PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT

Implementing Empowerment

Lorne C. Plunkett & Robert Fournier

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PREFACE

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

We wrote this book hoping that leaders, supervisors, hourly
paid workers, and employee representatives (e.g., union stew-
ards) all would benefit from reading it. We wrote it primarily
with those people in mind because they are the ones who will
experience the participative management process as both a
personal and an organizational event. We also hope that inter-
nal and external change agents—whether they be organization
development consultants or trainers—will gain value from our
experiences. The change agent is helpful or not, depending on
what processes or programs are recommended to the clients.
For practitioners, our message is simply to ask, "If I was paying
the bill for my services, would I feel that I was spending my
organization's money effectively?"

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Chapter 1 provides an overview of participative management
from our perspective. We also describe a case with which we
have been associated that exemplifies the concept and practice
of participative management and reinforces our belief that the
process pays off organizationally. In Chapter 2, we attempt to
demystify what we view as the "top ten" myths of participative
management. We explore the traps associated with the myths
and try to illustrate the impact of subscribing to them.

Chapter 3 addresses the issues for the organization in the participative management process. Chapter 4 explores issues for teams and groups. Chapter 5 offers some techniques that we have found useful in working with varieties of teams we have encountered in the participative management process.

In Chapter 6, we discuss issues for the individuals in the participative management process, which we too often find are simply not addressed. In this chapter, we write of the "unspeakables" because we believe that to ignore them is to ignore the very foundation on which participative management is built.

Chapter 7 attempts to look into the future and predict where participative management is going.

The Appendixes in this book are intentionally different from many other appendixes. We seized the opportunity to turn the book into a working document of sorts. We offer some tools that have worked for others, some examples of successful pieces in the participative management process, and a list of reference books that we found especially useful in our work with clients.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For many years, we talked about the collaborating for this book. In 1990, we put the plan in progress, and in doing so we experienced some of the same successes and failures that we describe in this book. We have certainly increased our empathy toward our clients as they struggle with participative management issues. In the end, however, we persisted and the feeling of completion is empowering! The book was written in two different cities (we live 400 miles apart), and we had to invent some creative ways to apply teamwork in our efforts to meet deadlines. We owe an incredible debt to the inventors of the telephone, the fax machine, and the courier service.

We wrote this book for a number of reasons. First, we felt a strong need to share our own experiences, beliefs, and concerns about participative management and how it is "done." Second, we believed that if we could marry our "internal–external" consulting perceptions, we could come up with a clearer view of participative management concepts and techniques. Third, our spouses suggested we should either write the book or stop talking about it!

You can't write a book like this without help and support from a lot of people. We want to acknowledge all of our clients, particularly the following who allowed us to share their experiences: the polyvinyl chloride expansion team at Esso Chemical Canada's Sarnia site, Shell Canada, Camco, Nova's Polysar site, General Electric Canada, Peterborough, and Martin Marietta, Denver.

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INTRODUCTION

IF PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT IS THE ANSWER, WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

Have you been on a trip when you had to refer to maps and checkpoints so constantly that you asked yourself, "Why did I undertake this journey?" This same feeling is probably rampant in organizations undertaking the shift in management philosophy to participative management. We consistently meet managers who are checking progress, mapping out tactics, confronting detours, and trying to keep the "kids in the backseat quiet." What started out as a "grand journey" is becoming a "never-to-be-repeated experience." This book is not meant to be a travel guide for visiting the world of participative management. Instead, it is meant to provide some *working* answers that might reduce the anxiety intrinsic to making a necessary and challenging business decision.

In this book, we want to provide you with a different slant to participative management. Most of the literature in the field is "missionary" in nature, extolling the benefits of a new way of working. They make promises to managers of a nirvana that is hard to ignore. We maintain that reality is the road to nirvana, and this book is about reality. We intend to share our experiences—both the failures and the successes. Our clients have allowed us to discuss their experiences in the hopes that other managers will either avoid some of the pitfalls or not feel that they alone have moments of doubt.

This is not a negative book. We believe deeply in the philosophy of participative management. However, good intentions alone are not enough to achieve success.

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DIFFERENT?

Several features make this book different:

1. We focus on the individual in an organization. Participative management cannot be successful if there is not a proper reconciliation of the individual's needs and the organization's need to change.

2. We emphasize the difficulties faced in a move to participative management. Managers cannot fight a battle without being aware of the battlefield.

3. We provide no panacea. Creating a challenging and fulfilling workplace is not as simple as many consultants would like managers to believe. There is no *one* right way. Success is based on using a wide range of strategies to get to a clearly defined end point.

4. We introduce participative management as a "business decision." Our approach is simple: "Don't do participative management for your employees' sake; do it for the business' sake. We believe the purpose is business stability and growth, not employee fulfillment. Participation is a means, not an end.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT?

Although the literature of management abounds with definitions of participative management, we could not find a satisfactory definition. In our view, participative management is a philosophy that demands that organizational decision making

be made in such a way that *input* and *responsibility* are extended to the lowest level appropriate to the decision being made.

The purpose of participative management is to ensure that effective decisions are made by the right people. Empowerment is a means to achieve participative management. It is the mechanism by which responsibility is vested in teams or individuals. Involvement, on the other hand, is the mechanism for ensuring appropriate input to decision making. Thus, empowerment and involvement become the building blocks for a participative management philosophy.

Throughout this book, the concept of teams plays an important part. Consistent with our definition of participative management, teams are another tool in the participative management toolbox. Although teams are critical for participative management, they are not participative management by themselves. If a team is created but not consulted or empowered, participative management will not exist. Many writers and practicing consultants tend to use football or hockey teams as effective analogies for participative management. We have a small problem with this. Football and hockey assume that everyone is involved in every play. Each player on the field or ice surface has a totally interdependent role with everyone else. In business, however, this is not necessarily true. Very few teams are so integrated that true interdependence is required. Baseball seems to be a better example for understanding teams in a participative management philosophy. In baseball, although there is definitely a need for role specialization and goal clarity, it is not uncommon for a left fielder to go three or four innings and never touch the ball. The game goes on, but the left fielder has little, if any ability to influence the course of events. What is critical for the team is that when the left fielder *is* needed, he or she is ready to carry out the designated responsibilities.

Participative management is more like baseball in that each individual is not involved in every decision in the organization, but is required to be effective when his or her input is required. Participative management also requires that the organization and its leadership recognize when to involve people and when to let them get on with running the business. Many of these issues are covered in later chapters.

WHY PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT?

Every organization moves to participative management for its own reasons. However, there seem to be two recurring themes:

1. Sharing success rather than hoarding failure. The traditional methods of management are inefficient for many organizations. Many companies are seeing market share and size diminish due to loss of quality standards, increasing militancy of an unhappy workforce, or a competitor's increased effectiveness. In considering solutions, many companies focus on the Japanese philosophy. Roger Smith, chief executive officer of General Motors, believed that the lesson to be learned from the Japanese was robotics. Xerox opted for customer service as its main competitive response. Ford has taken the philosophy that "quality is job one." All these strategies include some form of participative management as part of the total solution. Increasing business effectiveness is *impossible* without increasing the effectiveness of the human resources in the company. Participative management provides an opportunity to share responsibility, risk, and success. The old days of the heroic leader who battles impossible odds on behalf of his or her people are over. Organizations know that sharing the responsibility with