SHARING POWER THROUGH JOB DESIGN AND ORGANIZATION DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Power is energy. Power comes from the Latin word potere which means to be able. There can be no progress, no forward movement without power. In the business world power is the key ingredient in transforming employees to business partners. In the struggle for power in India, Gandhi used the principle of satyagraha (soul force) which derives its power from the rather opposite attributes of fierce autonomy and total compassion (Ferguson, 1980). Power is seen by many as evil. People are described as power mad or power hungry.

Power is what men seek and any group that gets it will abuse it.
Lincoln Steffens

Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.
Lord Acton

Others view power in a more positive fashion and feel that power over one’s life is an inherent right.

Power, after love, is the first source of happiness.
Stendhal

Ability to do or act; legal authority; a person or thing having great influence, force, or authority.
Webster’s New World Dictionary

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw special interest groups demanding and receiving power - Gray Power, Black Power, and Women’s Power. In the corporate world position power and personal power are often identified as the mechanism to get things done. Business executives and management in the 1980s seem to be more receptive to sharing power as a means to accomplishing results.

Although it is often from the harsh reality of financial desperation, even the companies of the auto and steel industry are increasingly sharing the power once reserved for executives with other stakeholders such as employee groups. This sharing of power is often the turning point from business crisis to success. As American business and industry prepare for...
the 1990s and struggle to compete in the global economy of the twenty-first century, sharing power with all employees will be increasingly a critical success factor.

The mechanisms for sharing power with employees take many forms. Employee involvement or employee participation programs are often installed to share power. A significant criticism of these programs is their failure to change the operating structure of the organization. It is as if the employee involvement programs exist at an informal level and do not get integrated into the way the company does business.

A more lasting sharing of power occurs when it is built into the structures of the organization so that power-sharing becomes a way of doing business. The forms of job design and organization design are part of any organization. If they can be structured so that employees are responsible for decision-making and even policy-setting at a local level, power tends to remain dispersed.

As early as 1980 when Alvin Toffler's The Third Wave was published, business observers, management theorists, and business practitioners discussed the new organization forms business would need to be more successful in the 1990s. Information is the corner-stone of this organization of the future. The organization structure is flat because the hierarchy for collecting and evaluating information is no longer needed. Span of control is replaced by "span of communications" (Drucker, 1986).

In a Wall Street Journal article Peter Drucker compared the form for the organization of the future to the form of the symphony orchestra. The manager's role like the conductor's role is one of merging various disciplines into a finished work. While all instruments play the same score, each has a different part. The musicians receive their training and coaching before they arrive for the concert. Similarly, in the increasingly high technology business world of the future, many employees come to the workplace trained and prepared in their unique disciplines. Just as the musicians must play from the same score to achieve the desired results, employees must work from common objectives, known in advance to achieve their results. The success of the manager hinges on his/her ability to "orchestrate" the needed results. Decisive leadership is needed that respects the performance of the individual players and also demands a high degree of self-discipline.

Ed Lawler (1986) provides a current translation of past research by Rensis Likert, Douglas McGregor, and Chris Argyris which highlights involvement by employees as the key to organization effectiveness. In contrast to control by management, employee involvement values the use of quality circles, teams, skill-based pay, and flat, lean organization structures (Kilmann, 1988). In Future Perfect, Stan Davis (1987), a Boston management consultant, explains how he believes organizational forms of the future will set the stage to accomplish what appear to be mutually exclusive goals for the customer. He calls this phenomenon mass customization. The economies of scale of a large organization will provide a low cost product or service while the customized handling of local customers' needs will provide a product or service tailored for any number of unique criteria.

Charlie Kiefer and Peter Senge describe an organization for the future in Transforming Work (Adams, 1984). They call this organization a metanoic organization and liken it to a successful rowing team. Even with highly talented individuals on a rowing team who perform in alignment, the race will never be won without the proper boat. Similarly the right organization structure is a prerequisite for accomplishing business goals.