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When Productivity Needs a Boost...

• Managers Are Crucial Element

By DARWIN GILLETT

Many of the current productivity improvement campaigns focus on the worker. Popular programs aim to change worker behavior and performance.

Some of these, such as Quality Circles and Quality of Work Life get employees more involved in solving productivity problems. There are also incentive programs to motivate employees and productivity measures to track employee productivity.

In focusing on the worker, these approaches overlook a key ingredient in successful productivity improvement: the manager. Even the Japanese, from whom we are learning about the power of employee involvement, stress the crucial role of management. Hajime Karatsu, managing director of the Matsushita Company, observed in The World of Work Report:

"Japan's success in producing quality products is not so much due to Japanese workers or to Japanese cultural differences as it is to good management... The newest equipment and a competent staff do not function well if management is poor." And, Hideo Sugiura, executive vice president of Honda was quoted in the Los Angeles Times as suggesting:

"In any country, the quality of products and productivity of workers depend on management. When Detroit changes its management system, we'll see more powerful American competitors."

David Kearns, president of Xerox Corporation observed in the American Management Association's Management Review Journal: "The fault of our business system lies more with managers who lack vision than with federal regulators." And, the Wall Street Journal reported that 80 percent of the top managers surveyed at 221 companies blamed poor productivity on management.

What then can managers do to raise productivity—to improve quality and service, to hold costs down and in general get better performance from their people? The answer lies not so much in selecting and installing productivity programs aimed at changing the worker, but in becoming more effective as managers in drawing out the potential of their people. This takes power—a special kind of power.

When we speak of power, it is usually negatively. The word conjures up images of coercion, greed and corruption. As a society, we fear and try to prevent the concentration of power in one person (or one organization).

"Power to the people"—as it has played out in the business world—has brought more employee autonomy and involvement in decision making.

The popularity of Quality Circles illustrates this trend. And, over the years, managers have become less autocratic and increasingly humanistic. These trends are good. But, in the process of limiting managers power, we may be failing to see and encourage positive aspects of power. Power does have an important place in managing for productivity improvement—albeit a different sort of power than we perhaps normally think of. It is a power that inspires and enables, rather than coerces.

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Many managers do not use this power. They find ways to avoid it, either by deferring to staff experts such as computer specialists, engineers, consultants, etc., or in the name of participative management, relinquish the direction-setting power to their employees who may become confused and ineffective. Still others become enforcers of corporate procedures and practitioners of lifeless management techniques. They manage the status quo efficiently but are unable to break new ground.

To achieve real progress requires managers to get in touch with their personal power. James MacGregor Burns, author of the book *Leadership* describes leadership as "engaging and mobilizing the human needs and aspirations of followers."

It involves looking at human beings, not just as they are, but as bundles of possibilities. It is a process of recognizing and bringing out the potential of human beings. The exercise of this power by individual managers can improve productivity dramatically—and build employee skills and morale in the process.

Many managers, however, find it difficult to tap into and use this power because they are overcome with negative energies such as frustration, anger and fear which build up within them and block their use of positive power. Trapped in the negative, they then use negative power by threatening, reprimanding and trying to motivate by inducing fear and guilt. This method rarely achieves long-term gains.

To use positive power, managers first need to recognize the negative energies and then break free of them. Some managers do this through vigorous exercise, others through disciplined mental work such as meditation. Whatever the method they use, these managers take the vital step of cleaning out negative energies and transforming them into positive power needed to lead people.

Managers do not need to wait for their companies to "reform" or for others to change. They can take the first step and tap into their own inner power. They can lead their people by using the power of:

Vision—To create and communicate a picture of what the organization or company must achieve, which can inspire and unite people in a common purpose. Progress starts with a vision.

Courage—To decide what will wait and what will be accomplished first and to call people to achieve the needed result. As in a crisis, people are then motivated to achieve the "must" goal.

Faith—To know that people will indeed achieve the needed result, and to share this conviction with them. This faith empowers people to stretch beyond their old limits to achieve more than they ever have before.

When managers use their own inner power to create vision, to provide focus, clarity and urgency on specific improvement goals, and to demonstrate faith in their people they will unleash immense enthusiasm and capability and will achieve significant gains in productivity. In the process, they will also enable their people to grow and realize their own potential, thus assuring continued productivity gains.

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