

A paradigm shift: use the perspective of a worker and the result will be...

Making things run well

Dick Danjin — United Automobile Workers

Today, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who'd not agree that satisfying or delighting the external customer is crucial to success. But business gurus just don't get at the core issues as viewed by the worker when they design satisfaction creating processes.

Most of us don't want to lug around a guru dictionary of the latest quality fads and acronyms or to pour through one to figure out how to start making sense out of work systems made up of various technologies, a myriad of material resources, and a variety of work groups and individuals doing dozens of different tasks. I sure don't need that kind of baggage on a daily basis, but I do need something handy, potent and portable to help me understand complex work systems.

It was 1979 when I first seriously started thinking about how to make things run well, I was then the QWL coordinator for my local union at Chevrolet Gear and Axle Plant in Hamtramack, Michigan. What I needed then, and still find useful, was the philosophical and practical equivalent of a doctor's bag.

The bag had to be portable and contain what would be needed to meet a wide variety of specific organizational needs; keeping in mind that doctors treat all human beings as human beings regardless of age, race and gender, shape or size, because they are all, in essence, human beings, not their unique characteristics.

When viewed from the perspective of the worker:

The essential purpose and function of management is to create and operationalize an organizational structure to control and disseminate the resources in the system;

in order to capacitate and enable workers to do tasks within a defined field of discretion, in a safe workplace;

and in a manner that does not require a worker to expend any physical or mental energy fighting the system to do their job.

From the doctor's perspective, all human maladies are diagnosed and treated in much the same way. So it is with organizations; regardless of size, age or products/services.

From the perspective of workers attempting to fulfill their organizational role by doing their

assigned task(s), the same organizational diseases (as noted by Dr. Deming¹) are possible and/or exist in all types of organizations, and are diagnosed and treated in much the same way. Even though most organizations proclaim their absolute uniqueness; all organizations are at the same time different and the same. Organizations, after all are structured to get things done.

That idea/theory/knowledge bag is expressed in the adjacent boxed paragraph. I want to share the bag with you, as it is now, with the hope that you will find it useful.

But before delving into each of the categories, you should understand that this *doctor's* bag is quite a bit different than the one with which I started out. It has alternatively grown, shrunk and been scuffed up from experiences with implementing: QWL processes in my own plant,

other auto plants; and jointness and quality improvement/employee involvement processes when the union loaned me out to the US Department of Labor, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, state agencies and cities.

Those experiences have shown to me that this one paragraph bag can be taken into any type of organization and opened up as the first step in making things run well. Asking the question, "What would you change about your job to make it easier for you to do?" is the way to open the bag for on-site use. The plan for unpacking my work systems *doctor's* bag here is to examine one phrase of the paragraph/bag at a time; beginning with "when viewed from the perspective of the worker."

When viewed from the perspective of the worker — First, mentally go into any workplace, a school, supermarket, factory, or hospital... any workplace and ask just one worker, "What would you change about your job to make it easier for you to do?" I doubt that the answer would be "nothing."

Next, mentally go to that organization's head office and ask the senior manager, "Are there any programs in place here to deal with effectiveness, quality and/or efficiency?" The answer in most cases will be "yes."

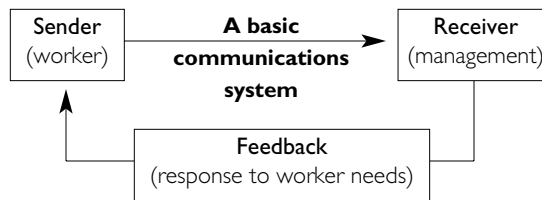
It's obvious that we have a dilemma here. Most workers can reel off a number of things that could/should be changed to make their tasks easier to do and yet most of these workers complete their tasks in workplaces that have efficiency and effectiveness programs in place.

Could it be that the one running the efficiency or effectiveness program has neglected to ask that one worker a simple question? A question that is key to running the system well. You bet. Why is this perspective overlooked? Could it be that the individual human has ceased to have any value to American organizations? Why is it that in organizations it is so difficult for the individual worker's needs to be heard and addressed.

Which will you have: a my way, two-way or three-way system? Since the early 1960s and the cresting of the human resources management wave, we have been told, "Don't be Tayloristic... be humanistic." One would think that by now we would be giving the appropriate attention and responses to the needs of (rather than the voice of) workers.

Have we not in recent years read journals, newspapers, magazines and been told by the business gurus about the magic and wonderment of *listening to workers*?

Could it be that simply listening to workers is only one third of the making things run well? If we wish to use not only those intrinsic abilities a worker brings to the job but also the accumulated experiential work knowledge which she/he brings along (and continues to acquire), we need a way to do that. That way is simply the basic communications process which involves a sender, receiver and feedback. What is different here, is that the process (charted below) must become an intrinsic part of work; not just another parallel program.



Before we think about shifting managerial responsibilities to workers, this simple process must be in place; and within an appropriate philosophical environment. If this isn't done, an organization cannot expect tasks to be done effectively or efficiently.

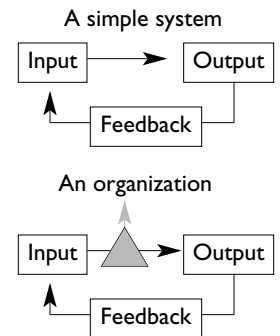
The essential purpose and function of management is to create and operationalize an organizational structure to control and disseminate the resources of the system —

Second, if we are going to discuss purpose and function, we must first think about the relationship between system and organization.

- A system, by definition, is a complex whole; a set of connected or interrelated things or parts.
- An organization is a functioning body or structure.

Systems are comprised of three elements: input, output and feedback². Within this context, organizations are the transformation structures of systems. An organization's purpose is transformation, that is the transformation of systemic inputs into outputs.

Management's role... It follows then (again from the worker's perspective), that the work of management is to create and operationalize that structure. The basic assumption being that management will do so with the goal of optimization.



While each of you may have your favorite guru or expert on the subject of creating and operationalizing organizational structures, the point being made here is this: *creating and operationalizing the organizational structure is a function and accountability of management*,³ regardless of your techniques.

Ask the question! However, in our imperfect real world, it is not only legitimate but just plain old common sense for managers to turn to the people who inhabit and perform tasks in the organization and ask, “Where did we shoot and miss?” “What would you change about your job to make it easier to do?”

To capture this knowledge, management can use either informal or formal processes. Some would call this *employee involvement*, others would go even further and call it *empowerment*.

How does management figure out how much and when control and dissemination of resources are needed? Easy. It is driven, absolutely, by the needs of workers to do tasks!

To capacitate and enable workers to do tasks within a defined field of discretion, in a safe workplace — Third, capacitate, the issue here is one of training. Capacitate, as I use it, and as Webster’s defines it is to make someone capable. And capable is defined as having intelligence and ability; being efficient and competent. The organizational challenge is to overcome, through training, any mismatch between what the job in its fullest sense requires and the skills, abilities and storehouse of experiential knowledge that workers bring to the job.

Unneeded problems or stress are introduced into the work system because, quite often personnel workers lack specific knowledge of the capacities needed to perform the required task(s). This, in turn, creates gross mismatches, which then trigger organizational training activities to capacitate workers to meet specific organizational needs. This, unclear and non-specific perspective leads to superfluous generic activities, and as one might expect, creates bloated training budgets.

Enable, as I use it, has to do with resources and power. It is management’s responsibility and accountability to provide the machinery, equipment, people, materials and methods that enable people to do their tasks. In addition, it is management’s legal (OSHA) obligation to provide a safe workplace.

In terms of power, there is no quarrel here with the fact that management has *power* in the organization. (In non-union organizations, power is explicit as ownership. In unionized workplaces, you can find it in the organization’s labor agreement within the management rights clause.)

The argument is that management must take accountability for the use of power — in many organizations this is not the case. Since power is that which is used to control and disseminate the resources in the system.

Management’s power should, with full accountability, be used toward these ends:

- To make sure that machinery, equipment and tools are appropriate, available and in good repair.
- To provide adequate numbers of people to complete the necessary tasks (within the concept of a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay).
- To supply capable materials of appropriate quality.
- To establish methods that are efficient.
- To maintain a safe physical work environment.

A defined field of discretion... Discretion is the capacity to exercise judgment. In organizations, making a decision requires the use or expenditure of legitimate organizational power. Conceptually, workers being allocated legitimate organizational power is what empowerment is all about.

The operational word here is power. And in organizations, power is finite and closely held. It is also much sought after and once obtained, coveted by those who have it. Here, it is important to note that there are two types of power: legitimate organizational power and that which is informally and paternalistically acquired and allocated. Those who have the power to hire, fire, organize work and allocate organizational resources are called managers.

This being the case, where is the power to come from to empower workers (enlarge their, currently, very narrow field of discretion)? Who will give up even one tenth of a cent of what could be described as their very workself?

Should an organization impose such a power redistribution (organizational restructuring) and the formal system of acquiring power (appraisals,

promotions and rewards), it would be the lesser dilemma faced by the organization than the agendas of the more powerful informal cultural and political systems.

Perhaps it would be easier to concentrate on establishing a simple structured communication system that regularly asks: "What would you change about your job to make it easier to do?" (More on this later.)

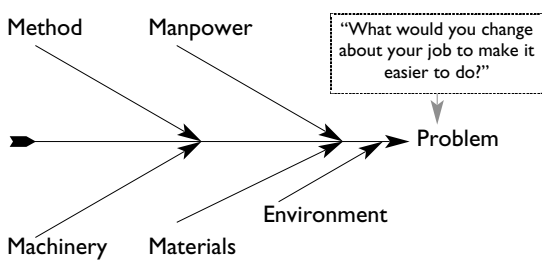
And in a manner that does not require a worker to expend any physical or mental energy fighting the system to do their job —

Fourth, have you ever heard or felt the following as an undercurrent or fallback position within your organization? "Regardless of the success or failure of the current improvement approaches (read fad) or organization's required operating procedures, *somehow* the people with jobs (as opposed to careers) will get the work done, thereby providing the sand in the box within which we play out our careers.

That *somehow* is how the organization gets by on a day-by-day basis regardless of interruptions, crises, programs of the month or whatever. This *somehow* is readily definable, documentable and measurable as the physical and mental energies expended by workers both in fighting the system to do their tasks and working with the system to do their tasks.

Documentation... You can document the inefficient, ineffective and demoralizing energies expended in fighting the system by asking, "What would you change about your job to make it easier to do?"

Measurement... The *somehow* can be measured by categorizing and quantifying their responses to "What would you change about your job to make it easier to do?" in a simple cause and effect diagram.



Anyone in the organization can be assigned to gather such data, by asking the question and

placing the answers in the appropriate cause and effect category.

The purpose of this process is twofold:

1. To tell management where they shot and missed in controlling and disseminating organizational resources.
2. To inform the CEO where the inefficiencies exist in his staff processes (in terms of capacitating and enabling the workers to do tasks).

Who's responsible for what? In a universe as ordered as ours, it is no coincidence that the cause and effect categories align with how most organization staffs are organized.

If we focus on those staff departments and individuals closest to workers doing value added tasks, we should come up with the following alignment between cause and effect categories and staff:

Method	Manufacturing/office manager
Manpower.....	Personnel director
Machinery	Maintenance/skilled trades foreman
Materials	Purchasing/materials mgmt.
Environment.....	Engineering (physical)

Is a new managing style required?

In a word, no. Using the perspective of the worker to approach making things work well does not require any new style of management or program.

Management's job — It only requires managerial accountability to capacitate and enable workers to do their tasks.

This accountability cannot be passed to workers whose:

- Prescribed task process is inefficient (method)
- Job includes the work of another (manpower)
- Machine or equipment needs repair (machinery)
- Materials are not statistically capable (materials)
- Environment is intemperate and/or unsafe (physical environment)

For the most part, workers have no legitimate institutional power over these things. Should it be a unionized workplace, the worker's usual recourse is to file a grievance over any managerial shortcomings.



Dick Danjin is presently an international representative of the UAW, General Motors Department. Since 1979, he has been involved with joint programs, organizational development and training programs, and observed change activities under many different banners. He began work for GM in 1963 as a production worker and subsequently worked as a skilled tradesman and became politically active in the UAW in 1971. Since 1985, when he was invited to join the staff of the UAW, he has represented and served the members of the UAW.

The worker's role... People trying to fulfill their role — do their task(s) — have little or no interest, let alone energy, to worry about management's need to: appease Wall Street, satisfy unidentified customers or their unknown needs through public relations schemes, nor attempts to mindframe workers with motivational quick fix programs or threats and intimidation. Workers are too busy working and trying to live their lives.

Workers hire on to take a job and to do work. Wilfred Brown⁴ defines work in the following manner: “*Employment work is the application of knowledge and the exercise of discretion within the limits prescribed by the immediate manager and by higher policies towards an objective set by the immediate manager; the whole thing being carried out within an employment contract.*”

Where in your employment contract are the modifications to this statement, and are those variances underwritten/supported by legitimate organizational power?

Working a job from the worker's perspective... The primary reason people take a job, rather than pursue a career, is survival and a predictable future. Additional, but less basic aspects of having a job are the value added points of:

- Known and predictable wages in exchange for doing tasks.
- It provides some intrinsic satisfaction.

Don't make me fight the system... People generally don't mind the labor. At worst, they tolerate it and at best, they find some satisfaction from it. What people do mind, both consciously and sub-consciously, is having to expend any energy fighting the system to do their job. Herein lies the root cause of much of the attendance and employee assistance problems that plague some organizations.

Final thoughts

The business of making things run well (from the perspective of the worker) is simple stuff! There is no new theory required, no *new wave* management style needed.

The solution to making things run well will become very clear when:

1. Management understands that organizations are meant to be structures that transform input into output and not career mills or structures for acquiring and exercising non-value added power.
2. Management understands their primary task is to control and disseminate resources to meet the needs of the workers.
3. Managers learn to regularly ask, “What would you change about your job to make it easier for you to do?”
4. Management is willing to be accountable to workers, as well as to owners and stockholders.

We can no longer compete in the world marketplace with organizations that say to workers, “Do the best you can with what you have.” Worse yet, is the moment when a worker is told, “It is good enough. Run it anyway.”

The measures for the effectiveness of “Do the best you can with what you have” and “It is good enough. Run it anyway” are foreign trade deficits, lost marketshare and unforgivable, unnecessary unemployment. If you will try making things run well from the perspective of the worker, I believe you will be amazed by the positive results. ♦

References and resources:

1. W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis*, MIT, 1986.
2. Albert Low, *Zen and Creative Management*, Playboy Paperbacks, 1976.
3. Elliot Jacques, *Requisite Organization*, Carson Hall and Co., 1989.
4. Wilfred Brown and Elliot Jacques, *Glacier Project Papers*, Heinema International Books, Ltd., 1965.