

MANAGING PRODUCTIVITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

A Practical, People-Oriented Perspective

Richard E. Kopelman



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PEOPLE-ORIENTED
PERSPECTIVE**

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**To my wife, Carol
and my sons,
Joshua and Michael**

PREFACE

This is a book about productivity. More specifically, it is about the effects of several behavioral science techniques (methods, approaches) that are widely believed to improve productivity in organizations.

A number of factors have contributed to my undertaking this effort. One is the growing skepticism I have noted among people in all walks of life as to whether the behavioral sciences offer any real, practical contributions to managing organizations. Increasingly, I have heard students complain that their textbooks are largely compilations of theories—and that the theories are often contradictory. Some students have apparently concluded that the major learnings from behavioral science courses consist of vagaries and platitudes such as “There is no one best way,” “There are many ways to skin a cat,” and “It all depends.” Graduate students often arrive at the same conclusion but use more sophisticated terminology, for instance, “Results depend on contextual modifiers, boundary conditions, individual differences, situational factors, etc.” In short, many students believe that there are no main effects, no reliable findings, no answers.

Many people in business and government have also apparently reached a similar conclusion. All too often, behavioral scientists are seen as producing uninterpretable mumbo jumbo, psychobabble, which even if it could be understood has little relationship to the practical problems of managing an organization.

For decades behavioral scientists themselves have warned their colleagues that the viability of their work depends, in the final analysis, on addressing and solving relevant problems. Yet while managers are interested in practical issues such as productivity, product quality, and personnel turnover, most (approximately 90 percent) of the academic literature has focused on scientific constructs largely related to such unobservable, intrapsychic phenomena as attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, intentions, values, and attributions. Managers, presumably, are supposed to make the leap of faith that attention to these latter phenomena will result in greater profits or help meet the payroll.

Aware that I was teaching behavioral science courses and that many people

were skeptical about the practical value of such material, I was receptive to a request by Steven Markowitz, then of the Continental Group, Inc., to prepare a research report. He asked me to examine the results of prominent behavioral science approaches to improving productivity in organizations and to determine which approaches worked and which did not. After several years and major revisions, the result was this book.

Among other audiences, this book is intended for both graduate and advanced undergraduate students. Whereas many textbooks emphasize theories and prescriptions, this book focuses on descriptions and evaluations (What has been attempted? What has worked and what has not? Under what conditions?). Accordingly, it can supplement texts in courses such as organizational behavior, management, organizational psychology, human resource management, and organization development, or it can serve as the primary text in productivity management courses.

This book is also intended for managers and staff professionals, many of whom are continually bombarded with brochures making all sorts of claims about the efficacy of various productivity-improvement techniques. In the absence of a systematic, comprehensive examination of the evidence, it is difficult to judge the effectiveness of a particular human resource management technique; certainly, isolated success stories related by promoters of particular techniques should not be relied on too heavily.

As in all projects such as this, a debt is owed to many people. I would like to recognize and thank Paul H. Thompson and Gene W. Dalton, my teachers and mentors at the Harvard Business School, for showing me how to align theories with problems. A number of colleagues, past and present, at Baruch College have also been very helpful, most notably Gary A. Yukl, from whom I learned a lot, and Donald J. Vredenburg, who provided a good deal of needed encouragement. I am particularly grateful to Benjamin S. Karan, a graduate student, for his excellent editorial comments. Thanks are also extended to Izhar Barlev, Dee Birnbaum, and Lynn S. Mullins for helping me track down articles, and to Terry Masiello for typing the first draft of the manuscript.

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Richard E. Kopelman

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION
