideals of the quality of working life movement. In particular, effort was spent differentiating QWL from other approaches to

organization development. The development of QWL as a movement, in retrospect, may have caused some division between those who use the QWL label versus those who might have used other labels to describe their work to enhance the health and effectiveness of organizations. With movements, all too often one is either part of them or "against" them, there are no other possibilities.

As we mentioned before, the late 1970s and early 1980s brought renewed interest in QWL. It was during this time that the fifth definition appeared. This definition is best described by thinking of the following scenario, which is based upon what we have witnessed in several large companies:

The chairman of the board of this large company is an enlightened and thoughtful individual who is concerned about the future of his/her organization. He attends some seminars or talks with some people at a cocktail party. He has a discussion with a consultant, and he becomes aware of this thing called QWL. He may read about experiments at a particular company, or read about some things done overseas. Coincident with this, internal surveys in his own organization indicate that people are feeling less satisfied with their work, more uncertain about the future, and more alienated from management and the ideals of the company. So the chairman then decides that there is a need to improve QWL; he sends out memos or makes speeches discussing his concern. While everyone agrees, no one is sure exactly what it means, and typically there is some passive resistance from senior management, who are uncertain about this new development. Finally, the chairman

decides that his firm will have a QWL Program, and sends out instructions or puts QWL into the objectives of senior management. Senior managers turn around in the next level down and say "we need some QWL." In turn, those folks turn to their people on the next level down and convey the same message, until a human resources manager is told by his operating manager, "we need QWL. They're very interested in it upstairs. Get me some." In this case, having been faced with this situation, the human resources manager has several choices. One choice is to go out and buy some. Indeed, there have been an array of vendors willing to sell "QWL packages." Another approach is for the human resource manager to survey the various activities that are going on, including organization development work, internal consulting, organizational effectiveness, etc. He then goes back to his supervisor and says, "Boss, we already got some. We just didn't know we had it." Out of this emerges the fifth definition then, which is QWL equals everything.

Under this scenario all organization development or organizational effectiveness efforts become labeled as part and parcel of QWL. QWL is seen as a global concept and frequently is perceived as a panacea for coping with foreign competition, grievance problems, quality problems, low productivity rates, and just about everything else. Clearly, the problem with this definition is that no innovation can deliver on all of these promises. In addition, this expansion of the QWL definition takes

the concept to the point where managers become very concerned and confused about "what it is."

Because of the expectations that are currently being created by the QWL equals everything definition, a possible sixth definition may appear; QWL equals nothing. Our concern is that as we witness the inevitable failure of some QWL projects (this must be expected in any new innovation) and an inability to deliver on some of the promises made, the skeptics who went along with it only grudgingly will turn on the concept. Finally, we will find that in many organizations the phrase QWL will become a forbidden term along with "job enrichment" and "organizational development." Our view is that it would be a real loss if this were to occur, because the important substance of many QWL efforts might be lost in a period of disillusionment.

Figure I summarizes the definitions of quality of working life presented so far. We will focus further on the issue of defining QWL after we briefly highlight our concerns with the current state of QWL practice and theory.

Issues and Concerns

As the discussion of definitions of quality of work life indicates, we have some major concerns about how the concept has evolved and the state of application today. These are as follows:

1. Vagueness of the Concept. QWL has not been firmly and clearly defined. In fact, some proponents of QWL have talked explicitly about not developing specific definitions. We believe this has led to continued misunderstanding and puzzlement on the part of many managers, and it is no surprise that concern

over this fuzzy concept has hindered its implementation and development.

2. Fadism/religiosity vs. Science. Many of those who have talked about QWL, or who have been proponents of it have talked of it in terms of a cure-all, as something which will work wonders as if by some mystical process. In the extreme, it's conveyed as some sort of religious/sexual experience, that is when you've got it, or when you've had it, you'll know what it is. This is in contrast to a scientific or pragmatic perspective which says there are a couple of concepts and tools that might be useful and that might work in certain situations. Again, the problem is that ideologists alienate those who haven't bought into the ideological content of the definition, and can create unreasonable expectations.
3. Focus on Low Level Employees. Much of the emphasis on the quality of work life has been on first level or line operative employees. QWL has been described as something the top tells the middle to do to the bottom in organizations. This presents two problems. First, it creates problems because often the bottom is being asked to do things that the top is unwilling to do; specifically, to use participative decision-making. This inconsistency or "do what I say, not what I do" approach clearly has some inherent drawbacks. Many problems exist just as severely for middle managers or technical personnel as they do for line operative employees. To assume that QWL is only a concern of the person on the assembly line ignores other large

Figure 1

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE

FIRST DEFINITION 1969 - 1972	-	QWL = VARIABLE
SECOND DEFINITION 1969 - 1975	-	QWL = APPROACH
THIRD DEFINITION 1972 - 1975	-	QWL = METHODS
FOURTH DEFINITION 1975 - 1980	-	QWL = MOVEMENT
FIFTH DEFINITION 1979 - 1982	-	QWL = EVERYTHING
SIXTH DEFINITION	-	QWL = NOTHING

groups of people who are entitled to the same levels of consideration.

4. Naive Views of Individual Behavior. Recently, those who have talked about QWL in some organizations have proposed that it will lead to greater effectiveness because it will make workers "happy," and that, being more satisfied, they will produce more. Research on organizations has demonstrated consistently for the last 25 years that satisfaction does not necessarily lead to higher levels of performance although it may lead to decreases in turnover and absences. Again, the expectation that happy workers will be productive workers is misleading and may be setting up unreasonable expectations.
5. Naive Views of Organizational Behavior. Similarly, many of those who have proposed QWL activities have described a process whereby pilot projects may be run and good ideas, having seen the light of day, will naturally spread throughout the organization and then be institutionalized or made permanent. They also assume that projects at the lowest levels will succeed even if the environment within the larger organization is counter to them. What we know about the systemic nature of organizations leads us to be very skeptical about the potential for highly participative processes at low organization levels when they are tried in authoritarian top-down organizations. The lessons of the job enrichment movement in the late 1960s showed this again and again. Similarly, to expect that pilot projects will somehow spread throughout the organization ignores the reality that in

general, pilot projects tend to be encapsulated and do not get disseminated even when they are successful.

6. Quality of Work Life and Productivity. The actual relationship between quality of work life efforts and productivity is often ignored. Some assume that QWL activities will inevitably lead to increased productivity. In many cases, this simply is not true. It may lead to higher levels of commitment, lower levels of turnover, and higher quality, but productivity might not necessarily come about as a result of QWL efforts. The important thing to keep in mind is that QWL and individual outcomes such as satisfaction and productivity are two types of outcomes which can be addressed by some of the same kinds of actions, but that they don't directly cause each other. Careful analysis of each activity is needed to determine what it is likely to impact upon. It is naive to assume that merely doing something related to QWL will lead to productivity.

In summary, we have major concerns about QWL. (See Figure 2). If we were totally skeptical about the concept, we could end this paper here with a warning to all to beware of QWL. However, we are not universally skeptical. Our preference is to see a realistic discussion and pragmatic application of the concepts of QWL. Therefore, we will try to provide a definition of the concept and share some of our observations of what conditions may lead to successful QWL activities.

A Working Definition

We will begin by providing what we think is a concise working definition. In general, we see quality of working life as a way of

Figure 2

GENERAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

1. VAGUENESS OF THE CONCEPT
2. FADISM/RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE VS. SCIENTIFIC/PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE
3. FOCUS ON LOW LEVEL EMPLOYEES
4. NAIVE VIEWS OF CAUSES OF INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR
5. NAIVE VIEWS OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR
6. QWL VS. PRODUCTIVITY

thinking about people, work, and organization. Its distinctive elements are: (1) a concern about the impact of work on people as well as on organizational effectiveness; and (2) the idea of participation in organizational problem-solving and decision making.

It is important to reflect on this definition. Specifically, there are two things which are important to keep in mind. First, the focus of QWL efforts is not only on how people can do work better, but on how work may cause people to be better. It is a concern different than other productivity or organizational enhancement efforts because of its focus on the outcomes for the individual. Second, a major distinctive aspect of QWL is participation in the process of making major organizational decisions. This is differentiated from full "participative management." We are not saying that all decisions are made in a participative manner. What we are saying is that individuals are involved in the process of making some important organizational decisions which affect them.

Another way of defining QWL is operationally; that is, to illustrate some of the activities that one might see as representative of QWL efforts (see Figure 3). While there are a broad range of activities, a number stand out. First is the idea of participative problem-solving, involving organizational members at various levels. This may come about in many different ways, such as with quality circles, which involve people at the work group level in understanding, analyzing and solving problems. Also, there are various participative organizational diagnosis designs, and different types of labor management cooperative problem-solving groups.

A second concern of QWL activity is restructuring the basic nature of the work that individuals do, and the work systems that surround them, to make those working arrangements more consistent with individual needs and with the social structures in the work setting. Work restructuring may include things such as job enrichment, the use of autonomous work groups, or the design of complete technical systems and sets of jobs and procedures, particularly as seen in the development of new high involvement plants.

A third type of activity involves rewards. We have long known that rewards are a major determinant of motivation, effort, and performance. In a number of experiments, the emphasis has been on creating innovative reward systems which will promote a different climate in the organization. Major examples of these are variations of the Scanlon plan, which share the benefits of cost saving innovations among workers.

A fourth type of activity involves improvements in the work environment. The emphasis here is on physical work and tangible conditions surrounding the individual. This may include changes in working hours, conditions, rules, or the physical environment. These changes, while visible and important in themselves, typically are limited in their impact, unless they occur in combination with other kinds of activities.

This list is not intended to be inclusive, but it provides some idea of specific activities that fit our definition of QWL, and in our opinion, describe the vast majority of activities that are called QWL.

Factors Predictive of Success

Having defined QWL, we turn next to the notion of which factors predict why some quality work life efforts are more successful than

Figure 3

TYPES OF QWL ACTIVITIES

- A. PARTICIPATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING
- B. WORK RESTRUCTURING
- C. INNOVATIVE REWARDS SYSTEMS
- D. IMPROVING THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

others. We will draw on several sources of experience and research with which we have been involved.

Predictive Factors

In recent years, we have observed, researched, and consulted with a variety of quality work life projects. These have included union management QWL projects, new high involvement plants, gainsharing programs, work redesign efforts, and problem-solving group programs. Our work on these has led us to identify six factors which are predictive of success in QWL projects (see Figure 4).

The first is a perception of need. QWL projects seem to succeed where all the parties involved truly perceive that there is a problem or opportunity. This need may arise from a variety of factors, such as financial pressures, or competitive issues. Where there is no perception of need - where QWL is brought about purely by the instigation of an outside consultant, a messianic manager or a fad-inspired executive - projects are unlikely to be successful.

Secondly, the need has to be one which is salient to the organization. QWL projects are more likely to succeed when the various parties are willing to make a significant commitment in terms of resources, consultative help, time and effort. Obviously, this is more likely to occur when QWL activities are seen as being aimed at issues which are critical to the fundamental competitive issues of the organization, rather than at issues which are perceived as peripheral or of primarily cosmetic value.

Probably the most critical factor determining the success, viability, and long-term impact of QWL efforts is the structure of the participative processes that are created. Again, there are several key

Figure 4

PREDICTIVE FACTORS

1. PERCEPTION OF NEED
2. PROBLEM FOCUS IS SALIENT TO ORGANIZATION
3. STRUCTURE FOR DOING PROBLEM-IDENTIFICATION
AND SOLVING
- THEORY/MODEL - PROCESS - TRAINING AND PARTICIPANTS
4. REWARDS FOR BOTH PROCESSES AND OUTCOME
5. MULTIPLE SYSTEMS AFFECTED
6. ORGANIZATION WIDE INVOLVEMENT

factors: The first is the need for an underlying theory or roadmap to help participants examine and understand issues. This roadmap might be a general diagnostic model of organizations, a model for looking at quality, or a model for considering the design of work. Which model is not critical. The point is that it is crucial to have some underlying theory for the participants to use in dealing and looking at the issues they will consider.

Second, it is important to have a process structured for problem-solving; that is, a series of steps with the various kinds of support, tools and instruments. To assume that people will be able to solve new problems, in new settings, in new relationships in a completely new and unstructured way, is simply naive. Those places that have been most successful have provided participants with an orderly and systematic process for working on problems. This avoids putting them in the situation where new unstructured problems have to be approached with new unstructured methods.

Third, both of these factors imply the need for training participants. While it is exciting to think about the "noble working man" and his or her innate intelligence and ability to solve problems, the fact is that many people in work settings do not have the skills to work successfully in groups doing complex problem-solving. This is not to say those skills cannot be developed, rather, it is to say that they are not common- most people have not been trained in how to solve problems in groups. Therefore, most of the successful projects have tended to involve some significant element of training, both in the theory and models involved in the problem-solving process and in some of the elements of working together in teams. At the core of this is a sense

that a QWL project, like any other project, requires some degree of competence and tools to work. To just throw people together in a room -- be they labor, management, senior management or lower management -- tell them to "solve problems" or "make decisions" and expect them to produce significant results, is wholly unreasonable.

Fourth, there must be rewards built into both the processes and the outcome of QWL activities. Rewards may be internal; that is, people may feel that there is a reward that comes about from just being able to participate, having one's ideas listened to. Ultimately, in our experience, however, if a project is successful, the individual participants on seeing their gains coming to the organization, will ask the question, "What's in it for me?" Therefore, in structuring projects, one needs to consider how the gains of the project potentially can be shared with the participants, both in terms of an equitable distribution of the gains and as a device for motivating people to continue to participate in the process.

On the other side, the gains may not come immediately, and the concern is how to get people motivated early on. Here, the particular concern is with management -- middle management, in particular -- which may hesitate to become involved in QWL activities because of the perception that it requires an investment of time, effort, energy, money, and a loss of control with little measurable benefit to them. Frequently, we have found that organizations tell managers to manage or create QWL projects while implicitly punishing them for doing so because of a concurrent emphasis on expense control, etc. In any case, it is important to build into the early phases of projects rewards for the effort, that is, for the process of implementing QWL projects. In

addition, it is important to change those aspects of the reward system, which implicitly punish people for undertaking QWL initiatives.

Finally, it is important that QWL activities not be limited to certain groups in the organization. When only certain levels in the organization or certain groups of employees are involved, projects often fail because a "we/they" relationship develops. In the case where lower levels are involved but management isn't, middle management often resists and blocks changes which are initiated at lower levels. When some work groups or workers are involved and others at the same organization level are not, counterproductive intergroup rivalry often appears and it becomes difficult to transfer the new structures and learnings to the rest of the organization. Often it is difficult to start everywhere in an organization at once, but it is possible and important to put structures in place at startup which will quickly allow everyone to be involved, which will communicate what is occurring and which will show a commitment to making the new practices organization-wide.

Conclusions

Our discussion so far suggests that there are three major components of QWL efforts which must be managed well for a program to be successful (see Figure 5). One factor is the development of projects at different levels--concerted, structured efforts to do organizational problem-solving, or the improvement of either the organizational environment, the rewards system, or the structure of work, through participative means. These projects are of the types we've mentioned, and those concerted efforts are important. It is not enough to say that we are now going to manage in a "QWL" manner. There must be tangible,

Figure 5

ELEMENTS OF A QWL CHANGE EFFORT

SENIOR
MANAGEMENT
BEHAVIOR

PROJECTS
AT DIFFERENT
LEVELS

CHANGES IN
ORGANIZATIONAL
ARRANGEMENTS

specific and observable actions aimed at changing the way in which work is done.

The second area of activity involves changes in management systems and organizational arrangements. They are necessary for two reasons. First, it may be necessary to change various types of structures, measures, goal systems, etc., in order to encourage and support QWL projects. Secondly, it may be important to look at those various changes in themselves as factors which are critical for QWL; for example, changes in rewards systems to build in gain sharing, changes in measurement to promote participation, and problem-solving.

Third, changes in senior management behavior are needed. As with any major change, the activities of the leadership of the organization become critical in determining the ultimate viability of the change. If senior management takes a stance of "do what I say -- not what I do," credibility is lost, and in the long term, it is doubtful whether changes will take place, or be institutionalized. What this means is that if a QWL project is going to be initiated, there must be some specific, tangible activity that takes place with the senior management group for it to be credible to the rest of the organization.

Most importantly, our experience indicates that all three of these elements are important for the success of a major quality of working life change within an organization. The elements are interdependent, and ideally support each other. Failures seem to occur when activity is limited to only one or two of these areas.

Overall, we are pleased and gratified by the increasing attention that is being paid to the nature of work organizations, to the quality of management practices, and to the impact that those factors have on

individuals. This focus on organizations, the nature of organizational life, the quality of organizational behavior, and the fundamental health of our organizations is a very positive focus and one that has great potential for enhancing both organizational performance and QWL for the individual. We end by stating the hope that whatever happens to the term QWL, nothing should happen to cause us to lose this focus.

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