Lessons Learned, Futures Planned

In this book we have explored about one hundred years of cultural transformations within automotive manufacturing. We examined major shifts in the structure and dynamics of work in the United States, emphasizing especially the contrasts between mass production and flexible and lean production. We developed two models of cultural transformation—one focusing on the elements of cultural adaptiveness, cultural responsiveness, and cultural problem solving, and the other that uses the metaphor of a bridge to focus on organizational-culture-change processes. We described a consensus-based cultural ideal for GM’s manufacturing culture that identifies one possible model for GM as it heads into its future. We also introduced a set of tools that GM and other U.S.-based organizations can use to facilitate the change process where change in collaboration, cooperation, and relationships are needed. Each of these aspects of manufacturing culture has the potential to yield benefits not only for GM and other U.S. manufacturing organizations but also for other U.S. organizations as well. Our focus in this chapter is to consider the lessons from this study of manufacturing culture and the ways in which those lessons are applicable to issues of cultural transformation in the American workplace.

Learning from Production-Work Paradigms

Production-work paradigms and the firms associated with them are situated within a particular historical and cultural context. These paradigms are affected by both conditions internal to the firm and conditions external to the firm. An interesting lesson that arises from their history is captured in the aphorism that “the more things change, the more they stay the same,” or perhaps more accurately, change
does not go in a straight line; it spirals back on itself with increasing refinement because of the need to “improve” existing processes. This historical information identifies many of the areas of tension and transformation that must be addressed in the development of any new production-work paradigm—including the extremes of hierarchy, individualism, and conflict orientation—as well as the elements that must carry forward to make that paradigm feasible.

**Mass Production**

Ford was a master at cultural transformation. Building on the processes and experiences of earlier industries, he developed an approach and a scale to the organization of work that was more efficient and profitable than ever seen before in the automotive industry. He created an organization that valued creativity, innovation, openness to technical changes, and experimentation, though only among “experts.” As his success grew, he solved his human resources problem in a way—a five-dollar-per-day wage—that lives in legend. Eventually, he and his company lost much of their ability to adapt and misread both the market and his work force. But the production-work paradigm that Ford pioneered was not changed significantly by Ford’s decline. General Motors had a similar mass-production approach for decades. The paradigm as it played out on the plant floor was not changed fundamentally by the influence of the UAW. The durability of mass production through prosperity, depression, strikes, and war attests to its adaptiveness and responsiveness. It was not until sixty years after Ford’s innovative work that the flexible and lean production-work paradigm came to automotive manufacturing.

What Ford can teach us today is to think of the organization and its people as a system. Everything was constructed to be consistent with his vision of the ideal, from hiring, to product, to the organization of work. Through his holistic orientation to production, he tried to optimize the entire organization, keeping in mind his goal to produce vehicles that an increasingly greater proportion of America could purchase. As problems arose in his factories (e.g., absenteeism and turnover, rise in materials costs), he did not ignore them but sought workable solutions. Organizations can benefit from a systems-thinking approach. It is worth the effort to step back, identify the goals, obstacles, and enablers, and develop a balanced, multipronged approach to systematically improve the organization.