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Can You Trust Your People To Be Self-Directed?

I was once able to manage a division for a period of several years in doing some developmental work in the area of self-direction. We uncovered many obstacles and problems in the progress that was made but there remained a commitment to this next step in the evolution of our management practices. Why this commitment remained is the reason for this article.

There were two resources to fall back on as reinforcing sanity checks that were used to help us continue in the direction we were headed and somehow work through the problems.

The first was an opinion formed over many years in manufacturing that there was substance to the whole topic of self directed teams that was recently emerging. This was reinforced by a very timely argument in a book on a related subject entitled "The Trust Factor" by John O. Whitney. It is not the purpose of this article to be a review, however I highly recommend this book to anyone seriously working in developing a self directed work force.

The second resource was a series of events that I was able to experience some years ago. It opened my own eyes to the influence that trust can have on strategic policy and how much this trust factor can influence the implementation of self-direction. It also helped zero in on one of the major resistance's to the changes we were making.

We expected quite naturally there would be resistance to such a change of style but it wasn't until we were well along in our efforts that the nature of the reason for much of this resistance began to emerge. It was difficult to pin down because not many were able to simply trust a structure that looked so loose in an environment that historically taught us that everyone had to be closely watched if the business was going to run according to plan.

Just to indicate how this can come into play, here are a few questions that have at least some part of their answers in the area of trust.

- How many supervisors do you have because you can't trust people to perform without supervision?
- How much of your accounting effort is spent auditing people because you can't trust human nature?
- Do you still have time clocks? Why?
- Are you burdened by cumbersome policies and procedures that try to cover too much because you have a few people that can't be trusted to do the right thing?
- How many people do you have inspecting and checking quality because you don't trust people to do the job right the first time?

THE MYRDDIN GROUP

- Do you have leaders who are comfortable with seventy direct reports or do you have managers who are taxed at eight or so?
- In your own opinion, how much of the above is based on demonstrated need and how much can be attributed to a “self fulfilling prophecy”?

The value of trust is the last hurdle to be crossed to get to a profoundly lean and effective organization. The day of the leaders of tens, hundreds, etc., has passed with the arrival of present day communications technology coupled with a much higher educated workforce. The trust issue is one of the remnants of a way of doing things that was established before this communication technology was available and has become so ingrained and behavioral in nature that it will be a formidable obstacle to overcome.

Not only is there the cost of extra people that a low level of trust requires you to carry, there is the spirit numbing effect on the organization that comes with an excessive amount of supervision and watching. There is a strong argument that the best form of control is self-control because it is always there even when there are no controlling agents present. Control by others can rob a group of its spirit and initiative to go out and solve problems on its own.

A personal experience several years ago crystallized this outlook on self-control and trust in my own mind. I had the opportunity if you could call it that to work in a large plant in a major Midwestern city where the labor force had gone out on strike. Those of us in the company who had staff positions joined the local plant managers and supervisors in running the plant for an entire summer.

We had enough people to run at about two thirds of historical operating capacity. The balance of the work was farmed out to sister plants so the customers were still well served. We were able to maintain quality levels as well as on time delivery performance and several shift production records were set on different cost centers once we mastered the jobs.

What was striking though was that in order to run the machinery, we had to do without foremen, superintendents, shift supervisors, the production manager, and even the general manager. They were all down in the shop running machines, as was the sales manager and the controller. Other than a production planner coordinating the flow of work through the shop, there wasn't a soul in any of the traditional positions of control. In spite of this, the shop ran, and it ran well.

Now, the point could be made that there were proven competent professionals running the plant and not the typical labor force, so the lack of these positions could be discounted. I'm not so sure that was the whole story though for several reasons.

THE MYRDDIN GROUP

- First, if any of the competent professionals had joined the plant before the strike, they would have been subjected to the same control structure that went away with the strike, no questions asked.
- Secondly, most had come up from positions similar to those being replaced. Who's to say the people replaced were not competent already.
- The third reason is that necessity is the mother of invention. It was never necessary to trust everyone to such an extent so the control hierarchy was always in place.
- Lastly, the idea of running a normal operating plant in this fashion was so far fetched at the time that it would never have been approved by the top management of that company.

So while it may not have been the only reason for this success, the element of trust did have an important role to play.

During this time period this plant was continuously showing a loss in the course of its normal operations with no real opportunity to make up the difference in direct labor or material costs. The central issue of the strike at that time was to keep the labor cost situation from deteriorating any further and with Kraft paper being the main raw material and a commodity product, there was no chance for any price differentiation there either. A highly competitive market ruled out any price increases, so the only real opportunity to run profitably was in reducing overhead. The elimination of the cost of much of the control hierarchy could have been a serious step in that direction. This was such an absurd thought, it was disregarded and the plant continued on after the strike showing losses for a few more years until the market strengthened and allowed marginal performers to run in the black once more.

This whole course of events also pointed out how blind we can be to opportunities to profoundly change the way we do things. Although it was joked about at the time, no-one really caught the full strategic impact of the potential of what we were involved in. It was just too great a step at the time to consider seriously. Now many organizations are in the process of exploring how to do something along these lines as a permanent way of doing business. In addition to expanding the opportunity for everyone to work under more self direction which is the primary reason for this effort, there is also much to be gained from shedding the overhead costs of what may be an unnecessary control structure.