

MANAGING PEOPLE WITHOUT PLAYING GOD

*the impact of
the work environment
on employee productivity*

Every man would like to be God, if it were possible some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility!

PROPOSITION NO. 1

Other things being equal, the probability of a company operating profitably during any one year or any series of years is seen to be directly proportionate to the effectiveness and efficiency with which the employees work.

PROPOSITION NO. 2

In today's technology especially, no newly-employed person brings to his work assignment an immediately available capacity to work with maximum effectiveness and efficiency. This is an acquired (learned) behavior — and what can be learned can be taught — *if we can learn how to teach it!*

"IN THE BEGINNING . . ."

Beginning with the work of Taylor at the turn of the century, much managerial time and energy and much business treasure have been expended in efforts to cause business to operate in accordance with these two propositions.

Time and motion studies, made and used for that purpose, have provided something less than the total answer to the quest for efficiency. (People do not always work in the manner nor at the pace predicted by the results of such studies.) Undertaken to develop an explanation for this phenomenon, studies at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company revealed the significant impact on productivity made by the feelings and attitudes of employees about their work.

The natural result: another leap to 'the' answer: a wholly new cycle of training and development activities (subsequently known as the human relations school)

were advocated and installed in some companies. (The full, true implications of the Hawthorne study were not to be understood until much later!)

When the human relations principles were applied, however, businesses did not experience the one-to-one relationship to increased productivity — and to what is called "morale" — that had been expected. Investigation showed that people tended to perceive their relationships to others and to work through the lens or filter of their own individual frames of reference. Past experiences and future expectancies tend to distort a person's vision: He sees what he expects to see, rather than what is there to be seen.

UNDERSTANDING ONESELF

This finding, in turn, led to another conclusion on the part of those connected with training and developing employees. Managers could become more effective leaders of people if they could be helped to acquire a better understanding of themselves. So, new training efforts were focused on providing programs and courses which would help managers to a better understanding of themselves and their motivations.

Some of this training boomeranged. One result was that a sizable number of the participants in the sensitivity training session became emotionally disturbed. Because of this, the universal application of sessions in that form was called into question. The quest roared on.

JOB TRAINING

Meanwhile, on a parallel track, other trainers and developers were seeking to increase employee efficiency and productivity by providing more data and information about the work and the job.

Newly-hired employees were exposed to orientation and indoctrination sessions and to job instruction training. Supervisors were being taught the duties and responsibilities of a supervisor. Managers

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*Russell, B., *Power*, Allen and Unwin, Great Britain, 1936, p. 11 (paperback, W. W. Norton and Co., New York, 1969).

were being taught the functions of a manager and how to delegate.

Much money was pumped into this training barrel, also, with results somewhat less than overwhelmingly satisfying. Training officers found it difficult to identify those supervisors and managers whose performance had improved as a result of the training they'd received.

But there were some clues on the horizon which, upon investigation and analysis, would point out the real problems that would have to be solved before the desired level of productivity could be reached.

There was, for example, the work of Likert, Herzberg and Odiorne, which contained suggestions that the nature of the work itself and the environment in which it is to be done both play a major part in determining the efficient working level of individual employees.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In my own career, it happened this way.

I was employed in the training department of a large air-frame manufacturer. The company obtained a new contract, a *fixed-price contract*, quite different from the *cost-plus percentage fee contract* to which our earliest operations were geared. The difficulties connected with making the changeover were recognized, and new operating procedures were designed for use by the 20,000 man work force. Plans were made to train the 500 first-line supervisors in the new 'way of doing things.' The training program in the new operating procedures was carefully designed and carefully taught, and the 500 supervisors successfully completed it. The training department's members congratulated themselves on a job well done.

Within three weeks, three short weeks, serious questions were being raised about the program's effectiveness, because it was being discovered in one department after another that the super-

visors and the employees they supervised were *not* doing what they had been so carefully trained to do.

Investigating what had happened, we discovered that the training groups had been designed so that only one supervisor from a given work group was away from his work station undergoing training at any one time. After training in a group with a heterogeneous membership, the supervisor went back to his work unit and proceeded to adapt his work habits to the new procedures. Thereupon, in instance after instance, he was approached by his supervisor and questioned as to why he was doing things in this particular (the new) way. The subordinate correctly answered that this way was the way he'd just been trained to do it. This was the right way. The typical conversation that followed, initiated by his supervisor, went something like this:

"Who told you this was the right way?"

"The school did."

"Well, we don't want it done that way around here."

"But we were told that new work should be handled this way."

"I don't want it done that way."

"I have to do it that way."

"Now just a minute! Who signs your time card anyway?"

"You do."

"Don't you think it will be smart to do it my way?"

"Yes, sir!"

After a conversation like this, it is obvious that the employee would change from the way he had recently been taught back to the boss's way of doing the work then he would begin to think about other changes he had made. Could he be expected to place himself in jeopardy by doing anything in the new (correct) way?

"MAYBE SOMEONE'S TRYING TO TELL ME SOMETHING . . ."

From experiences such as these, we trainers drew certain conclusions which subsequently performed research has verified.

We concluded —

1. *We had trained the wrong people.* The new procedures should have been explained and taught to the entire work team; not to just those employees who had to use them.
2. *We had added to the trainee's problems.* By the design of the training, we had made it unnecessarily difficult for the trainee to transfer what he had learned from the classroom to the job.

We can state these 'lessons' as training-design principles:

1. The likelihood of a new procedure being successfully installed and followed by operating level employees increases as it is explained to, understood and accepted by, the supervisors and managers of the operations.
2. The more closely the circumstances and conditions under which training is conducted approximate those which prevail on the job itself, the easier will be the trainee's job to transfer his learning from 'school' to 'job.'

PRODUCTIVITY FACTORS

So we concluded that productivity or behavior of an individual at a given time is really a function of two separate factors. The first is the man himself — his skills, abilities, attitudes, emotions and value system: everything that he brings to the job. The second factor is the environment in which the work itself is to be performed.

It became evident that a formula, developed elsewhere, expressed this concept; succinctly:

$$B = f(p, e)$$

[The work behavior (B) of an individual is a function (f) of the person himself

(p) and of the environment (e) in which he works.]

The formula, as applied here, is intended to convey the fact that when change in behavior (i.e., in work habits) is required of a given worker, there are two separate focuses for efforts designed to effect the change. One is the man himself and the other is the environment in which he is expected to function.

In the past, we trainers had focused almost exclusively on trying to change the man — on trying to ‘play God’ — in the belief that we could point out his weaknesses, expose him to personal development programs and courses, so he would change his unsatisfactory work habits automatically.

AGENDA

1972 ASTD MEMBERSHIP MEETING (Recognition Luncheon)

Wednesday, April 26, 1972
12:00 - 1:30 p.m.

Albert Thomas Convention &
Exhibit Center

Houston, Texas

All ASTD members are invited to attend the 1972 membership meeting which will be held during the National Conference. The agenda for the meeting will be: (1) introduction of newly elected officers, (2) State of the Society report by President John S. Jenness, (3) new concepts under consideration for ASTD, (4) financial status of the Society, and (5) recognition through awards for ASTD members and chapters.

There have been sufficient failures with this approach to cause us to examine the other point of possible focus: the environment in which the work is to be done. Current research and our practical experience both demonstrate that great and immediate improvement in work performance can be attained by arranging the work environment so that its major aspects are consistent with proven social science and scientific management principles.

“YOU ARE TO BUILD AN ARK . . .”

The message to today’s executives and managers is clear: Arrange a work environment which enables the employees to perform effectively — or else!

Clues to the nature of this message have been provided by the results of the works of men like Likert, Herzberg, Odiorne and McGregor. The findings of these researchers contradict a number of commonly-held points of view about people at work: that people dislike work; people shirk responsibility; people do not want to become ‘involved,’ and people are generally apathetic.

From this point of view, supervisors have concluded that people with such traits must be coerced and manipulated. To be successful, the supervisor must ‘play God’ and tell his employees (individually and collectively) what must be done, how, when, where and how well to do it.

Current research findings about people-at-work paint quite a different picture. They indicate that people *want* to work, people *want* to do their work well, people *want* to do meaningful work, people *want* to assume responsibility.

Why this apparent gap between the commonly-held conception of man-at-work and the conceptions of man-at-work produced by social science research projects? I do agree with the point of view which says that many people-at-work appear to behave in a manner which can be described as apa-

thetic as disinterested in their work, and as wanting to follow others rather than to lead them. I do contend, however, that people are not born that way; they have *learned to behave that way*. Their earlier experiences in the home, at school and in business and industry have made it clear to them that there are *no* rewards for them if they behave in any other way!

(I add a parenthetical comment on the young men and women of the “now” generation who have been and currently are entering into business and professional careers. They have been subjected to an educational process which advocated their total personal commitment to performing satisfying, meaningful work and are *not* accepting assignments which demand that they repudiate all they’ve been taught. If business and industry want them as employees, working conditions must be changed and changed dramatically!)

Let me relate an example of the way in which people at work learn to be apathetic or have their previous learning reinforced. In a meeting a man makes suggestions, the chairman or boss turns and says “How could you be so stupid as to propose that idea?” or “Where does that stupid suggestion come from?” Can’t you just hear the individual thus berated say to himself, “I’ll never open my mouth in this meeting again.” Or can’t you see another committeeman with one or more good ideas saying to himself “Sure glad I didn’t open *my* mouth.” People learn very rapidly under such conditions even though what is learned is not what the boss seeks to teach. They learn to anticipate what he wants or what it’s safe to say. In the examples cited, the boss did not intend to silence the man. He ‘knew’ the idea would not work, but did not handle his criticism effectively. This particular senior supervisor felt that he had apathetic people working for him because they were not giving him *good* ideas; and his subordinates would not give voice to the good ideas they had because they did not want to

be ridiculed. This is one of the factors involved in the saying, "We teach people to be apathetic."

"... BUT HOW AM I TO BUILD THIS ARK?"

As supervisors, we must learn to build an organizational environment that is conducive to high productivity resulting from a better understanding of the circumstances in which people work most effectively. When I talk about establishing an environment conducive to allowing people to work effectively, I am thinking of the areas to be discussed below — Organizational Goals, Management Philosophy, Organizational Structure, Communications Network, Climate, Leadership Skills, Reward Systems, Procedures and Work Methods and Budgets. This is not an all-inclusive list of the factors impacting upon work, but it does contain those most frequently under the control of management personnel.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

The most important element of the work environment is a set of effective and meaningful organizational goals. Man is a goal-oriented animal — consciously or subconsciously he is continuously striving to achieve goals. This is one of his basic motivators. A man with a goal, being strongly motivated toward its accomplishment, tends to exert great amounts of his available energy in pursuit of it. A company can capitalize on this quality in man by defining its own goals and communicating them to employees so they can realize that there is a similarity of goals, and that in helping the company attain *its* goals, the employees can automatically achieve their own goals. This suggests the importance of each manager getting to know his people and, at the same time, acquiring a maximum knowledge of the social sciences as they relate to human behavior.

By clarifying and communicating company goals, we may modify the manner in which employees perform on the job. We tap the self-motivation of individ-

uals. Note carefully, we are not implying that organizational goals must be dependent on or stem from the goals of the employee. Rather, management must have clear meaningful goals that are communicated to employees — but to which employees are able to identify.

MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY

Here, I am talking about the philosophy held by managers and management as it relates to their concept of the role of management in doing work. Basic to management philosophy are the assumptions made relating to why people work. If management believes that people fall into the McGregor Theory X category (i.e., that they are dull, stupid, apathetic, disinterested in work only because they have to, will not accept responsibility and will only do what they are told to do), management's role is quite clear. People must be manipulated and forced to do their work.

If on the other hand, management believes people *want* to work and *want* to do meaningful work and accept responsibility, the role of management becomes quite different from Theory X. Management can establish an environment where people have more freedom, initiative and decision making. Then it boils down to whether we believe that people can be trusted or not.

If a manager can understand that behavior is learned, then when he finds his subordinates not performing, or performing poorly, he will know that he must help them unlearn the inappropriate behaviors and must provide the opportunity for them to relearn more appropriate behaviors. Again, the question to be posed is, how do *you* feel about all of this? Which theory do *you* support and what evidence do you have for it? Are *you* willing to test your own evidence?

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE

The manner in which we structure our organization can have a great impact on the productivity of its units and individ-

uals. The traditional organization built around functions with supporting staff has not fulfilled the needs of modern technology. Project-type organizations evolved to permit rapid development and production of a clearly-defined product line within an organization with many product lines. Each such project placed in the hands of the project manager, gave him the authority to commandeer any or all of the company's resources to insure timely deliveries. Conflicting authorities of the several product/project managers demanded priority assignment to the several products/projects in order to determine which had first claim on scarce company resources. So the matrix organization — combining the best features of the functional and line and staff operations — was born.

In addition, some companies have installed free-flowing organizational concepts, using committees of peers, and revolving leadership. Each of these structures is designed to employ company resources to the fullest — men, machinery and money.

What type organization is best for you? Why are you currently organized as you are? Is it because 'that's the way its always been' or 'it worked well for company X, therefore, it will probably work well for us' — or, perhaps, because you just never thought about it! Does your organization truly reflect current theory and practice? Does your organization permit people to work effectively/efficiently or is it in reality a barrier?

CLIMATE

By 'climate,' I mean the freedom of employees within the organization to be able to discuss real issues, to be able to say what they feel should be said. An organization with poor 'climate' is characterized by subordinates who are 'yes' men, telling the boss only what they think he wants to hear. It's an organization where the only words are "don't make waves" and "play it safe." It is obvious that the decision-making ability

of supervisors is greatly limited with this kind of input. But then this climate can develop even without deliberate action on the part of the supervisor. Frequently the supervisor, through ineptness, mishandles subordinates and causes them to learn something different than he had intended. My earlier example might help explain this.

In responding to his supervisor's request for suggestions for improvement, the subordinate is interrupted in the middle of his presentation by a very irritated "Where did that stupid idea come from?" As I asked earlier, what does the subordinate learn — he learns to play it safe. First he finds out what's acceptable to the boss, then tells the boss what he wants to hear — rather than expressing his own opinion. Now I'm sure the supervisor did not intend to establish such a climate. To him it was an unworkable not "stupid" concept. From his point of view, it had no merit. He did not realize that perhaps, from the subordinate's point of view, the idea had merit. By his action and lack of sensitivity, he taught the subordinate something about the climate of the office.

A better understanding of human behavior would have caused the supervisor to react to the subordinate's statement differently. What I am inferring here, of course, is that we can plan for and modify the kind of climate we want and act so we achieve it — if we are aware of and utilize social science findings.

COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK

Theoretically, organizational structures are designed to facilitate communications essential to the accomplishment of organizational purposes. Many times, however, the system does not work.

One of the purposes of an organization structure is to permit effective communications within an organization. Most of us, through practical experience, recognize that the communication we plan for does not always take place. Apparently, there are other factors that mitigate against effective communication.

Communication systems do not generally take into account the fallibility of people. One of the frequent complaints by the supervisor in a union shop is that union people tend to support complete sharing of information with their people while company management keeps this same information from him. Thus, many times a union steward has information about what is going on within the company before the supervisor does. Then, too, within an organization there are 'informal' communication networks — the car pool, coffee klatch, all excellent communication channels. The point I want to make now is that we should not try to *destroy* these communication networks but as supervisors we should learn how to *use* them better.

How effective are the communications media of your office? How do you decide, for example, how much of what kind of information is required by whom? Or is it left to chance? What mechanisms do you have to use if you are effectively communicating within and without your own organization? One way of testing this is to recount the number of times you have received information, different from that requested, which is incomplete, or is not received on a timely basis. It's so easy to sit there and register complaints concerning the ineptness of the other persons in responding to you. Is it really his 'fault' or have you failed to be clear in what you have requested?

REWARD SYSTEM

"Behavior which seems to be rewarded tends to be repeated, while behavior which seems to be punished or not rewarded tends to be avoided." Most of us utilize this principle to some degree in our attempts to motivate people working for us. The theory is simple. People will work to obtain rewards or they will not do things to avoid being punished. There is one important aspect of this that comes out of our understanding of human behavior: Most of us assume that what is rewarding to us will also be rewarding to our subordinates. This assumption is dangerous because it

may not be true. Our subordinates may not see reward as we do. Let me give you a quick example:

In a large company one of the motivational concepts utilized was a bonus plan. For outstanding performers, the amount of the bonus could reach the equivalent of three months' pay. The contribution of the individual determined the size of the bonus.

The bonus pool was derived from a percentage of the profit of each of the many projects within the company. Accounting procedures required that a certain percentage of the potential profit be set aside. At the end of any year this pool was divided among the employees according to the ground rules.

However, one year the controller of one of the large profit centers failed to withhold any of the funds for the bonus kitty. This organizational unit represented a large percentage of the business. At the end of the year when bonuses were computed, it was discovered that for this one plant there could be no bonus. Management realized that the people in this organization should not be penalized for lack of effectiveness of the controller so it was agreed that the money from all plants should be pooled and the bonus should be based on this amount.

As a result, all bonuses were significantly less than they had been for the same performance rating the year before. Each of the persons receiving the bonus felt that he was being penalized without knowing why. Because of the secret nature of most bonus systems the reason for the cut could not be divulged. The company had made a sizable profit this year; a reduction in the bonus did not seem reasonable. Management's attempt to motivate through a bonus system backfired because it failed to consider the nature of the reaction to a lower bonus than expected. Management knew how 'generous' it had been, but was not sensitive to employee feelings on the matter.

Even more significant is the example of the employee who had superior performance.

Wishing to give him an additional bonus, his superior scraped together as much as he could from unused sources and added to the formula amount. This additional amount, however, still made a bonus less than that of the previous year. Manage-

ment had told this employee that he would receive a special reward over and beyond what the average person got. When he received a smaller bonus, he found it difficult to believe that he had been rewarded.

The inference here is that in developing our reward system we must take into consideration how the reward will be perceived by those who are receiving it — not how it is seen by the donor group.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

There is no such thing as a born leader. People must learn to lead. Some individuals, through selective behavior early in life and reinforced by success experience, learn by trial and error how best to lead. This learning often is not at the conscious level — thus we say he was a born leader since we are unaware of the forces which contribute to this special development.

Today there is a great body of knowledge about leadership and the skills required to lead in the many and changing environments in which the manager must function. These skills can be learned in an organized way. By improving skills in leading, an individual is provided with a variety of ways to handle a given situation. He thus can be creative and grow as a manager. He develops a flexibility which allows him to lead in the most appropriate way — not in the stereotyped image of the boss so often portrayed and now immortalized in Thompson's *Up the Organization*.

With additional skill, the leader can more readily build this aspect of work environment to motivate his people in a desired direction.

PROCEDURES

Basically, procedures are designed to allow work to be done effectively and in an orderly manner. Whether this is true or not depends on how the procedures followed by one organizational unit impact upon the work of another unit.

From among the various staff departments, let's take the controller as an example. Many controllers have established outstanding work methods. These methods enable the controller to gather all sorts of data and allow him to make the required analysis and report back to the organization. Indeed this effectively allows him to do his job. On the other hand, we frequently find that the user (line department) considers the demands of the controller as being unusually severe. These demands are seen as red tape — they hold up production, add unnecessarily to cost, etc.

Yet, line departments require much of the material collected by the controller. But to what degree should a staff department superimpose its needs on a line department? Or is the staff willing to adapt to the needs of the line, even if such needs seem irrelevant? Can we not assume that line departments have their specific needs and shouldn't we try to be truly responsive to them? Are we, who are in a service organization aspect of the business, concerned about the needs of the operating departments of the business or are we self-centeredly concerned with making sure we conduct our specialized business efficiently regardless of the impact on others? Can we ask sincerely what really is in the best interest of the company?

Staff departments must learn to think in terms of what is good for their company as a whole, developing systems and procedures that are most advantageous throughout the organization. We must learn to listen more effectively to the using departments so that their needs are actually considered in a decision-making process.

A GROWTH ENVIRONMENT

In the foregoing I have tried to point out the importance in considering the impact of the work environment on the productivity and effectiveness of the employee. Working with the environmental factors of:

- Organizational Goals
- Management Philosophy
- Organizational Structure
- Climate
- Communications Network
- Reward System
- Leadership Skills
- Procedures

is doing more than putting the separate parts into proper perspective. Manipulation of the environmental factors does not call upon a manager to 'play God.' But, it does demand that he take an active role in arranging each environmental factor within his control. By this action he provides a work environment which will free the worker to grow individually, while making a maximum contribution to the goals and purposes of the enterprise. Thus, the company increases the probability of securing for itself the benefits of a work force, free-functioning at the level where maximum productivity and efficiency are possible.

MEMO TO ECONOMY/ EFFICIENCY-MINDED PERSONNEL AND TRAINING DIRECTORS:

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