The Messiah Syndrome—The Forgotten Factor in Participation

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I am indebted to some friends from Unilever for the term "messiah syndrome." They had noted what I had long observed, that the conventional image of the participative manager was not adequate to explain the actual facts of success and failure in participation in industrial and commercial enterprises. They identified what they called "the messiah syndrome," and while this term is in some respects misleading, it provides a good starting point for this article.

One of the most common comments heard by those who seek to encourage participation is: "You should really be saying this to my boss. I agree with all you say, but without the support of our top man we can do nothing."

Likewise I have heard some dozens of Chief Executives say, often from the public platform, that "Unless the top man in the company believes in and practises participation there is relatively little that anyone lower down can do about it". There are occasional exceptions—the special cases—but generally I would fully endorse these views, based on contact and observation during eight years of work with the Industrial Participation Association.

Confirmation of another kind comes from one of the most comprehensive research studies of "Worker Participation in Management" ever to have been undertaken. In the middle 1960s the International Institute for Labour Studies, an offspring of the ILO, sponsored and supervised a multi-country comparative research project, lasting several years. Researchers looked at worker participation in management in ten countries—France, Federal Republic of Germany, India, Israel, Japan, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Yugoslavia. Although none of these studies is strictly parallel, due to variations in the countries concerned, availability of resources in the different countries, and other factors, they are sufficiently comparable to form a "family of studies", undertaken within a common overall framework.

Management attitudes

One conclusion stands out above all others. The only factor common to every study of successful participation in all ten countries was management attitudes. This was as true in socialist Poland and Yugoslavia as in free enterprise USA, and held good for all the other countries too. None of the other factors investigated was of the same order of importance or so universally applicable.

The evidence seems clear that management attitudes hold the primary key for success. And by this I mean the belief that participation is the right way for enterprises to be run and a willingness to spend time, energy and money in making it successful.

And yet... while I am convinced of the truth of this finding, I do not think it is the whole truth. The conventional image of the participative manager or chief executive is of someone who consults as widely as possible before decisions are taken, and indeed who rarely decides anything entirely on his own. A nice guy, he spends a lot of time talking with people, both individually and in meetings, and takes time and trouble to ensure that the workforce are kept informed. He delegates, and his style is basically that of consensus. Certainly these characteristics are often found in participators. But in my experience the overall picture is far too bland. Some of the most creative participators do not fit the model.
"Messiahs"

The founders and initiators of participation schemes in companies are a widely diverse group of people. More often than not they exhibit entrepreneurial as distinct from straight managerial qualities. Flair, intuition, inventiveness and unpredictability are as often found as the more conventional characteristics.

They are "characters", and have charisma. On the whole they have a genuine concern for the welfare and well being of employees, and spend a lot of time talking to people about the company and its plans. But as often as not they are direct, decisive, know what they want and how to get it, set high standards, expect people to work hard, and are quite capable of giving those who do not meet their high standards a very uncomfortable time. These people are tough and know how to run a successful business. They delegate responsibility and value effort and success. At the same time they are more concerned to solve problems and rectify mistakes and train subordinates, than to blame them for errors.

The average worker responds well to this colourful type of leadership. They feel in their gut that they are part of something that is different, and better than the average. Technically speaking there may be less participation than conventional wisdom dictates, but at the gut level there is more because the atmosphere feels participative, people feel involved, and things get done. Participation is full of paradoxes, and one is that the climate of attitudes in a company, plant or office is usually more important than the particular behaviour of individual managers, however senior.

I remember attending a meeting some years ago at which the chairman and founder of a nationally famous participation company was outlining his views on participation, and explaining the fundamental principles on which the enterprise had been built. In the discussion that followed his personnel officer, a woman, rose to speak. She said in effect, and it was too long ago for me to remember her exact words: "Don't believe everything you hear Mr —— say about our company. Many of us disagree with many of his ideas, and he is far from perfect in the way he practises them! But we do what he wants because we love him".

I have never forgotten what she said. She was not just talking from the perspective of a woman. She was pointing out what so many of us forget — that participation is about how people feel, not just about systems of communication, consultation, and joint decision making.

Integrity of leadership style

The idiosyncratic personality of many pioneers of participation is one of the key factors that I have noted. This is as true of leaders on the trade union as well as the management side, perhaps even more so. Individual styles of leadership will always differ, and this is as true of participation styles as any other way of running a business. A leader has to feel "comfortable" about the way he does things. Putting on an act, wearing a style that does not fit, never works. It has a phoney quality which people will invariably notice. Integrity, which is perhaps the most important quality of any participative leader, means that people act in character and are true to themselves. It is the case that most of us are sufficiently diverse in our nature to behave in a number of different ways, but as soon as we go outside our range, we are in trouble.

So I return to the paradox that many pioneers of participation are a combination of democrat and autocrat. They "get away with this" because of their charisma. Their flair and ability to get things done can be killed by the constraints of a conventional model. Indeed I have met a number of chief executives, quite determined to go down the participation road, who have successfully imposed their will and style on those around them. Either you adjust to the top man's requirements, or you go, and in the last analysis who is to say this is wrong, even though it runs counter to much of what is preached and written about participation.

There are limits to the successful practice of such attitudes and policies, and company or unit size is the primary limiting factor in my experience. The "autocratic pioneer of participation" is much more likely to be effective in the smaller to medium sized concern. Provided he can maintain a personal link with most aspects of the enterprise and most members of the workforce his idiosyncratic abilities work to advantage. And because such leaders have often built the organisation from scratch or from small beginnings, and because they are often endowed with above average energy, they can maintain this link beyond the size where you would expect it to break down. They have an instinctive/intuitive feel of how things are going. But as soon as this ceases to be possible, because the organisation gets too big, or the management
problems become too complex, the qualities that once made for success can become counter productive. At such a point improvisation has to be replaced by orderly systems, and procedures; flair needs to be combined with management disciplines; and individual decision making become subject to group consideration and coordination.

The second generation

In his book *The Developing Organisation* Professor B. C. J. Lievegoed analyses three stages of organisational growth. He calls the first the Pioneer stage, characterised by individual and often autocratic leadership, direct communication, a personal oriented style, problem solving by improvisation, and a sense that the company is a family.

Succession is perhaps the central problem that faces the pioneer enterprise. The true pioneer stands “head and shoulders” above even his closest colleagues. This makes it especially difficult for the innovator to let control pass into other hands while he is still around. Those who might have the capacity to follow on the founder, and develop further what he has built, are seldom prepared to stay until he retires, or dies, or really hands over. They move on to conquer new fields.

This is especially true of participation pioneers. I have noted that very few participation enterprises manage to maintain a participation atmosphere and style into the second generation. When the founder or key innovator departs the scene through death or retirement, or when they run out of steam as some of them do, the participative atmosphere and style can all to quickly disappear. I am forced to the conclusion that in the great majority of companies, up till now at least, participation is highly person specific. It not only depends on general management attitudes, but on the personal qualities and characteristics of a small number of key people.

There are ways in which the transition into the second generation can be accomplished. Lievegoed emphasises that one way, especially in an expanding company is to grow by splitting into a number of semi-autonomous smallish units, each headed by an individual whose personal style and ideas are broadly compatible with those of the founder. Another is to recognise early on that the second and third generation of participation depends on the creation of a company culture in which creative enterprise and genuine participation can flourish side by side. This cannot be accomplished overnight. Indeed it can take up to a generation to establish such a culture, and the essential condition is for the pioneer to modify his style, and progressively to delegate responsibility. He will have to start the process 20 years before his retirement, when he is at the height of his powers. Very few are either able to do this or to recognise the need in time. Moreover even if the need is recognised it can be difficult to identify those key people on whom the successful maintenance and development of second generation participation will depend. Again outside pressures, commercial, social, technical will often divert the founder from these tasks until it is too late. Likewise technological considerations may both force expansion, and prevent the company splitting into units of manageable size.

Problems of transition

If the founder departs the scene before the transition process has been accomplished those who remain will be forced into what Lievegoed calls the second stage of organisational growth—the Phase of Differentiation. Here responsibilities are divided on formalised and functional lines, with some sort of committee system to ensure coordination. Standardisation and specialisation of tasks, procedures and responsibilities etc become the norm. The consequence is that without the energy and charisma of the founder, and his ability to keep people in touch, the feeling of involvement quickly fades. The grass roots feel increasingly out of touch. The system takes over, the overall company style tends to become bureaucratic, formal, rigid and slow to respond to pressures and human needs. The most serious problem will be a decrease in motivation and productivity.

Eventually some action is forced on the company to try and improve what everyone recognises as a deteriorating situation.

At this point an attempt is made to take the company into what Lievegoed has called the Phase of Integration. In many companies this is solely a management exercise. But in some the needs and feelings of the workforce are also recognised, and an effort is made to develop or improve systems of communication and involvement. In some the workforce is itself brought into the process of company review and reconstruction, so that what emerges can be a jointly

decided and agreed solution. The aim is to overcome problems of fragmentation and return the company to a state in which it can function once again as a whole, and where people will be free to act intelligently in terms of overall company needs.

Unless the company is lucky in its management, or more rarely in the presence of a particularly gifted workers representative, there can be many difficulties and frustrations at this stage. It is not easy to replace the human touch of the founder once it has been lost. All too often the management pays too much attention to systems, procedures and structures for consultation, and not enough to attitudes, especially their own attitudes. Many say they want to establish participation, and then fail to participate with the workforce in designing the participation system—they propose, and sometimes impose their own solution.

So the new plan gets off on the wrong foot. Hopes and expectations are raised, only to be disappointed. In time everyone comes to regard the exercise as a waste of time and effort.

Sadly this experience of disillusionment is all too common. If the attempt has been labelled "participative", participation gets a bad name. The workforce feel they have been conned and management, who will often have been half hearted at the beginning, come to regard participation as another useless panacea. The attempt is either abandoned, or continued for a while without any real sense of conviction; those concerned finding it easier to go through the motions rather than admit defeat.

Some lessons

The central theme of this short article is that too little attention has been paid to the personal qualities of those who develop effective participation in companies, and that in many cases the conventional picture of the participator is inadequate to account for the facts of success and failure. I conclude by summarising what I believe to be some of the key lessons which all of us need to bear in mind.

1. For most people participation is about feelings and gut reactions, and especially about fairness, being treated as a responsible adult, being kept in the picture, and about the feeling of being equal as a person.

2. Committees, councils, and formal rules are important, but secondary.

3. Messiahs succeed because they understand the gut and because they help to fulfil a universal human need—the need to be around people who are creative and "larger than life."

4. Messiahs are most effective in smaller organisations and in the earlier and pioneer stages of development. They are significantly less successful in larger concerns where the factor of personal contact diminishes.

5. Few companies can maintain participation from one generation to the next. To do so they must establish a climate of participation—a company culture. This can take a generation to build and therefore must be planned and developed, in good time, and over the long term.

6. The succession problem is a key issue, especially in the smaller and medium sized concern. The most difficult question is how to find and keep innovative pioneers while the founder is still active. One way is to expand by splitting. If this is not practicable the founder must adjust his way of running the business long before he retires.

7. There are growing numbers of people today who want the opportunity to be members of participative companies, and to practice a participative philosophy and management style. Only the company that has developed a participative culture will be likely to find and keep these people. They hold the key to the future.

Finally it is salutary to recall that organisations, like people, have their life cycle. Companies go through the life cycle of birth, growth and adolescence, maturity and middle age, decline and death. Many go through crises and are rejuvenated. Others fail to meet the challenge of renewal, they crystallise and fade away. At present few industrial or commercial organisations manage to retain the vitality, openness of mind and innovative capacity of their early years into the middle of their life cycle. The rate of technological change often accelerates the death process. Participative management is no protection against this universal law, unless it is also imaginative, forward looking and innovative.