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**Union Management Cooperation:
A Case Study in Ambivalence**

**CEO Publication
G 86-7 (85)**

Susan A. Mohrman
Center for Effective Organizations

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Abstract

This paper presents the consultant's perspective on a union/management quality of worklife project. The effort was successful in impacting one area of a large paper mill, but less successful in altering the overall management style. The project involved four labor unions, two changes in mill ownership, and two changes in top management. The paper describes the complexity of system change in such a turbulent environment, and focuses on the role of the external consultant.

BACKGROUND

Paper mills tend to be in rural settings. Forests, streams, harsh weather, small towns, local bars, churches, volunteer fire departments, and a healthy distrust of outsiders. The Bidwell Mill was no exception. The five hundred mill employees were rural people. Hunting, fishing, card playing, pool at the local bar, and church and community activities filled their non-working hours. Vans, jeeps, trucks and campers filled the parking lot. It was hard to fill all job positions during turkey season. Men longed to retire in a little place of their own on the river.

Bidwell employees were union people, as were their fathers before them. Theirs was hard, heavy, dirty work, in austere surroundings. The union had done well by them. They were well paid by any standard, commanding sizable shift and overtime differentials, and protected by stringent work rules, job classifications, and staffing levels. Job security was important. There was no other game in town.

Every two years a team from "headquarters" arrived to negotiate the labor contracts, and, in the eyes of local management, to accede to more demands and further tie their hands and burden them with procedures to use in dealing with the employees. Including overtime pay, the income of bargaining unit employees sometimes exceeded that of their supervisors. On the other hand, many managers begrudgingly admitted that it was the union contract that drove salaries up as well, and resulted in handsome benefits for them and their families.

Bidwell, as many other mills, had an aging workforce. Many of the current employees had started up the "new mill" in the 1960's. They had come from other lumber and paper mills in the area. The management had come with years of experience in various company facilities all over the country. Those had been heady times--new equipment--the latest technology, a small and excited workforce, and relative autonomy--given the large distances from corporate

headquarters. Things had changed since then. The mill had grown, the unions had become stronger, the excitement had worn off, and headquarters had begun to keep much closer tabs on daily performance.

In 1981, when I first came to work with the Bidwell Mill, the paper industry was in a period of retrenchment. Opportunities for career growth were few and far between. Supervision and managers in Bidwell felt they were stagnating, unnoticed by the "wheelers and dealers" back in the burgeoning, bustling headquarters. Few in Bidwell had the needed business background or inclination to move into that world. There was a clear differentiation of responsibility. Local mill management kept the mill functioning and generating specified tons of paper in the specified product mix. Headquarters staff concerned itself with market, profit and innovation. Bidwell management felt proud that they always made their tonnage targets, even under adverse circumstances--and a bit annoyed that their level of profitability (which they didn't even know) was being criticized. After all, it was the big headquarters overhead that dragged them down.

In the late 1970's, companies in the paper industry, like other basic industries, were searching for ways to improve performance in an intensely competitive market. Traditionally organized by strong unions, several companies became interested in the Quality of Worklife approach of cooperating with the union and its members to improve the quality of work life of employees and the performance of the company. Executives from Bidwell's parent company visited General Motors and other U.S. QWL sites, visited Japan, appointed a corporate change agent, hired a consultant, and "encouraged" local managements to consider embarking on a new approach to management. Thus, reluctant managements such as Bidwell's began receiving newspaper and magazine articles describing QWL, and found themselves sitting through a three day

workshop/orientation, and found themselves "deciding" to give it a try.

The "decision process" was interesting. The Bidwell managers did feel that "no" was not an acceptable answer. And yet the data that emerged in the workshop was compelling: Yes, they could envision a much more effective mill--there were lots of opportunities for improvement; Yes, relations with the union were strained; No, teamwork wasn't their long suit; and Yes, there was some interest, especially among several of the younger managers, in providing opportunities for personal growth and development and more involvement in decision making. And so, the management group woke up one day in September, 1981 remembering what must have seemed almost a bad dream--that they had committed to set in place a process to get their mill to fit a vision which existed at that point primarily as words on flip chart sheets. Noble sounding words, to be sure: cooperation, teamwork, communication, trust, and problem-solving. In fact, so noble that to have decided not to try to attain them would have been unconscionable and irresponsible. And yet, to admit that the mill wasn't already that way was to assume a bit of that questionable motivator, guilt, and to admit to failures that had gone unrecognized.

THE FIRST PHASE

I had been an observer in the initial workshop, invited by corporate to attend, get to know the local management, and be considered as consultant to the mill. From this point on until early 1984, I, a city based and born female, was the primary consultant to the QWL effort in Bidwell. I was hired by the local plant manager and his staff to help with an effort which they didn't think would amount to much.

I began my relationship to the mill with great interest--for me this was a new industry, a new technology, new unions and new people. I experience such a situation as a rich mystery book--watching the content unfold and the

pieces come together exposing the rich texture of the relationships of people to each other and to their work. Part of me fights the tendency to become a voyeur--sitting back and passively taking it in. On the other hand, I experience the enthusiasm of being an "agent of change"--believing that by working together people can find a better way to do their work and a new and more satisfying way of relating to one another. That part of me fights the tendency to be a missionary. I approached the mill knowledgeable of the dilemmas of a third party interventionist--knowing that the distance inherent in that role defines its limits and its possibilities. Destined to work through others and responsible for helping them work together, I am also aware that I can neither do it for them nor to them. I can hope that after trying new approaches, discovering new aspects of each other and of their work, and receiving orientation and training in new skills and frameworks, both union and management will choose to do things differently.

On my first visit as consultant to the mill, the hue and outcry commenced; "The biggest problem in running this mill is interference from headquarters. It is they who veto all training and development monies, who give us unrealistic and inefficient orders, who don't involve us in major decisions about how to run the mill. There is no way that we can become more participative managers in a situation where we don't even call our own shots." That was the major up front rationale for the probable failure of the effort. There were others: "We tried a management training process a few years ago. It was a complete fiasco. All they did was ask us to role play. You aren't going to ask us to role play, are you? Programs like this don't work in our mill. We're very task oriented, practical managers." "Our unions won't agree to anything that threatens their power. All they're interested in is how badly they can bleed the company. And all our corporate management does is

give in to their demands." "QWL has never been tried in a complex environment like ours. We have four local unions, four shifts, and a continuous process technology. We simply can't shut the mill down to have meetings and do all this training."

In early team development and planning sessions, I heard these and other protests scores of times. Correct or incorrect, this was the way they viewed their world. I saw it as my job to open up these assumptions to closer scrutiny by the management team. We dissected each and every one of them, looking for what they, the local staff, could do to lay a foundation for success. Emotion was primarily around the inevitability of failure. However, even that was a double-edged sword. For surely they could implement change as well as any other management team. And after all, headquarters seemed to be serious about this, judging from the amount of training and consulting dollars they were pouring into it. And hadn't they been complaining that the company was unwilling to provide resources for development of people in the past? Besides, they were hearing that back at headquarters the company president and his staff were going through a similar process, and beginning implementation of participative management in the headquarters groups.

The staff went about this process with a measure of detachment. I was treated with the politeness that might be afforded to a visitor, the attentiveness and skepticism that might be payed to a teacher who might or might not have something worthwhile to offer, and periodically with the irritability of a parent whose teenage child had once too frequently pontificated on what life is all about. I was, as they pointed out, an academic, a fact I could not dispute. And yet, they worked hard.

With a cool, dispassionate resolution, the mill staff planned a process to introduce QWL into the plant. The first step, they felt, was to get all salaried employees on board. In past efforts, managers and supervisors were

employees would enable managers to come to understand this new approach before adding the complexities of dealing with four local unions. Unspoken, of course, was the need to "buy time" to see if this might blow over. I thought starting with the salaried sector was an acceptable strategy. At this point, no enthusiasm had been generated, and no champion had emerged. The mill manager, who had accepted me as his "QWL expert", so felt the corporate press that he was willing to do whatever I said was necessary to make it work, but he had hardly reached the point of personally championing the cause. I hoped that with time and exposure, and some demonstrations of what is possible, some champions would emerge.

Initial salaried activity in late 1981 and the first half of 1982 included three major activities. First, each salaried employee attended a one-day orientation. This included general information about QWL and employee involvement, exercises designed to illustrate possible impact of the QWL approach, discussion of areas where the mill might benefit, and of factors operating for and against the QWL approach. It ended with a question/answer and discussion period with the top management group. There was quite a bit of skepticism, as well as some curiosity and interest among this group. Several younger managers (younger in this mill was mid-forties) volunteered to assume leadership roles in the process, the first "breakthrough".

Second, a general supervisory skills training process was started. Six first and second level supervisors were trained to be trainers, and all managers began a schedule of attending a series of two-day sessions. Reports were that the training was good, and people felt that it had been long overdue. I became a bit more hopeful.

Third, the management staff planned and implemented a survey feedback process to begin diagnostic and problem-solving in each family management

group. A subcommittee of managers developed the survey from a set of existing standard instruments, administered it, developed a format for feedback and problem-solving, and trained each department head in how to do it. They became quite involved in this process, assumed ownership, willingly volunteered for tasks, and were happy with the results.

Despite ongoing protests that too much time was being committed to this effort, and that mill productivity would be impacted, each department cooperated in scheduling and found a way to prevent a decline in productivity. The survey feedback sessions, while of mixed success, in several departments led to an ongoing process of problem-solving meetings. Managers varied considerably in their personal comfort with the process, and the amount of personal energy and responsiveness they applied. However, even the most adamant opponents of cooperation with the union were supportive of efforts to better train and develop the management ranks. Most reluctantly admitted that the survey feedback sessions had been useful, at least as communication devices.

I continued to have the feeling that this staff was approaching the process as "taking their foul-tasting medicine"-- a lot of complaining, and yet overt compliance to the plans that they, as a team, developed. Their desire to "get it over with", ironically, led to a relatively fast and efficient planning and implementation process. I had the nagging impression, however, that the managers were experiencing this as jumping through another set of hurdles defined by headquarters. It was not their own. As for me, I was the acknowledged "expert" in how to jump through those hurdles--just another person doing her job. I felt no personal antagonism; in fact, my presence was beginning to be accepted by most of the staff members.

By this time, an internal coordinator had been selected, had received considerable training, and was coordinating the day to day events. I was relieved to be able to move into more of a strategic role. I sensed that as

long as the process was seen as being energized by an outsider, the staff was able to disown responsibility.

THE SECOND PHASE

In late 1981, at my urging, the mill manager had met with the four local union presidents to inform them fully of the company interest in QWL and of the efforts that were being started in the salaried ranks. He encouraged them to think about this approach and said it was probable that sometime in 1982, he would be approaching them to see if they would be interested in establishing a Steering Committee to develop a union/management QWL process. As time went by, he kept them supplied with all articles and materials, and informed of the progress of the efforts in the salaried ranks. The union presidents seemed interested, but skeptical.

In the spring of 1982, the mill manager began to feel pressure to start talking seriously to the union. Sister mills already had their unions "on board". Besides, thinking that the process leading to the involvement of four different local unions might be long and complex, I encouraged him not to wait too long to begin. I was concerned that the union become true partners in the effort early enough to impact the form it took. Since summers at the mill were periods of high vacation loads, and a difficult time to schedule meetings, it was decided to have a preliminary discussion with the unions in the spring, with a notion to establish a steering committee in September. The management staff was not united. Some felt this was too soon; others were ready to get on with it. All were willing to go along with it if major activities did not begin until autumn.

The union officials asked for and received the same three-day orientation workshop that had earlier been conducted for management. They wanted no man-

agers present except the QWL coordinator. I conducted this session. The union officers were, by and large, energetic and thoughtful. They asked hard questions and carefully weighed the potential risks and benefits of this approach. Officers from three of the four unions seemed interested--the fourth were reserved, concerned, and essentially negative. Their concerns were primarily the long term fear that such efforts are really union-busting techniques. The officers in this union sat visibly apart from the others, and appeared to be self-appointed watchdogs for unionism in the mill. Periodically, they threw out challenges to my impartiality, and questions regarding my motivations. They also spent considerable energy trying to dissuade the other unions' officers from their apparent interest in this approach.

For me, this workshop was an intense experience. It is in such situations that I experience most poignantly the dilemma of being an outsider. The questions asked got right to the point. Did I think that management is serious about this? I can only say that they have decided to give it a try. They, like you, feel that there are beneficial possibilities and also some risks in proceeding. Did I think management's motivations can be trusted? Are they trying to bust the union? I can only say that I have no reason to believe that management intends anything other than trying to work more cooperatively with its unions to make the mill more effective. Did I think cooperative activity is good for American labor unions? I know that in some industries labor and management are successfully working together to strengthen the company and create a better place to work. In such places, the role of the union is changing as the workplace become less adversarial. Is this good or bad? They themselves have well articulated the two points of view, and they must decide for themselves. If they want to give it a try, I will play a third party role--which is to always work for an open exchange of

information so that both labor and management can make informed decisions about how to proceed. I can guarantee nothing about how things will turn out.

My responses must have seemed honest and realistic to most of the participants. As one local president put it, "we have to assume that we ourselves are able to make judgments about what is in the best interests of our people and our union. Giving QWL a try doesn't mean we stop exercising judgment." The union officers decided to request a meeting with management to discuss how to proceed.

A one day meeting of the management staff and the union officials led to a decision to establish a mill steering committee to design and implement a union/management QWL process. Its first tasks would be to begin the scheduling of a three day joint training process in inter-personal skills for all union and management employees. This training package had been developed and made available from headquarters. Local union and management people were to be trained to conduct it. The steering committee was also to set up local sub-steering committees in three of the four areas of the mill that were represented by each local union. The fourth union agreed to be in the overall steering committee but opted to postpone commencement of activities in their work area. A month later they also withdrew from the mill-wide steering committee. They complained that the other union officials were entering into an effort which threatened union strength. They claimed that the other officers had been "brainwashed" by the "shrink" from USC.

Although they had not voiced their concerns in the joint meeting, management was considerably less happy with the decision to proceed immediately than were the three unions. They were noticeably relieved that their unions were willing to give it a try, but activities were to begin much sooner than they had anticipated or desired. Scheduling through the summer was going to be a real problem, they felt. This was the first time I felt mistrust by the

management group. Suddenly I was third party to two clients--and I had not represented management's preference not to proceed too fast. Had I, the consultant, intentionally misled them?

I was interested in and worried by the obvious discomfort of the top management staff sitting in a planning session with twelve union officers, and their unwillingness to bring up and put emphasis on their own concerns. For instance, even when I posed the question about whether summer was a good time to start, they only weakly mentioned their preference to begin in September, and quite quickly acquiesced to an earlier start. This contrasted with the evident complete comfort and openness of the union officers, who felt summer to be ideal. Clearly quite a bit of team development would be needed.

QWL activities did begin in earnest that summer. Most participants in the QWL training were enthusiastic. Mill members were developing a language to talk about the way they interacted with one another. The mill steering committee generated a philosophy to guide the process and engaged in broad reaching dialogue about the issues in the mill. Two of the three steering committees got off to good starts, and by autumn had established task forces and teams that were dealing with meaty, task-related issues. A cadre of enthusiastic managers and union members was developing. The third local steering committee got started in September, but experienced some difficulty because of turnover and lack of interest in the management ranks. Various problem-solving groups and task forces were established in the administrative groups which serviced the mill. One quickly introduced some changes in workflow and a cross training process.

Two factors cast a shadow over the QWL process. First, the mill, along with its sisters in the company, was put up for sale, a process that culminated in an early autumn sale. Meanwhile, however, the uncertainty and job

insecurity in the management ranks deflected attention and consumed energy. In conjunction with the sale, the mill manager retired. There were sighs of relief among some managers: "We'll see how long this QWL lasts under new management." I was beginning to become discouraged by the lack of attention to the accomplishments of the QWL process. I feared that insufficient positive energy had been generated for the cooperative process to withstand the stresses and uncertainties of change of ownership and management.

Second, the uninvolved union had begun active efforts to kill the process. Its official stance was captured in communications to its members and to management, stating that the union would continue to cooperate, as always, with legitimate contractual efforts to improve the mill. They would do so within guidelines specified by the contract, and saw no need for a special QWL effort. Another local union countered with a communication stating that union/management problem-solving efforts were contractually enabled, and thus QWL represented no threat to or departure from the union's traditional position and the collective bargaining agreement.

The uninvolved local union also lobbied with its International to come out against what was happening, and it appealed to members of the other three unions to come to their senses. It played into the natural distrust of management. Employees in at least one of the other unions began looking for and encountering signs that management was not to be trusted. One of the major issues that was seized on was union perception that management was not keeping the union informed about the details of the sale of the mill. Mill management had the same complaint about headquarters, and was reluctant to share their own uncertainty with the union. There were other issues as well, where union members were quick to point out the differences between rhetoric and action. In some cases I agreed; however, there was still much to learn, and the effort was young. Leadership was in transition. I hoped that the new

mill manager would establish a more concerted dialogue with the union.

As management began experiencing pressure from the union to bring action into conformance with the philosophy, I began to receive regular barbs from certain managers about having pushed the process too fast. The union members, they felt, had developed unrealistic expectations. Meanwhile, the steering committees and the task teams they established were busy. Issues such as cost of scrap, reduction of use of costly chemicals, reducing maintenance backlogs, and improvement of clean-up procedures were among those tackled during late 1982. These efforts were captured in newsletters, written up in the company "paper", and reported in staff meetings. In several work areas, intact teams began having weekly meetings to discuss ways to improve their performance. In two areas, supervisors set up their own family group problem-solving efforts. While the QWL activities gained momentum, so did the less visible but not less noticed efforts against QWL.

THE REVIEW

The transition to new ownership and a new mill manager was occasion for review of the effort. All evidence indicated that the new owner was "solidly behind the QWL approach". The new plant manager was "in favor of a participative approach" and felt that he was quite experienced in managing that way. He felt that, given time, his staff would become comfortable with such an approach. He was concerned, however, about the apparently "radical" attitudes of some union members. He had a strong mandate from headquarters to increase productivity substantially, and felt that all unions would have to cooperate with the effort if the mill were to survive. Cooperation, he felt, should not be optional. His staff had informed him that things had gone too quickly and were draining the energies of management. Nevertheless, producti-

vity was up: grievances were down, and the steering committees had headed off several issues which had had the potential to seriously disrupt union/management relations at the mill. It seemed to be a mixed picture.

The new manager seemed interested in my perspective concerning the QWL effort, but was naturally preoccupied with completing the details of the transition to new ownership. He was interested in keeping the current level of union/management cooperation, but did not feel that expending a lot of effort to extend it was high priority at the time. In particular, he did not respond to my recommendation that increased face-to-face dialogue be established with the unions to try to rebuild some of the trust that had deteriorated during the period of the sale. Working to develop his own staff was a much more pressing concern. Although I agreed about the importance of team development with the top staff, I also felt that it was important to take strong measures to model the open, two-way communication that I felt would be required to address some of the concerns and issues that existed in the workforce. I felt a tension begin to develop between me and the strategy that had unfolded under the previous manager and the new manager and his philosophy of management.

In February, 1983, the top staff held a QWL update session. In addition to the mill manager and his staff, the corporate QWL Vice President and I were both present. The QWL coordinator led the session. Each director reported progress. Supervisory and management training and development were going well, internal staff were being developed to facilitate the cooperative effort, and almost half of the employees had received training in cooperative problem-solving. The steering committee met regularly and was a good forum for exchange of information and identification of areas that needed attention. Three of the sub-steering committees were operating well, although there were rumbles of dissatisfaction from some supervision and union members in two of

the areas. In these areas, union members were pressing for visible signs of management commitment, such as removal of time clocks. In at least one work area, dissident members had begun to actively talk against the QWL process. On the other hand, various task forces and problem solving groups had some impressive accomplishments. These were reported coolly and dispassionately. Even the director in whose area the most major strides had been taken in morale, productivity and quality of performance merely said the effort was satisfactory. With a feeling of sadness, I realized once again that there was no enthusiasm among the top staff. The QWL efforts were still seen as a diversion from running the mill--no champion had emerged. Results meant nothing if they weren't perceived as important.

After the reports were finished, one director asked to share a concern. It had, he said, been a long 18 months. Moving from a highly adversarial position with the union, and overcoming years of hard feelings toward the union is a long, up-hill struggle. Asking supervision to change their behavior created a lot of stress. "We've done things in a traditional way for a long time, and being told that there's a better way is being interpreted by some as a slap in the face. There are still uncertainties and stresses among the salaried employees. It seems suddenly that all we're concerned about is making the union employees happy."

The meeting heated up. Other directors more or less hesitantly shared similar feelings, ranging from concern about stress in the management ranks to indignation that so much productive time was being spent in meetings and not doing work. And now the union was pressing for faster progress, more meetings, and "proof" that management is serious. Some union members have even pointed out that their supervisors are blockages to productivity. "We know we have some weak links, but these are human beings with long years of

loyal service and we've provided meeting settings where union members feel they can criticize managers. This has gone too far! Let's slow down, let's reconsider." The discussion was no longer dispassionate.

The new mill manager suggested listing the benefits and problems that were being derived, at least in part, from the cooperative effort. What appeared on flip chart paper was as follows:

BENEFITS: Cost Savings
Improved union attitudes
Supervisory development
Solution of problems
Increased teamwork
Improvements in quality of work
Cooperation in installation of a major technology change

PROBLEMS: Too much time in meetings
Stress
Resentment by some supervisors
Unrealistic expectations/pressure from the unions
Too many ideas, too much enthusiasm from employees

One director reminded everyone of the amount of money that it was costing to train and develop these groups--just so people could log more unproductive time? Another director reminded everyone that the corporation had told the local management that union/management cooperation was a company goal, but that each local management could determine what form it took. But in Bidwell, "things seem to have assumed a life of their own." "Perhaps we should stop now, and not let this effort continue to expand and encompass more and more of our operations." " Sure the union members have lots of good ideas for improving productivity, but so does management. We're not even getting a chance to work on our own ideas because we're so concerned with theirs."

THE FINAL PHASE

Faced with the apparent contradictions and dilemmas, the new mill manager decided that things had indeed proceeded too fast. He embarked on a team development process with his own staff. I helped him identify a local consultant who specialized in team building, to facilitate this largely top-management oriented development process. The mill manager felt his people needed to be educated, and that they would gradually come to appreciate the importance of the participative process. Unfortunately, the process was even more gradual than planned, as yet a new and very complicated sale, this time of part of the mill only, consumed most of his time, and sessions were frequently cancelled.

My visits to the mill became less frequent. Efforts in the QWL process assumed a status quo. Committees and teams continued to meet, but few new efforts were started. I continued to consult periodically to the joint committees and to the internal coordinator, who did a good job of supporting the ongoing efforts and continuing the training and development process in the mill. There seemed to be no need for an outside expertise, except where third party neutrality was required. The new consultant had sporadic contact with the staff. His client was definitely the mill manager. He kept in steady touch with me, in order to ensure that the team development and QWL efforts were in harmony, but he also became discouraged by the difficulty of attaining momentum in his efforts.

Efforts by the uninvolved union speeded up. There was publicity about QWL in a different paper company where the QWL steering committee had instituted an incentive system that appeared to pit worker against worker. In the eyes of the Bidwell union, that proved that QWL wasn't in the interest of the employee. "If you let employees participate they may make decisions that aren't in their own best interests. That's why they need a union." The Inter-

national came out with an article warning locals to view QWL efforts with great caution. In another part of the country, yet another paper company was reported to have "busted" its union through a two year lock-out.

These efforts to destroy credibility of the QWL effort, combined with the uncertainty of yet another sale of the mill led to heightened mistrust, and more demands from union members that management prove its seriousness. Responding to increased financial performance pressures from new owners, management was initiating cost containment efforts. Why weren't they going through union/ management committees? Responding to a series of serious incidents of theft, management had suggested employee searches. What kind of trust did that show? Why was management once again trying to hide the details of the sale of the mill from the worker? Why was management so incompetent that they had two sales within a year? And so forth.

Management, trying to adapt to two new sets of owners and to adjust to even higher performance pressures, found little time or interest to respond to these union concerns. In the face of all this, the robustness of the committees and teams was surprising.

Later in the spring, two of the remaining three local unions withdrew from the QWL effort. One cited non-specific charges that even after a year of QWL, management hadn't changed the way it acts. The union members were keenly aware of the corporate pressure for increasing productivity. Management was viewed as unilaterally trying to introduce changes that would bring about work rule changes through the back door. In that union, the anti-QWL faction had become a majority. The other local union cited specific incidents of management not being willing to respond to their concerns or even to sit down and discuss them. Despite the existence of problem-solving committees solving important productivity problems, they felt that management still was unwilling

to treat employee concerns as important. The local president, who had worked hard to make the process succeed, summarized it as follows: "After a year, QWL is still in their heads only, not in their hearts". He said the pendulum had swung, and the skeptics were now the majority.

One local union continued the cooperative efforts in their work area, although the officers admitted that they were having a harder time dealing with the general distrust. The strategy in that area was to continue the meetings, but not make a big deal about it. At least one year later, the committees and teams in that area were still meeting. In fact, task forces were being utilized more frequently in many parts of the mill, and most included hourly workers. These task forces were not labelled "QWL", and were generally set up through management initiative. The gradual education process continued, led primarily by the internal coordinator, who was now manager of "employee development". The mill manager was promoted to another job, and yet another new manager arrived to continue the process.

AFTER THOUGHTS

Driving away from the mill for the last time in early 1984, I was struck by its robust beauty. Nestled along a stream on a sun-drenched afternoon, the mill was characterized by a certain tranquillity. Inside were hundreds of people, busy making it work, turning out paper products. It had survived a lot of changes. New behaviors and structures had been attempted. Some remained; some disappeared. New managers had come and gone. New owners as well.

Was the QWL effort a success or a failure? Did it go too fast or too

slow? Is union/management cooperation a good way to try to deal with today's problems? Is it in the interest of the employees? Should the effort have waited for a less turbulent time? Would a less turbulent time ever arrive? Was the existing management staff capable of fundamental change? These questions all have been asked. The answers depend upon the respondent. Of the many stakeholders in the process, some felt it was going too slowly, others too fast. Some were adamantly opposed to official cooperation between union and management. Others felt it was long overdue. Some employees felt well served by union efforts to increase the involvement of the hourly worker in problem-solving, others ill served. Some felt efforts should await more stability in the mill. Others felt that working together could only enhance the ability of the people in the mill to adapt to change.

One lesson that I learned once again was that there is no "management", "union" or "employees"--there are only a collection of viewpoints, institutional spokespeople, and historical patterns of interaction. Change processes are inherently political. They must deal with the "oughts" that stem from ideology, personal interest, and just plain differences in the opinion of well-intending people as to what is the best course of action. Will QWL, as one set of union officers felt, be a powerful tool for improving the lot of the workforce, or will it, as others suggested, erode bargaining power and institutional protection? Does opening up dialogue with employees who have (sometimes angry) concerns indicate willingness to work together to solve problems, or does it indicate management weakness? Do workers overstep the bounds of propriety when they point out that weak management is a barrier to productivity, or is this a legitimate expression of concern for the economic health of the mill? These are not issues that are readily solved by a demonstration of success or a limited pilot effort. These are issues that are at the root of what the participants are all about.

Changes in position require dramatic, undisputable events, powerful enough to redirect the orientations of large numbers of players. At Bidwell, events were quiet and ambivalent--not the stuff of which altered frames of reference are made.

Take for example the question of success or failure. Even after several years, I am unable to apply either of these labels. I am aware that by focusing on the efforts of one part of the mill and one local union, I could have written up this experience as a resounding success--with statistics and testimonials to convince the reading public. On the other hand even the union and management within that area were reluctant to call it a success, for their efforts were suspect by the rest of the mill. Were they turncoats? Were they fools? Can it really be for the good of the mill that work teams are meeting weekly, solving problems, scheduling work and dealing with their own quality problems? How do we know they are doing it right? Hasn't management abdicated? Can it really be for the good of unionism that workers are openly addressing inequities in work load and contribution --are helping managers to solve their problems? Shouldn't the union officers in this area be spending more time on the workers' problems and less on management's?

Was the QWL effort without general impact? An entire workforce was trained in interpersonal skills, managers embarked on an ongoing, in-depth managerial skills effort, task forces were being utilized more extensively, and there were increasing instances of individual managers and supervisors trying out new approaches to dealing with problems. Would this have happened without the QWL effort? I believe, perhaps because I want to believe, that the union management committees exposed people to new ways of thinking about and acting with each other, and that the press of being part of cooperative efforts provided a push toward trying out new skills that wouldn't otherwise

have been there. I fear that without that press, management will be easily able to revert to old ways. I hope, however, that this will not be true.

Is it a good idea to label efforts such as this with terms such as "QWL" or "Employee Involvement"? Does that imply a program, destined to become a memory? The pros and cons of such labelled behavior were manifest in Bidwell. The status as corporate program attracted resources and focussed attention. It legitimated people in trying out approaches, and provided them with time and training to do so. It provided a rallying point for proponents of a new way of running the mill. It provided a target for those who did not want to change. The "program" could be done in--through change of ownership, change of mill manager, or by merely going through the motions. On the other hand, the "program" had been announced as a serious effort for long-term change. This implied personal risks--what happens if I can't change?--and potentially a long term change in the balance of power.

The biggest problem with labelling the effort is that the label is generally only applied to certain efforts. The union/management committees are QWL, the training is QWL, the problem-solving groups are QWL. Somehow people are unwilling to see that every day events must also be QWL--sharing information with a workgroup, giving performance feedback, scheduling work, answering questions and concerns -- these all have to be QWL if there is to be a new way of doing things. It is those everyday things that undermined union management cooperation in three of the four areas of the Bidwell mill. Impressive committee achievements are not convincing to the employee who has failed to get a response to concerns from the supervisor.

In Bidwell as in other organizations with which I have worked, I once again was impressed by the amount of stress and anxiety that is engendered by such change processes. Although the popular literature speaks glibly of working smarter, not harder, learning to work smarter is hard work. Learning

a new way of managing and fearing failure; spending time listening to the different viewpoints and often critical concerns of people who have previously been disenfranchised; thinking about how to develop the talents of people; and taking risks to try out new ideas are not cost free. And so, I accepted the testimony of the Bidwell top staff that they and their people were tired. Two sales and three years of QWL had been quite demanding of the management of a mill that had fallen into a pattern of operation that had existed untouched for a decade.

At least in part, institutional cooperation at Bidwell fell prey to turbulent times. An industry in transition, unionism in transition, changes in ownership, and changes in expectations. The entire effort was characterized by ambivalence--both within management and labor. The players extended far beyond the confines of the mill. The struggles to determine the role of labor in the upheaval that has characterized the transition to a global economy go on at all levels--nationally, in corporate halls, governmental agencies and international union offices; locally, in plants and mills, and in local union halls; and individually, in the hearts and minds of the people. In my view it is not a question of waiting until the upheaval settles, for each day determines the future.

How do I feel about my role? Could a more "charismatic" consultant have energized greater interest? Would a more perceptive consultant have looked at the level of interest, assessed the instability in the environment and decided not to give it a try? Was it a problem that I am a female?...an academic? Would champions have emerged more readily had it been easier for them to identify with the consultant? I do not know the answer to these questions. Perhaps my beliefs about consulting emerged because I am a female academic. I raise questions, pose alternatives, teach techniques and frameworks,

and manage process. I strive constantly to have groups establish their own goals and make their own decisions, pointing out when I observe that certain courses of action violate the principles they are trying to maintain, and making recommendations when there are clear best choices or needed actions for attaining the group's goals. I try to transfer ownership and expertise internally as quickly as possible.

In Bidwell, I once again learned how difficult it is to maintain such a consulting stance. Among the basic tenets of my trade are the need for neutrality in dealing with multiple stakeholders. Neutrality is very difficult for people to accept emotionally. Seeing both points of view is not always valued or trusted by those who hold one viewpoint strongly. I sensed, for instance, that my concern for the union as an organization did not endear me to the Bidwell management. Working with a group to surface valid information, generate alternative approaches, and exercise free choice can raise considerable anxiety. It can even be construed as manipulative when it occurs in a context where the ultimate choice -- the choice not to play the game at all--has been taken away. From the perspective of the management staff, it made little difference that they had been participants in the decision to start training in the summer. It was my "fault" for not managing the process better. Besides, so much was happening externally, over which the mill employees had no choice, that it was difficult in general to assume responsibility. Openness of information, a key tenet of cooperation between groups, is in and of itself threatening in many organizations where keeping the lid on, keeping dirty linen out of sight, and following prescribed information channels has long made it easier to manage. Weaknesses in the management ranks were one example of information that, when surfaced, presented a thorny managerial problem.

I would like for the change process at Bidwell to have been more dramati-

cally successful. Given the turbulence in its environment and the deep seated beliefs and values that existed among the employees, perhaps the slow, steady pace at the Bidwell mill is the best approach in the long run. I have thought frequently about whether I could have better helped the Mill managers deal with the uncertainties and anxieties of their situation. Could I have more successfully influenced the fourth union? Could I have done a better job of helping the second mill manager assume leadership and ownership in a QWL process that was not his own?

I would do some things differently, perhaps. We all would like to be the hero. And yet, I find it important to remember that the process at Bidwell was theirs, not mine. I was one player in a chapter of the Bidwell Mill history. They took the risks and tried the new approaches. I contributed time, energy, concern, substantive knowledge of process and technique, and the perspective of an outsider. In the end, as they knew all along, my hopes and aspirations for their mill are unimportant, for I will drive away. It is the people at Bidwell who must live with what is left behind.

