

# SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

## "THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE: A VISION"

Guest Commentary  
BY DON SCOBEL

Concern for the quality of work life (QWL) during the past two centuries, in this country alone, has embraced a continuum of social objectives including freedom from bondage, protection of the free enterprise system, the right of collective representation, job and economic security, due process, equal opportunity, and occupational health and safety, to name just a few of the more obvious. QWL, although a relatively new acronym in HRD literature, is certainly not conceptually young. For generations, the quality of work life has been a concern of industrialists, social scientists, academicians, philosophers, labor leaders, legislators, theologians, lawyers, visionaries, etc.

Why then has the 1970s seen the emergence of a movement that is so boldly and broadly being called QWL, as if Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Gompers, Henry Ford, Martin Luther King, Susan B. Anthony and Peter Drucker really didn't care about the quality of the work life experience?

One reason is perhaps that in the context of today's society, whatever the efforts of past generations, the nature of work life remains humdrum for many people who work. Even with past progress, there remains a gnawing emptiness in the work life experience for many people. If Abraham Maslow were alive today he might say, "Once fed and secure, deprivation



Don Scobel

of higher order needs is as painful as hunger."

The past decade in this country seems to have highlighted some deficiencies in the affluent and relatively secure workplace society. First, the affluent and secure society has yet to relieve some notable pockets of deprivation and insecurity. Secondly, an increase in individual affluence and security does not seem to carry with it an increase in enthusiastic contribution to the workplace organization. In fact, the emerging signs are that affluence and security (what some call the "golden handcuffs") without other fulfilling qualities of the work life experi-

ence are more aligned with malaise and disheartenment than with a creative and energetic workplace society. It is these "other qualities of the work life experience," whatever they may be, that the more recent QWL concern is all about.

In a sense, today's QWL is testing the hypothesis that a more creative and productive workplace positively correlates with the opportunity for individual growth and fulfillment from the work life experience. Although "fulfillment" is illusive and individualistic in its definition, there are some generally fulfilling workplace characteristics that are beginning to emerge from experience. For some, it is the opportunity to have input into decisions that a person is expected to implement. For some it is a voice, however small, in the definition of a person's own job. For some it is a revision of policies and practices to reflect personal respect and trust. For some it is a lessening of the restrictions and regimentations of work life. For some it is creating cooperative rather than adversarial union-management relationships. For some it is being more openly and honestly informed. For some training and development specialists it is often the design of organizational processes that enables people to apply the results of their training, education, development and growth.

From my experiences with several work organizations, it is becoming increasingly evident that QWL can be *real*. It abounds with practical applications. Let's look at one infinitesimal comparison of incidents. . . .

At one manufacturing plant, there are several welders who work in booths. These booths are made of heavy, fireproof, canvas curtain-like walls that protect fellow workers and passersby from flying sparks and from exposure to the intense brightness of the welding torch. Over the years these curtain walls had become filthy, odor-laden, and were beginning to tear. These welders came to work one Monday morning to find the old walls gone — replaced with a new kind of material, yellow in color, translucent, even moderately transparent, yet still able to halt flying sparks and to radically blunt the intensity of the flame. The welders were enraged. The company had replaced the old barriers with material through which people (like supervisors) could now see them and "spy" upon their activities. They said they were now disturbed by the flames of fellow welders. They said the new curtains were inferior. They refused to work for a few hours in protest. They filed grievances under the contractual grievance procedure and filed complaints with the Occupational Safety and Health Commission. They worked with agonizing slowness. Eventually, to avoid these escalating wars (and an adverse court decision), the company returned to the canvas curtains of antiquity!

At another facility, the conditions were the same: old, dirty, smelly, torn, ugly canvas-welding booth curtains. The supervisor called the welders together to show them samples of various new welding-booth curtains that were now on the market. They all discussed it and expressed their views. They voted and selected new yellow, translucent and transparent curtains. They wouldn't be so isolated and locked in anymore. The new curtains would be cheery and break up the claustrophobia. There was no stoppage; no griev-

ances; no OSHA complaints; no slowdowns . . . in fact, maybe just a little more energy and enthusiasm.

That's a tiny patch of QWL. In fact that is what QWL really is — patches of involvement and dignity sewn into the quilt of a trusting, involving, caring, productive workplace society.

As practical and experiential as QWL must be to have any real meaning, it also has some art form in it that touches the senses and the feelings. It is not all organizational logic. There is some dream in the reality of QWL.

The following is just one person's imagining — the author's. Since I am more attuned to manufacturing workplaces, this dream is vectored in that direction, but the reader should be able to extrapolate its underpinnings for a hospital, bank, school, government office, research institute or whatever the occupational setting.

#### The Dream

This dream of a harmonious and fulfilling workplace comingles the-


ory, policy, feeling and people. It strips the traditional work life scenarios of their devisive and disengaging qualities. The dream unfolds thusly:

The disparant value system separating factory and office life dissipates. The fuller trust quality of higher levels of work life permeates the full society. The mistrusting regimentation, especially of factory and non-supervisory office life, give way not to permissive abandon but to an adult sense of individual and organizational responsibility.

The workplace encourages sociability and non-work-related activities that are meaningful and enriching for those who participate.

The workplace society builds its policies around the qualities of most of its citizens and not around the few who might choose to exploit it. Negative influences no longer dictate society's policies and practices. Positive factors take over in policy and process setting.

Managers and supervisors really



## IS EASY... AND CHALLENGING

- IT'S EASY TO APPLY AT ALL ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS
- IT'S EASY TO LEARN — AND TO TEACH
- IT'S EASY TO USE TO DEVELOP ENTHUSIASM AND PRODUCTIVITY


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care about the people they supervise and extract strength from the contributions of the other. Some of the common hostilities in work life gradually give way to understanding and friendship. Policies are not viewed as cellblocks that tightly hold people in. They are seen instead as building blocks that bend and grow as situations change and unique individual circumstances present themselves.

People in the workplace are encouraged to sharpen their skills and insights through effective training, education and development. Even more importantly, organizational processes encourage people to try out the results of their personal development.

Praise flows freely intuned with contribution and achievement.

Profit, productivity, involvement and sharing become highly respected workplace concepts, words and realities.

Whoever conceives ideas involving change and improvement discusses them ahead of time with those who are affected and who would implement the change.

Sometimes, almost for the fun of it, things are decided by a VOTE!

The workplace hums with people performing at their high level and freely contributing their ideas.

Union representatives, where they exist, get a chance to interface not just in conflict situations like grievance discussions, arbitration hearings and bargaining sessions, but in a host of constructive, non-adversary situations.

The organization realizes that a job is not what it describes to be, but what people actually do in attempts to build on people's creative ingenuities rather than stuff them into the "scription."

The union, where it exists, is relied upon to help formulate, facilitate and safeguard emerging policies and processes as they become meaningful parts of the work-life culture.

Alleged misconduct is handled not by childlike warnings but by a mature counseling process with the preservation of full due process and a right to an impartial hearing.

Differences that may arise are resolved at the level they occur

with higher level discussion relied upon only for providing suggested resolutions where necessary to the original discussants.

Those economic benefits and related policies that tend to divide people solely by class for status will be reshaped, consistent with a society where respect, dignity and privilege are ubiquitous.

Economic discussion will consider the full spectrum of financial realities of the organization, including the opportunity for the entire work society to share an improved organizational performance.

Concern and opportunity are extended within the work society truly without regard to race, religion, sex, national origin or other irrelevant characteristics.

A host of vital activities will be stirred by committees of voluntary participants.

The entire work society is involved in furthering safe practices and improvement of the physical environment.

The workplace will relate closely to the community, especially in mutual educational matters and where community and social services can aid employees and their families.

Alas, as this workplace emerges from current reality, management finds itself "managing" in some very different ways. Similarly, the union where it exists starts "unionizing" in some very different ways. The people are encouraged to become involved in ways that make their work life experience worthwhile. Change takes place not as a "program" or "strategy" but as a continuing process of growth and development.

Part of the dream is that it comes to reality *without requiring a change in the structure of any existing institution*. The art of managing remains a magnificent art. Management in this futuristic model is not being overthrown or nudged from its position of leadership. It does not abdicate. In fact its fundamentals are fortified by its exercise of leadership through processes of human development and involvement. In this dream, the free enterprise system not only

survives but it achieves new routes for its perpetuity. No governmental decree or heavy legislation is required to achieve the reality of this dream. Nor does it require the workplace to become a behaviorist's laboratory. It is achieved by the very people who wrote the traditional work life scenarios. The people within the workplace find their own reparations.

There is one last characteristic of the dream concerning its own fruition. It does not achieve itself by dialogue, debate, logic, eloquence or a required change in any

person's or institution's attitude. A more fulfilling work life grows out of specific processes that let people experience a finer work life. It is this experience that widens people's attitudinal horizons. People in conflict can be touched by the processes of change without first having to set aside the scars of days gone by. The scars heal over not from an elixir of rhetoric but from new experiences and involvements.

#### The Essence

Experiencing a sense of community involvement, trust, contribution, growth, dreams and self-

selected welding curtains — that's what QWL is all about! — *Don Scobel*

Until recently, Don Scobel was manager of Employee Relations Development for the Eaton Corp. He has had corporate responsibility for labor relations, training and development, government relations, benefit administration, employee communications and employee relations policy development. For the last several years he has been a prime mover in the development of new processes of employee involvement and many innovations in leadership style, at both union and union-free plant environments.

## "A NEW LOOK IN SKILLS TRAINING"

Guest Commentary  
BY HARRY OSTROFF

The most urgent objective of the skills trainer is to increase blue-collar productivity. I believe we now have the technology to meet this objective in a new, exciting, measurable way.

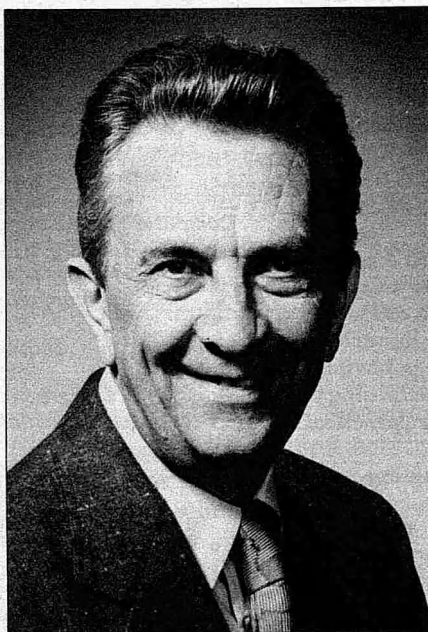
Let's begin with a task analysis. It will show that all mechanical craftspersons work with two basic groups of skills. They are:

1. Tool Manipulation
2. Information Handling

Tool manipulation is an obvious activity of all mechanics. But the use of tools and equipment is dependent on another activity. It is the physical result of the mechanics' not-so-obvious information processing activity. Something inside their heads is telling them which tool to pick up and how to use it.

This continuous processing of information is the centerpiece of the new look in skills education. The new look will include developing better ways to train mechanics to read, to understand and to interpret the many kinds of information they use. This new look will also be evident in the information storage and retrieval hardware we provide for mechanics to quickly access what they need to know at the time and the place they need the information.

Auto mechanics are the craftspersons with whom we are most



Harry Ostroff

familiar. Let's look at the many different kinds of information they must be able to use. Some of them are:

- Catalogs
- Charts and Graphs
- Cut-away Views
- Diagrams
- Electric and Mechanical Blueprints
- Exploded views
- Factory Bulletins
- Operating Procedures
- Parts Location Views
- Schematic Drawings

- Shop Repair Manuals
- Tightening Sequences and Torquing
- Wiring Diagrams
- Work Orders

Truly an impressive array of technical two-dimensional forms of data.

#### Literacy and Attitude Problems

Unfortunately, the low literacy skills of some high school graduates presents a serious problem we must overcome in training people to handle information efficiently. In addition there is a negative peer group attitude toward "bookwork." We will have to educate a mechanic to regard "bookwork" as important a part of the job as is a tool box. In fact, it's more important! They must learn not to take up a tool unless they are sure they have the information to improve the car's performance. The person with the wrench can damage your car as well as fix it. If some professor of semantics researches it he or she will probably find that the word "monkey" wrench derived from the fact that many mechanics were seen to pick up this tool to monkey around with.

Much of the necessary information is not in the form of words. Reading technical drawings, schematics, diagrams and pictorial