

Real Employee Empowerment-Democracy is not Laissez-faire

Don de Guerre

Notes from a presentation:

These are notes from the Innovation Salon presentation by Dr. Don de Guerre on October 30, 2003.

Don noted that much of the argument of this presentation reflects the one made by Christopher Lasch in *THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY*. This book portrays the situation in the United States quite well, and leads to these conclusions:

- the history of a system is important
- either lessons are learned, or mistakes are repeated

Another good source is Merrelyn Emery's *SEARCHING: Theory and Practice of Cultural Change*

- During WWII the Allies organized a multi-disciplinary project to understand the 3rd Reich
- Fast feedback was essential to their form of social control
- They were trying to develop practical applications from this project
 - Firing guns on ships
 - Synchronous training, support, coordination
- the lessons learned from this project carried forward into civilian life
 - Post-war, people wondered if self-managing groups could be replicated in organizational life
- This leads to the studies of Kurt Lewin and the Tavistock Institute

Can organizations engage employees?

- Trist & Emery on Open Systems
- Complicated relationships need to be explained
 - relationships within the organization(internal)
 - relationships with the environment (external)
 - account for effects on organism
 - account for effects on the environment

- All four relationships are important in any plan for change

“You can’t change a company without changing a country.”

What does empowering lead to?

Emery encourages us to keep in mind the contextual

- Turbulent environment
 - Post-war developments = alternatives, changeability, choices
- Uncertainty
 - Look for proactive alternatives
 - Ideals trump values
 - Ideals are changing
- There are four ascendant ideals required for active adaptive change:
 - Humanity
 - Community
 - Nurturance
 - Beauty
- There are four conditions of maladaptive change:
 - Doomsday (powerlessness of people to influence outcomes)
 - Segmentation (in-group/out-group demarcations)
 - Dissociation (withdrawal, apathy, indifference ... excessive autonomy)
 - Superficiality (over-simplification of complexity)

All mal-adaptations and their resultant scenarios are attempts to reduce relevant uncertainty and simplify choices. They are maladaptive because they actually lessen the chance of reducing uncertainty. The most adaptive scenario in high uncertainty is to pursue human ideals.

The most productive approach is one that is inquiry-based, focused not on programs but on processes, with a long-term big picture perspective

No compulsion is acceptable – engagement must be freely done; and involvement is required from the very beginning

What is needed is a new paradigm of organizing – NOT one of organizations; this will result in (i) an ongoing conversation over time; (ii) continual negotiation; and (iii) a new mind-set

Representative democracy is in trouble, whereas participatory democracy is in the ascendancy

Six Criteria for Productive Human Activity

- Elbow room (autonomy in decision-making)
- Continual learning on the job (setting goals, getting feedback)
- Variety
- Mutual support and respect
- Meaningfulness (socially useful, whole task)
- Desirable future

Listener's comment: There is an irony in previous attempts; the choices were either:

- Centralized waste (communism)
- decentralized waste (capitalism)

This led to studies by Kurt Lewin on democracy vs. totalitarianism. Lewin's ideas were further developed by Fred Emery in *TOWARD REAL DEMOCRACY*

Democratic "solutions"

- 2-year terms in office
- random selection

Listener's comment: Reform always needs a "migration path" to get from here to there.

Yes, and that migration path begins with the dialogical process and is like puzzle learning as opposed to problem solving

- One step at a time
- The outcome is uncertain
- Consensus is necessary

About the Author:

Notes prepared by *William Sheridan*, Ottawa

Resources to follow-up with:

F. Emery, *Toward Real Democracy*, The Ontario Quality of Working Life Centre, Ministry of Labour., Toronto, 1989

M. Emery, ed., *Participative Design For Participative Democracy*, AUC/CCE, Canberra, 1993

R.E. Purser & S. Cabana, *The Self-Managing Organization*, Free Press, New York, 1998