MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Organizational Effectiveness

From the Editor

It was a Saturday morning and we were coming back from our usual market and grocery shopping routine. As usual CBC was on and the Radio One show, *The House*, was winding down when a political commentator rephrased an old observation: A simple solution to a complex problem usually works … *none of the time*. He went on to point out that when simple solutions are applied to complex problems a temporary cessation of symptoms occurs and then the problem resurfaces soon thereafter as a more robust, virulent strain.

If my memory serves me correctly, he was talking about inter-provincial relations, that old chestnut of Canadian politics. The same phenomena with other examples occurs within organizations.

In the work we do, we help our clients understand the complexities they are facing using a systems-based approach. Then we search for viable solutions that will deal with the root of the problem in the longer term.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Life in organizations is nothing if it isn't a balancing act: how do we encourage innovation and stability, control and initiative, planning and action? One of the more demanding paradoxical challenges is efficient participation: how do we gain buy-in and commitment without slowing the organization down to a crawl?

In this article, Stephen Baetz points out how many organizations have opted for efficiency and given lip serve to honest participation. He makes four initial suggestions that will help to strike a better balance and invites you to continue the dialogue.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization that sponsors this publication.

Stephen Baetz

Searching for Efficient Participation

Here's the Trivial Pursuit question for today. What do Dante's *Divine Comedia*, Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queen* have in common? You've got 30 seconds to answer or the question goes to the other side.

Give up?

They all deal in some way with the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

There's something surprisingly comforting about having sin defined as Gregory did in the 6th century. You know what's out-of-bounds, what's unacceptable, what's deplorable, offensive, appalling, unpardonable, disgraceful. (And if you know what *not* to do, you should be able to keep yourself out of hot water.) If we were ever to raise our hand and ask why one of the sins is on the list, somebody schooled in fire and brimstone can draw a map of where each sin leads. My recall is limited — and maybe I should have paid more attention — but I know pride comes before a fall, greed leads to distrust, lust to petty relationships, and … and from there it gets fuzzy. All I can remember hearing is that I should avoid the seven deadlies if I want to lead a full and decent life.

Or should I?

The way I see it, the upside of some of those sins has been grossly undervalued. Wouldn't psychologists, for example, tell us that pride is the cornerstone of a positive self-image? Those same purveyors of mental health would insist that a balanced life is characterized by a blend of achievement and relaxation (sloth by any other name). And they would probably propose that bottling up emotions (such as anger or envy) causes useless stress that could lead to psychosomatic disorders. Some might even go so far as to suggest that anger, when we are being mistreated, is highly appropriate and that wishing (which is a huge chunk of envy) is essential to a purposeful life.

Life in the 6th century must have been more tolerant of simple solutions. Fifteen centuries later, I find extreme positions not to be viable. Most of the time I find myself and my clients in the middle, faced with the challenges and complexities of balancing conflicting aspirations. For instance, how do you deal with paradoxes like controlled empowerment, thoughtful action, or flexible consistency?

The paradox that more and more of our clients worry about is efficient participation.

The choice that most organizations have made in the last couple of decades has been on the side of efficiency. As a result, hierarchical structures have been fashioned and a version of autocratic or oligarchical leadership deployed. In such an environment, power and authority rests at the top; it is the senior leadership group who defines the direction, sets the key performance indicators, arbitrates territorial battles, doles out financial resources, and exhorts those at the front line to get it done. Communication to all corners of the organization is a challenge. Cascading is the preferred method. Messages flow from the top about what is important and what is not. Leaders conduct dog-and-pony shows to convince everyone the choices are the right ones and to sell alignment as a virtue.

There has been some recognition by a few leaders that a hierarchical structure has a few major drawbacks. For one, cascading doesn't work; it is neither effective nor efficient. Why? Some managers hold on to information in an attempt to increase their value. Others unwittingly distort the message. Still others don't understand the messages they get, deem them to be non-essential, and subsequently don't share what they've got. Getting buy-in has been a struggle, to say the least, and something new is needed. As well, in the last two decades the needs of workers have changed and they appear to be looking for opportunities for participation. As a result of those factors and others, there have been attempts to involve front-liners in the business: quality circles and semi-autonomous work teams came first, then project teams of all sorts, and those have been followed by task forces, specialized work groups, and round-tables. Some gains have been made. However, the underlying authority of the hierarchy has remained untouched and, as a result, top-down approaches have sustained themselves, for better or worse.

Of equal significance is the frustration of many on the leadership team with how long participation takes. Despite all of this, what remains? A desire by everyone to figure out how to have efficient participation. It is in that context that I offer some suggestions.

Make two-way communication a leadership priority.

Resist the temptation to rely on a cascading tactic to communicate. It doesn't work. Search for ways to deliver key messages directly to the people you need to have in the know. For sure, talk about the conclusions you've reached and the direction you're headed. As well, talk about the reasons behind the conclusions, point out the nature of the struggle, and tell others what you are trying to balance.

Spend the same amount of time in listening posts hearing what others think, know, and perceive. The reality is that people will be more likely to listen to what you have to say if you listen to what they have to say.

There is a temptation to communicate only when something new has to be "rolled-out." No wonder skepticism sets in and hidden agendas are assumed to be at work.

Establish periodic forums where any strategy, tactic, or policy can be challenged.

In those forums use working consensus as the decision-making method — you will talk the issue through until everyone agrees not to disagree. To get everyone to the point of feeling comfortable with such a bold step (the usual worry is that somebody will stick in their heels and stop the group from moving on), make sure that before the meeting the participants all have the same information and the same criteria for making a sound decision.

Encourage managers to make operational decisions within their function.

Not every decision has to be made on the basis of working consensus. Those that affect the function and the function alone can be made by the manager so the team can get on with it. If a decision crosses functional lines, determine who is in the best position to call it: that may be a single person or a small group.

A few organizations are finding some success in improving efficiency by having leaders set deadlines for decisions based on urgency and importance. That means that the decision time isn't driven by when everyone's calendar meshes but by a clear understanding of the costs of not making a decision and/or the benefits of getting on with it right now.

The implication of this suggestion is that each team must have a second person (a representative if you will) who knows as much about the issues of the business as the manager does so that when the manager is not available they can fill in. This leads to the next suggestion.

Hold elections within teams to determine who the second representative for the team will be.

The team or work group should decide through a working-consensus process what they are looking for in a team representative. From there, members can be nominated and an election held. Such a courageous approach not only disrupts the traditional power base — no longer is power gained and held by what position you hold in the organization — but it also develops additional leaders who can communicate about business issues.

At a minimum, the representative is expected to fill in if the manager isn't available for urgent decisions. As well, they should know what is going on in the team, in other functions, and in the organization. Only then will they make solid, balanced decisions.

Here's tomorrow's *Trivial Pursuit* question: How do you ensure efficient participation?

Abandon an over-reliance on hierarchy and cascading which depend on the control of information to gain power. Then search for authentic ways to engage everyone in the core issues of the business, even if it means having *strangers* at the decision-making table.

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