9. Some selected problems associated with formal workers' participation

Abstract

The question is not whether participation 'works,' but the conditions when it works – and when it won't. Most of these conditions have been carefully studied, but three questions need more attention: (1) when are employees actually willing to devote time and effort to participation?; (2) what are the appropriate roles of supervisors and higher-level managers in participative systems?; and (3) how can participative momentum be maintained? Suggestions are made how to approach these issues.

Introduction

Workers participation in management has been the subject of continuing debate among academicians and practitioners for over three decades. Much of the debate relates to whether given forms of participation 'work' or not in some overall sense. A recent meta-analysis of numerous studies, some with and others without positive results, concludes, 'participation can have a statistically significant effect on performance and satisfaction, but the average size of these effects is small enough to raise concerns about practical significance' (Wagner, 1994). I find this approach not useful. Clearly participation works under some conditions and not under others. The key question is what are these conditions? What are the key differences between successful and unsuccessful participation? And how can we raise the success rate?

I also think we now have enough evidence to specify some of the conditions which make participative success more likely, almost regardless of how 'success' is defined (but more on 'success' later). First among these conditions is that participation must be supported by the main interested parties: workers, supervisors, higher management, and the union (if any). Other important conditions for long term success of formal participation are (1) a participative day-to-day management style, (2) reduced pay and status differentials; (3) substantial job security; (4) extensive training in human relations and technical skills; (5) a supportive 'infrastructure' (Blasi, Mehrling, and Whyte, 1984) which provides social, legal, and financial support; and (6) participation should be introduced participatively. Further, direct participation is more likely to be successful if it is supported by representative participation.

Even were there general agreement as to this list (there isn't), some major problems remain which are both difficult to resolve in practice and about which there has been too little research. These will be discussed at some length in Heller, Pucik, Strauss, and Wilpert (forthcoming). Here I focus on just three problems:

... the extent to which workers are willing to participate;

... the role of supervisors and top management; and

... the maintenance of participatory enthusiasm.

Before I begin my main discussion, allow me a few words as to forms of participation and measures of success. There are some interesting issues here.

Forms of participation

Any discussion of participation is complicated by the fact that participation comes in many versions (which is one reason why the generalized concept enjoys such widespread popularity). Simplifying considerably, there are two main arguments for participation. The first is that participation redistributes social power, protects workers' interests, strengthens unions, and extends the benefits of political democracy

to the workplace. A major goal here is to check management's power. Proponents of this approach stress varying means of *representative participation* such as works councils, worker representation in company boards of directors, and occasionally workers' ownership. This approach has been more popular in Europe than America (in part because, at least until recently, Americans saw unions and traditional US-style collective bargaining as adequately protecting workers without the need of additional mechanisms). However I sense that European enthusiasm for participation has considerable waned.

The other approach stresses participation as a means of making organizations more efficient through increasing workers' satisfaction and productivity. A variety of terms are used to describe this movement: quality of worklife, employee involvement, and work restructuring, among others. The emphasis here is on direct participation, for example quality circles (QCS), semi-autonomous work teams, and total quality management programs. Though many of the ideas came originally from Europe, they have been implemented moderately widely in the US. According to a recent survey, two or more 'flexible work practices' (such as quality circles) are in place, with at least 50% of the workers involved in each, in 37% of US establishments (Osterman, 1994). (Though this is probably the best study available I think the estimates may be high and may include programs which never have been fully implemented or which now have been abandoned.) As discussed later, many programs are short-lived or exit in name only. Most of the changes which have been made are 'marginal. . .. because they do not change the work system or power structure in a fundamental way' (Appleyard and Batt, 1994).

In discussing direct participation it may be useful to contrast *problem solving-groups* (such as quality circles), where management's approval is required *before* employee suggestions can be implemented, with *decision-making work teams*, which have the power to implement their own decisions. The distinction is brought out by comparing two US auto plants, the highly successful NUMMI and the moderately successful Saturn. In both plants there are extensive networks of joint union-management committees and regular team meetings to propose work improvements. In both, for example, workers and their unions have a substantial voice in selecting supervisors. Both have generated considerable employee commitment.

The NUMMI form of participation is an example of what Womack, Jones and Roos (1990) call 'lean production.' With a sixty-second job cycle the job is highly repetitive. Through constant 'kaisen' workers engage in 'self-Taylorization,' thus eliminating the few seconds of slack which might allow them to take a break or vary their work pace. Every operator's movements are carefully described and standardized. A suggestion made by a work team, if accepted by management, is applied uniformly elsewhere. NUMMI-type participation has one advantage: to the extent that workers participate in 'designing their own chains' they are more likely to accept the result as fair. On the other hand, job-redesign techniques capture workers' secret shortcuts which once they could use to make their lives easier. Management can supervise them more easily.

Saturn is closer to the Swedish model. (Rubenstein, Bennett, and Kochan, 1992). The plant was developed from scratch by a joint union-management team. Workers have greater freedom to modify their work behavior. Job cycles are longer and there is less work standardization. In short, compared with a traditional assembly line, NUMMI allows considerable participation; compared to Saturn (or its Swedish now-closed counterpart, Uddevalla), NUMMI is relatively restrictive (Adler and Cole, 1993).

What do we mean by participatory success?

Measures of direct participation's success fall under two heads, attitudinal (such as commitment or job satisfaction) and behavioral (e.g. productivity, quality, turnover, absenteeism). In theory (at least according to some theory) attitudinal and behavioral measures of participation's impact should be highly correlated. Research results are less clear. In some cases, participation increases quality but not satisfac-

tion; in other cases it is the reverse. More research attention should be given to these seemingly deviant cases.

What are the appropriate measures of representative participatory success? Better labor-management relations? Fewer strikes? More even distribution to perceived power (a la Tannenbaum)? Higher productivity? Greater worker satisfaction? Each measure implies a different purpose for participation and perhaps different theories as to it its operation and success.

Given the short half-life of many forms of direct participation, a critical measure is sheer survival. The fact that a committee meets year after year doesn't necessarily mean that it is effective. But if it stops meeting altogether it clearly is no longer serving a function. As suggested by the new field of 'organizational ecology', research should pay more attention to survival rates.

How willing are workers to participate?

An obvious condition for effective participation is that workers want to participate. A central tenet of classical human relations is that, at least for some workers, work lacks challenge and is alienating, and further that participation is a prime solution to this problem. Thus it has been assumed that there is a strong demand for participation. Beyond this it is implicitly assumed that once offered a chance to participate, workers will be willing to devote the time and energy to do so.

Robust evidence as to workers' desire for participation is difficult to gather. Workers may be asked how much participation they would like; typically they reply they want a little more than they have now. Often too they respond that they are dissatisfied with their present extent of participation. But surveys of this sort are not terribly reliable. The responses depend heavily on the context in which the questions are asked and the type of participation in question. Further, for workers who never enjoyed much participation, the choice may not be very meaningful. It is like asking how you would like living in a foreign country you have never seen.

More central to the success of participation is the extent to which workers are willing to devote time to participation in practice. Considerable research suggests that even when given the opportunity to participate, relatively few workers take advantage of this opportunity (Leitko, Greil, and Peterson, 1985; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kochan, and Verma, 1991). They want the results of participation, but are reluctant to involve themselves personally to achieve these results.

There are a variety of factors which might affect both general desire for participation as well as the willingness to spend time doing so (Dean, 1985; McCarthy, 1989).

1. For fundamental personality reasons or because of culture and upbringing, workers may feel uncomfortable in expressing themselves, especially in the presence of supervisors or people of higher caste or status. For example, participation may be seen as criticism and therefore inappropriate. Ganguli (1954) reports that Indian workers feel that decision-making is the job of top management, not of workers. (On the other hand, professionals in western countries view participation as a right.)
2. Workers may lack the skills and knowledge to participate – or think they do.
3. Participation is time and energy consuming, as well as frequently frustrating. Workers may be willing to participate for extra pay or reduced work load, but not in addition to their other assignments.
4. Workers may feel their current job is already sufficiently challenging or ambiguous. Like professors overloaded with committee work, they may suffer from 'decisional satiation' (Alutto and Belasco, 1972) and so prefer to avoid further responsibilities.
5. If their interests lie outside the workplace (i.e., it has little salience for them) they may prefer to spend their participative energies elsewhere, say, in a pub.
6. Workers may willingly participate with regards to only a limited number of topics. For example, they may enthusiastically

participate in decisions to raise wages or improve working conditions, but show little interest in improving quality or rectifying supply imbalances.

7. Among the presumed advantages of participation is that workers 'buy into' the system, that is they become more committed to the organization. But workers may consciously or subconsciously believe they are being manipulated. If they are hostile to the organization, they may have no desire to make it work better. Hostility to their particular supervisor or to the organization as a whole may quickly develop into hostility to particular participative schemes (Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers, and Goodman, 1994).
8. They may participate for a while and then decide they are accomplishing nothing (that it is 'pseudo-participation') and so drop out.

Willingness to participate at the workplace level may be analyzed in the same terms as willingness to participate in a union – a topic about which there is a considerable literature. One approach is through path-goal analysis. Workers will engage in a particular form of participation if they perceive it is likely to satisfy goals important to them – and if the advantages of participating exceed the costs involved, in other words if there is a net payoff (Gallagher and Strauss, 1991; Klandermans, 1984). These goals may be classified as either 'expressive' or 'instrumental'. Expressive goals are those satisfied through participating in the activity itself, such as the opportunity to communicate with others, exercise leadership, or be part of the decision-making process. Instrumental goals are satisfied as a result of participation, such as making one's job easier, safer, or better paying.

Those with expressive orientations may participate because it is fun (some faculty members enjoy faculty meetings). Those with an instrumental orientation may participate only so long as they perceive instrumental payoffs. However, some people may participate neither because they expect an immediate personal payoff or for fun – but because, in their culture, participation is a social obligation, a form of organizational citizenship (Graham and Verma, 1991) – meaning there may be another form of payoff).

There is considerable evidence that after initial enthusiasm when a given participation scheme is introduced, willingness to participate peaks out and then declines. More on this later. My main point here is that successful participation requires people willing to participate. And they are more likely to participate if participation seems likely to pay off.

Possibly formal participation may be considered a success even if only a few people actually participate. The others may be satisfied if the *opportunity* to participate exists, to be used if desired. And they may participate vicariously through the activities of their informal 'representatives' who actually do.

Supervision

Supervisory opposition has been a barrier to participation the world over. The reasons for this opposition are well known: Direct participation forces supervisors to learn new methods of supervision which often clash with everything they have learned previously. It reduces their status and authority; as workers assume more authority, levels of management may be eliminated and supervisors' very jobs are at risk. The supervisor's status is especially threatened if participative work groups (such as QCs) make suggestions directly to top management; after all, QCs may make productivity- or quality-improving suggestions which supervisors should have introduced on their own.

Adding to hostility, supervisors rarely are consulted as to whether or how participation is be introduced. Participation is voluntary for workers but not managers. Indeed participation has been described as an example of 'the top telling the middle to do something for the bottom.' On occasions participation has been strenuously resisted by supervisors' unions. 'One unexpected result [of shared governance in Los Angeles schools] has been the organization of administrators into a recently certified union... Their main complaint is that the

[school district] had bargained away much of their authority in . . .negotiations . . . to which they were not a party' (Bickner and Kleingartner, 1992).

Further, representative participation typically bypasses the supervisory level. Employee members of representative bodies, such as works councils, have access to top management which supervisors lack. Typically supervisors are without representation of any sort.

The supervisor's appropriate role

The appropriate role for supervisors in formally participative organizations has received only sporadic research attention. It is almost as if supervisors cease to exist in a formally participatory organization. (We need good longitudinal research on how participation actually changes supervisory behavior,)

Ideally, formal and informal participation should be combined. Ideally, the supervisor should listen, consult, delegate, and encourage group decisions. He/she should be a coach, trainer, and especially help develop his employees' participative skills. Indeed, with an ideal supervisor, group decisions may be made on a daily or hourly basis, so there may be no need for a formal participative mechanism at all. In practice, formal direct participation is likely to have only limited success if it is not generally consistent with day-to-day supervisory practices.

However, there are few supervisors who fall perfectly (4.0) into Likert's System 4 (1967). Here is whether trouble begins. How can we integrate these less-than-ideal supervisors into systems of formal participation? For example, what should be the relationship between the supervisor and formal direct participative bodies (for example, quality circles)? Should the supervisor serve as the QC's chair? Should he/she merely be a team member? Or should the supervisor absent him/herself from the circle's deliberations? (A related question: should the circle be chaired by a 'facilitator' from without the department?)

There is a considerable danger that when less-than-ideal supervisors chair QCs, their presence may inhibit discussion and groups may be less likely to take responsibility for their own decisions. Many (not all) of the presumed psychological advantages of direct participation will be greater if the circle is free from supervisory interference. But if this happens, there is another danger: the supervisor and the independent QC may develop into a rival power centers with adversarial, bargaining relationships.

Democratic supervision may be relatively feasible (but not really easy) in a small group whose members have similar interests. It becomes far more difficult (virtually impossible?) where employee-employer interests differ and where the supervisor's chief loyalty is to top management.

Supervisors and representative participation

According to Likert (1967), supervisors should act as linking pins, representing the interests of subordinates to superiors, and vice versa. Ideally, therefore, supervisors would act as workers' representatives and there would be no need for formal representative participation. Communications, both upwards and downwards, would pass through the linking pin. Together the chain of linking pins would eventually join ordinary workers to top management and resolve all problems through discussion (or would it be through bargaining?)

But there are problems to the linking pin concept (Strauss, 1977). In the first place, it requires managers at each level to be good communicators; one poor communicator and the magic chain is broken. Secondly, the interests of higher management and workers often (always?) differ, forcing supervisors to act as mediators or (much more likely) primarily representatives of top management. As differences grow, the linking pin may suffer increasing stress and eventually sheer. At best it subjects supervisors and managers to high degrees of tension. Given human imperfections it would be folly to rely on a single channel for upwards communications. Certainly, supervisors should not serve as subordinates' representatives on representative participatory boards such as works councils.

Instead we need reliable alternative channels

of communications. A union may serve this function. Or there may be elected works councils or the equivalent. At Saturn there are two co-managers at each middle managerial level, one representing the union, the other management (Rubenstein, Bennett and Kochan 1993).

In principle supervisors should have independent representation on representative boards. But this rarely happens. There is (was) some provision for independent supervisory representation at Glacier and an elected managerial representative serves on the workers' side of some German supervisory boards. For the most part, however, when supervisors serve on safety committees or other representative bodies, they represent management's interests, not their own.

As subordinates assume more power, formally or informally, supervisory behavior needs to change. Training may help. Supervisors who successfully develop participation at lower levels should be rewarded by favorable evaluations, salary increases, and promotions. Supervisors may behave more participatively if they are treated participatively themselves. Indeed participation at higher levels of management may set the stage for participation at lower levels. And supervisors should participate in the process of introducing participation. At best, however, the supervisor's role may be anomalous.

To conclude this section, more thought is needed as to the supervisory role in formally participative organizations.

Higher management

Higher management's support is highly desirable, if participation is to be successful. But how essential and what kind of support, passive or active? Representative bodies, such as works councils, may function in the face of management opposition when their existence is mandated by law or union contract. Also, direct participation may sometimes be bootlegged at lower levels (particularly on the night shift) without top management's knowledge. Nevertheless top management's support considerably increases the chances of success. Otherwise participation schemes either atrophy, or, if mandated by contract or law, develop highly adversarial relationships.

Ideally, top management will support participation through use of symbols, through serving as role models of participative behavior, through rewarding such behavior on the part of subordinates, and perhaps by sponsoring an organization development program. All these activities may help establish a 'participatory culture,' though the process is not simple.

In practice, however, top management frequently gives participation only lip service. Its support is often symbolic and uncertain. As Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers, and Goodman (1993) point out, managerial support for participation comes in 'waves' or fads. A program may be adopted (often with much fanfare), because it is highly touted by consultants or management journals or practiced by competitors. (As institutional theory suggests, organizations are copy cats: they follow the leader.)

But as enthusiasm for one program wanes, a new one is introduced. At Fawley (in England) announcing a new scheme was 'an important 'rite of passage' . . . related directly to the career objectives of members of the management group' (Ahlstrand, 1990). Once the managerial champion is transferred elsewhere the program may be quietly dropped or allowed to atrophy. In any case, the symbolic or political nature of many programs is easily evident to lower managerial levels and helps explain the low priority which these programs receive.

How programs are diffused differs greatly in different situations (see Cole's, 1989, discussion of the contrast between how quality circles were diffused in the US., Japan, and Sweden). Within the organization they may be sponsored by different departments, e,g. human resources, quality, marketing, or public relations – as well as by line managers. In short, the introduction and continued success of participation programs depends heavily on managerial politics.

Nevertheless further research is needed as to the conditions under which management will voluntarily introduce various forms of participation (often the law gives them no choice) and

will persist in supporting it (the law can't force support).

Some final dilemmas: Having a top-management champion may be useful if not essential to get participation started; but participation may start off badly if it is forced on unwilling workers and unions. And, can there be a charismatic participative leader? Organizations need direction. But direction is rarely achieved spontaneously. Someone, a leader, must take the initiative and lead. However, strong, charismatic leadership may inhibit participation (or does it?). More thought needs to be given to this issue. Some believe that national democracy requires organized political parties. Are these necessary (or even feasible) in work organizations? How democratic can work organizations be?

Maintaining participation

The half-life of direct participative programs is fairly low. Some seem to be more hardy than others. Hypothetically, the survival rate may be greatest when:

1. The participative structure is mandated by law or collective bargaining.
2. There is a union to insure that the legal and contractual requirements are implemented.
3. The participative mechanisms involves permanent changes in job duties or permanent assignments. Thus work teams are more likely to survive than QCs. Similarly full-time union participation facilitators in the US constitute a permanent lobby for greater participation, as do OD departments in some companies.

Even these conditions may not be enough. Over time, despite any law, participative bodies may meet less often, have spottier attendance, and deal with increasingly trivial matters. Full-time facilitators may have little influence and convert their jobs to sinecures. Even teams may slip into routine and make no new decisions.

Direct participation raises expectations for steadily increased participation, yet once team members have successfully coped with the problems of redesigning their jobs and found solutions to production problems and work-quality difficulties, a period of let-down ('burnout' or 'plateauing') is almost inevitable. Workers' decision-making skills have increased but the unresolved problems management lets them handle have decreased. Initially high expectations may be dashed and workers may develop an 'immunity' to further participation. Preventing this is not easy.

Hypothetically, a program's long-term survival may be related to (1) its demonstrating relatively rapid payoff in terms of important goals, such as costs, productivity, or quality, (2) the organization's overall goals and strategy (is its comparative advantage in low cost, high velocity throughput or in quality, variety, and flexibility?), and (3) the widespread acceptance and legitimacy of the participative process.

Beyond this participation is a brittle system. Autocracy comes more naturally. Participation is likely to persist only as long as the participants perceive that it will payoff in ways significant to them.

One reason why participative schemes are often short-lived is that they are introduced into alien systems, and the systems' defense mechanisms mobilize to kill them (example: Gaines Dog Food, Walton (1980)). To some extent participation is itself a system. As mentioned earlier it is more likely to survive when other elements are favorable: if it is supported by unions and top management, if status and pay systems are equalized, and so forth. Indeed some seem to argue that for participation to survive the entire organization needs to be changed.

Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kochan, and Verma distinguish between two forms of participation, those which are 'self-contained' and those which are integrated with 'larger changes in organizational structure, procedures, and subsystems' (1991). Self-contained programs are usually easier to introduce and may lead to dramatic short-term gains. Further they may pave the way for more extensive, integrated programs. But unless more extensive changes occur, self-contained programs are prone to failure.

I suspect this overstates the problem, if only slightly. Participation need not be all or none. Participation may be part of a loosely coupled linked system. Under some conditions, limited forms of participation may survive in autocratic environments. Since total participation is unlikely to be achieved in one swoop, future research might examine how limited forms of participation can he helped to survive in nonparticipative organizations.

Still, I generally agree with the authors. Participation is more likely to be effective if the overall environment is favorable.

Conclusion

To repeat my introduction, the question of whether participation 'works' leads us nowhere. Participation is not a cure-all. But under *appropriate conditions* various forms of formal and informal participation *can* contribute to better decisions, greater motivation and satisfaction, and more efficient, effective organizations. Further research should focus on these 'conditions' and how to change or adjust to them.

I have discussed three sets of problems which deserve further research. There are many others.

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