"OUR EMPLOYEES WOULD BE THE FIRST TO TELL YOU THAT 'IT'S THE BEST THING THAT'S COME ALONG IN YEARS.'"

A BASIC MODEL FOR EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

BY ROGER D. BOURDON

My intention is not to get into a detailed discussion as to why employee participation is an important organization development issue. If you do not believe that a participative role in an organization is reinforcing to employees or that employees, if allowed, can make greater contributions to the productivity of an organization, then you probably will not want to read any further. It may not, on the other hand, be particularly clear as to what behaviors an employee participation system will reinforce or what the specific objectives of such an effort might be. The following are some objectives that any organization might want to consider.

- Early identification of problems in the business of the organization;
- Quicker and more knowledgeable solutions to problems and at lower levels;
- A more even and pervasive distribution of responsibility throughout the organization;
- Innovation in methods of conducting the organization's business;
- Reinforcement of positive employee behavior through rapid response to positive contributions;
- An efficient method of communicating information both horizontally and vertically;
- Increased productivity;
- Increased attendance;
- A more cooperative working relationship and team orientation among organization members;
- Development of organizational identity in individual members; and
- Identification and development of leadership within the organization.

Attempts to respond to the participative needs of employees have ranged from the suggestion box, a miserable failure in most cases, to more complex plans such as the "Scanlon Plan," "Q.C. Circle," "Zero Defects," and a wide range of team building and participative management approaches. Some plans have extended the concept of participation to include participation in profits and tied bonuses or profit sharing into the Plan (Scanlon); others have more focused objectives for their participation plans such as quality improvement (Q.C. Circle, Zero Defects). When faced with the task of developing an employee participation plan for my own organization previously mentioned, the approaches were surveyed, including on-site visits and discussions with employees working under participation plans. One of the things I learned, largely through employee contacts, was that plans which incorporated cash bonus systems did not seem to fare any better than those that did not. Employees in bonus plans were aware of the bonus but few were able to describe the relationship or contingencies between their performance in the participation plan and the bonus. The bonus appeared to blend in as part of the compensation package. Money did not appear to be an essential ingredient in designing an effective participative environment. Our decision was to design a plan without this element.

There are several factors which

appear to be common to most participation plans and which I consider key issues in the success of the model presented in this article. These necessary ingredients are as follows:

1. A belief that employees have brains and are able and willing to contribute more than they have been allowed to.
2. A willingness to allow (trust) employees to identify problems and suggest solutions.
3. Open access to the system by employees.
4. Participation by all employees at all levels, including management.
5. Willingness to use work time for meetings.
6. Detailed administrative structure for the process.
7. Management accountability for administration of the program.
8. Commitment to honest responses by management to employee recommendations.
9. Commitment by management to listen.
10. A very rapid response/feedback procedure for all employee input.
11. Employee validation of management response quality.
12. A willingness to communicate and share organizational information.
13. Commitment of time and expertise to train supervision and management to handle the procedure.
14. A process focus on issues which relate to the daily performance of job duties (as opposed to personality issues and problems outside the control of local management).
15. Someone, "a gatekeeper," responsible for checking and controlling the system who reports to senior line management (time and money).

A Basic Model

The following model describes an "Employee Participation Plan" instituted in a labor intensive, three shift, manufacturing environment with 25 to one labor/management ratio. This E.P.P. was designed to meet the previously stated objectives and respond to the "key ingredients" also noted. The E.P.P. hinges on a team concept with teams being constituted at the employee, supervisor, department head and plant level in pyramid fashion.

Production Performance Teams: As the title would imply, teams are constituted for the purpose of identifying and solving production problems and issues. The objective as understood by all employees is to remove obstacles which impede individual job performance and recommend actions which enhance productivity and quality. A team is established for each shift within each department. Each team is made up of three to eight employees and the shift supervisor who serves as the team leader and facilitator. Team structure and size is determined by two factors: 1) the number of major job categories represented on the shift, and 2) the total number of employees on the shift. Each employee must have an opportunity to serve on the team — team service is not required — for two consecutive team meetings at least once per year and, where possible, depending on the number of employees on the shift, twice per year. Team members are selected at random and participate on the team on a staggered rotational basis. Fifty percent of the team rotates off every other meeting. Using these criteria, a large shift with a large number of major job categories — all of which must be represented — will have a maximum team size of eight with each employee participating once per year.

Small departments with low numbers of employees and major job categories are collapsed with other small departments to form teams of three or more members. Very large departments may have more than one team per shift. Team meetings take place during shift hours in a conference room away from telephones and work areas. Notices are posted well in advance of meeting dates which give time and place of meetings and the membership of each team.

Supervisors in each department participate as team members with the department head serving as team leader. Department heads in turn participate as team members with the plant manager serving as team leader. Management-level teams meet at times between shift-team meetings so as to have the benefit of shift team input.

Developing a Team Log

The vehicle for documenting and tracking participant input is the team log. The log is a sheet, or sheets, of paper with four columns. The column heads are *Problem, Ideas and Suggestions, Who Handles, Action Taken,* and *Priority* (level 1, 2, or 3). This log is filled out by the team leader at the end of each team meeting. During the meeting the same column heads are put on a large blackboard in full view of the entire team. As *problems* are identified and discussed they are written on the blackboard along with the team's *suggestions and ideas* for resolution of the problem. The team also recommends *who*' should be responsible for following through on the item — usually management personnel. At the end of the meeting the items are simply transferred from the blackboard to the log sheet. The log sheet is then given to the person who manages the E.P.P. for the entire plant. In the present case that person is a management-development specialist. It could just as easily be a personnel specialist or other staff or line head. Someone must be responsible for the integrity of the program, and that person should be accountable to the head of the organization who should view the E.P.P. as their plan. Any less involvement by the organization head will greatly diminish the plan's effectiveness. It cannot exist as a side issue!

When log sheets have been turned in from all shift team meetings, the plan manager compiles them into a master log for distribution to upper tiers of management. They are, in turn, used in management-level team meetings. During these meetings new items are added and log items from shift team meetings are responded to. The complete log ends up on the plant manager's desk. The plant manager then reviews all items, checks for the quality of responses in the *action taken* column, and follows-up on items for which there has been no action taken. Actions taken are reported to the plant manager who notes these actions on the team log before the complete log is delivered to the plant manager and before the next round of team meetings is scheduled.

The action taken column is, of course, the important one. I cannot overemphasize the importance of honest responses to team suggestions. With the slightest hint of management "put-offmanship," the effectiveness of what you are trying to do is lost. It is far better to say that it can't be done and give the real reason, than to give excuses. You will be tested! The first few rounds of team meetings are critical. Management is on trial and employees will have a wait-and-see attitude. It's all up to management during these first months.

Prior to each subsequent team meeting the log is redistributed to team leaders. The action taken on previous log items are reviewed for employee validation and discussion. If these items pass muster they are rubber stamped "complete." As a rough index of how you are doing, you should shoot for a minimum of 70 percent of log items completed between each team meeting. No sheet should be removed from the log until *all* items are stamped "complete." Items which remain unresolved for more than 30 days should be flagged by putting them on a different color sheet within the log; we use pink. In addition to the regular log, we have found it necessary to use a separate log attached to the regular log for listing long term items. These are items that have resulted in decisions which cannot be implemented immediately due to scheduling or capital problems — roofing job, machinery purchases, waiting on parts, etc.

Because the timely completion of "actions" on log items is the key effort, a report should be generated which gives the number of log items by category — production, quality, safety, stock flow, machinery repair, etc. — for each round of meetings and the number of items resolved by the date of the next round of meetings; expressed in percent, totaled, and summarized. Such a report will provide top management with a pulse on progress and will pinpoint continuing problem areas.

Team Meetings

Teams should meet every two weeks for no more than one hour. At the onset of the plan, the number of items and resulting work load is apt to be high, as many as 120 items for an organization of 350 persons. As these initial items become resolved, the number of items produced in team meetings will begin to diminish as will the required meeting time. When team meetings begin to take

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less than 30 minutes, you can consider going to a monthly meeting schedule.

The agenda in a team meeting has four segments. The first segment is the communication segment. During this segment information concerning the organization is communicated to employees by the team leader. The objective here is to create an informed employee who does not have to rely on the rumor mill for information and does not get surprised by changes that affect his/her job. Information from all levels of the organization is prepared ahead of time and distributed to team leaders. This may include information on market conditions, product or machinery changes, personnel changes, company profits and reinforcing comments on employee performances. Questions are often asked in this segment which cannot be answered immediately. These are noted, followed-up on, and an answer given to the employee on an A.S.A.P. basis. An answer is guaranteed.

The second segment is devoted to a review of items and "actions taken" on the team log. During this segment employees validate that noted actions have been taken and have an opportunity to review the quality of the result. Satisfactory actions are marked "complete."

The third item of business, and the one which takes the greatest share of time, is the identification of new log items and their corresponding suggestions and assignments of responsibility. This segment puts the greatest demands on the team leader in several respects. It is their responsibility to foster full participation by all team members while at the same time helping the team to focus on productive issues. They must also help the group to clarify the problems individual team members bring to the meeting and help them to generate workable solutions. They must do all this in a non-authoritarian fashion — a leadership style that not many supervisors are accustomed to.

The fourth and final segment on the agenda is to prioritize the new log items. This is done by assigning a 1, 2, or 3 to each item. This simply reflects the team's feelings concerning the relative urgency of each item, with "1" representing the most urgent.

A comment is in order here on the role of the team leader between team meetings. It is their responsibility to attend to and follow-up on all log items which are within their control and authority. Where items fall outside their control, it is their responsibility to monitor the progress of others on those items. Because he/she cannot personally resolve the items does not absolve him/her of responsibility.

Training Requirements and Administration

Training for a participation plan is critical. Supervisors and department-level managers typically have little experience working with groups, particularly in a participative atmosphere. If they do have group experience, it is more apt to have been authoritarian in tone — they talked and others listened. This is a difficult history for many to overcome. Our experience suggests that it will take, on the average, three months of training with a minimum of two hours per week.

You will need at least one trainer experienced in leadership and communication skills and the use of some video equipment. Without going into great detail on the training program, we put our effort into three skill areas: 1) reflective listening, 2) assertion training, and 3) behavior rehearsal of team meetings. The greatest amount of effort is spent on behavior rehearsal, or role play, of team meetings, incorporating the first two skills. Using small classes of six to eight managers, written roles are given to each role player in the mock team meeting which depict every conceivable situation which might come up in an actual team meeting. Trainees take turns at the team-leader role and all role plays are videotaped. These tapes are fed back, critiqued and used for further instruction. *We train to criterion!* We do not turn any manager loose until they have demonstrated that they are able to handle a team meeting, regardless of the number of extra sessions it takes to prepare them — and some will require extra sessions. In fact, we do not initiate the participation plan until we are comfortable with the ability of all team leaders to conduct team meetings. For this reason I would suggest not announcing an initiation date until all training is completed. A premature start could be a disaster.

The first six months of the plan's existence will create a great deal of work for everyone and will require a maximum effort from management, if you are to succeed. After the first six months the work load will subside and the process will be absorbed by the organization. If you are in a manufacturing environment you can expect a great deal of demand to be placed on shop and maintenance personnel. Because of the beginning deluge of log items management will have to spend significant time following up and following through.

The first few months will require 75 percent of a full-time person to administer the plan and a full-time clerk. This will subside in six months to 30 percent for the plan administrator and a half-time clerk, based on an organization of 350 to 450 individuals.

The plan has actually turned out to be a time saver. Turn around time on problems is quicker. Problems do not "float" up to higher levels of management and become management time wasters. They are resolved at the appropriate level. Employees watched with awe as problems, some of which had been longstanding, that had been identified in the morning's meeting were being resolved during the same day.

Production and quality have improved not from working harder, but because impediments to work have been removed. Removal of stock flow problems, inadequate machinery conditions, safety hazards, and the advent of better ways of doing things have all contributed to this, not to mention the increase in quality and quantity of communication.

Employees are better informed and no longer have to endure the frustrations of depending on rumor for information and second guessing management. Employees are heard and see the direct result of their input into the organization. The quality of work life has improved for everyone concerned.

Our employees would be the first to tell you that "it's the best thing that's come along in years." Try it, you'll like it.

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