

Values: The Cornerstone of QWL

Developing a system of shared values in the work place is the surest way to achieve a high quality of work life.

By ANNETTE HARTENSTEIN and KENNETH F. HUDDLESTON

This article is the fourth in a series developed by the ASTD Quality of Work Life Committee. The series describes QWL efforts and suggests how to support and maintain them. The first article appeared in the September 1983 issue of the Journal, the second, by Saul Rubinstein, in the March 1984 issue, and the third, by Robert B. Leventhal, in the June 1984 issue.

For too long quality of work life (QWL) efforts have centered on questions of structure and not shared philosophies between management and labor. It is clear that for QWL to be successful, management and labor must have shared values. HRD professionals will be called upon to engineer both the process and training modules needed to arrive at and maintain these values. They will have to distinguish between values that are counterproductive to QWL and those that are essential for QWL success. They will need to recognize the capabilities (understandings/skills) that facilitate shared values and the resources available for assisting the HRD professional in designing the process and training modules needed.

A most important frontier in upgrading the quality of life is the corporation. American management and labor must meet the challenge or be overwhelmed

by the pressures of foreign economic competition, the aging of basic industries, the shift to a post-industrial information society and a work force looking for more than monetary compensation from work.

Organizations can meet these challenges by integrating the requirements of technology with the needs of people through QWL efforts. Employees will benefit and organization performance will improve.

Major turnarounds are occurring because of the introduction of QWL approaches into some corporations. Among the most popular approaches are autonomous work units, labor-management committees, employee participation, open communication between managers and employees and quality circles.

Labor/management agreement

Although QWL approaches are recognized as valuable tools in the campaign to revitalize organizations, mixed results are being reported. Experts believe these efforts are faltering because labor and management lack shared values. According to Rosabeth Moss Kantor, "Shared philosophy—'family feeling'—can't be stimulated or imposed artificially because top management wants to create a Japanese-style organization; it has to derive from the way work is done.

"Zealous managers, eager to show they are in tune with the CEO's push for participative management, have started counting their task forces, rather than thinking about the substance of what was/was not being accomplished."

Simply put, to enable people to have a more satisfying work life and greater productivity, supportive philosophies agreed upon by management and labor have to be in place at the start.

Counterproductive values dominate when a conscious effort isn't made from

the start to identify shared values essential to QWL. In the United States the value of competitiveness, rugged individualism, adversarial negotiation, hierarchical organization, reactivity, utilitarianism and employee manipulation are emphasized. In *The Change Masters*, Kantor identified the typical organizational culture as segmentalist with overly concentrated power, authoritarian, resistant to change, and extremely compartmentalized with respect to work units.¹

As a pattern, actions and problems are handled piecemeal without people being aware of the whole picture; ideas and approaches are not shared. According to Myers-Briggs personality research, 75 percent of the general population would describe themselves as practical and pragmatic, only trusting facts, firmly guarded in reality.² These types of people like stability—not change—and prefer standard operating procedures. Many are short-range oriented and focus on tasks rather than on people. They communicate with difficulty and find it hard to develop the trust and teamwork essential to the well run organization.

Without shared values, managers are often authoritarian and deny workers a sense of involvement, responsibility and autonomy. The all-too-frequent result is a lack of commitment and productivity. These negative values underlie many corporate cultures. They shape behavior on and off the job, undercut the work ethic and prevent high performance levels, as workers see status symbols and pay unfairly distributed. QWL efforts will fail in such an atmosphere unless labor and management agree on a new set of positive values.

A new way of life

QWL efforts emphasize an alternative world view. QWL succeeds when labor and management agree on the need for:

Annette Hartenstein is coordinator, executive management and development, at the Defense Communications Agency in Washington, D.C., and co-coordinator of the Washington Roundtable on the Humanization of work. Kenneth F. Huddleston is business coordinator of the Fox Valley Technical Institute in Appleton, Wis.

- Development of the full range of human potential;
- Respect for human dignity;
- Tolerance of differences;
- A sense of community;
- Equity and autonomy;
- A humane, productive and democratic work force.

QWL is a process—a way of life—that implies trusting relationships, improvement, satisfaction and meaningfulness. It is not a project or program. John Naisbitt identifies high-tech/high-touch and the erosion of hierarchies as two of the major trends of our time.³ He predicts that high technology stimulates a need for meaningful interaction. Thus, he believes that self-responsibility and genuine person-to-person communication will become essential elements in our institutions.

Special processes and training are at the heart of QWL efforts. In many instances, HRD professionals are called on to engineer the process and develop the training modules that management and labor need to arrive at and maintain shared values. These processes and training must foster corporate cultures that help top executives, managers, labor leaders and workers develop values appropriate for management by participation. The capabilities (understandings and skills) that should be addressed by HRD include the following:

- *Personal capabilities*—Self-awareness of values, inclinations, strengths, styles and impact on others; entrepreneurial/innovative spirit; change-oriented; behavioral flexibility; management of own stress; environmental awareness; long-/short-term perspectives; clear speaking, listening and technical writing; balance of action; and patience.

- *Interpersonal capabilities*—Trust and teamwork, group dynamics, verbal and nonverbal communications, interpersonal sensitivity, management of organizational stress, recognition of others' expertise, rewarding others, balance of leading and following, sharing authority with others, feedback skills and ability to increase upward and downward openness.

- *Process management*—Multiple-perspective decision making (see problem integratively and from different viewpoints), creative problem-solving and thinking, planning, organizing, goal setting, win/win conflict resolution and negotiation, consensus development, dynamic planning, structuring exchange of information and

ideas, and how to manage the evolution of the overall process.

Training directed at developing the above capabilities is best integrated early in the process, when the effort is to develop a list or constitution of shared values. This process should begin with guiding a committee, composed of top-level representatives of management and labor, through a value-based process. This process uses diagnostic questionnaires, structured personal interviews and independent meetings with representatives of management and labor groups, followed by joint meetings held over a period of time. What emerges is a definition and clarification of where each group stands on the key values, what future state or values they would like to buy into, and what must be done to reach that goal. An agreed-upon set of values then can be drafted. This results in the initiation of a value-driven QWL process from which the necessary structure can be built.

HRD professionals need to be more sensitive to the needs of minorities, women and blue-collar workers. In this area, more use could be made of experiential learning activities. For example, first-line managers and support supervisors uncomfortable with experimentation will need training that shows them how to encourage trial and error by workers instead of relying on rules and policy. In past years, training has too often emphasized structure over a value-based process. It's time for the pendulum to swing back, at least part way, to process.

Four key resources help organizations engineer the process and develop the training program. The predominant resource is the in-house HRD function. A number of plants around the country have established their own QWL training programs with unique qualities. For example, the United Auto Workers at Buick has established a jointly directed retraining and reassignment program flowing from its highly successful union/management QWL program. It offers academic and technical training to employees whose jobs have been lost through changes in work practices or technology.

Often overlooked, particularly by medium and small organizations, are the QWL/productivity centers and private consultants. Centers and consultants can be instrumental in serving as resources to help management and labor develop shared QWL values. Because of their

broad-based, neutral perspectives, consultants are in a unique position to step back and observe the organization's values, when insiders may be too close or the issue too political. Outside resources can also provide values-related training for internal trainers/consultants, management and labor. Resources include centers such as the American Center for the Quality of Work Life, American Productivity Center, Oregon Productivity Center, and the Project on Technology, Work and Character. According to Richard Ault, when choosing a consultant or center, one should look for a person who sees the QWL process as systematic and cultural.

Another overlooked third-party regional resource for the HRD professional is the community college or university. Institutions like Lane Community College (Eugene, Ore.) and Central Piedmont Community College (Charlotte, N.C.) both have established QWL/productivity programs within their institutions and worked with local companies. As a result, they can provide quality counseling and training on the examination, definition and redefinition of values. Schools like Delaware Technical and Community College (Dover) regularly share their values-readiness assessment process with area companies on-site.

With extensive research capabilities and expertise in organization development, management and labor/management cooperation, the regional universities should be explored. For example, the State University College at Buffalo helped the Exolon Company look at values by conducting a four-month study of worker attitudes. Though not all post-secondary can assist in developing shared values for effective QWL, you may be surprised when you learn firsthand of the quality of help that is available locally. Increasingly, post-secondary institutions see this as a vital service they can provide within their region.

References

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