

QWL As A Weapon

Against Mismanagement

■ *Guillermo Grenier & Andy Banks*

The debate within the labor movement over the merits of quality of worklife (QWL) or "employee involvement" programs has concentrated primarily on two positions. One side sees QWL as a way to improve working conditions, morale and productivity by providing a more congenial workplace where everybody "works together." The other side claims that, at best, quality of worklife programs are sophisticated disguises for deskilling and speed-ups, and, at worst, are manipulative union-busting tools which U.S. management has borrowed from the Japanese.

Both sides of the debate emphasize the importance of "cooperation," one arguing against it, the other seeing it as an intrinsic good with positive spin-offs for both workers and their employers. Neither side has looked at QWL programs as a way of addressing the problem of mismanagement. This failure often means that unionists are faced with the choice of cooperating with incompetent management or running the risk of being labeled as conflictive and out of step with today's labor relations. We feel

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that because both sides believe the issue is whether to cooperate or not, both sides are trapped into responding to management initiated programs.

Frustrated with this predicament, we set out to explore the potential of QWL to address a dominant problem in the American economy, the problem of mismanagement. Can QWL programs be used by workers and their unions to correct the inefficiencies of mismanagement? Can the QWL process be used as one strategy to help rebuild and empower an ailing labor movement?

In the discussion that follows, we present the information which persuaded us to reach a rather optimistic conclusion about the potential of employee involvement programs. We conclude that we live in an age of deskilled management. Management has lost sight of the product and has concentrated on increasingly complicated methods of increasing profits without having to produce better products or services. We argue that what hope there is to correct this structural mismanagement lies in the hands and minds of workers and their unions. To the extent that those doing the work know more about it than others, it is essential that the knowledge of the many shape the decisions currently in the hands of the few. To that end, we propose a model of employee involvement which depends for its success on the strength of the union and of rank-and-file involvement in its operation.

We get to this point first by reviewing the development of management as a profession. We then outline three characteristic ways that employee involvement programs can work. The first two models show the most likely outcomes of QWL programs. They are characterized by managerial domination, lack of access to critical information governing high-level decision making, no way to change shopfloor routines in spite of worker requests for change, and a general separation of decision-making from decision implementation. The third scenario presents what we consider to be the minimum requirement for a truly empowering QWL program. Our aim is to help change the way unionists conceive their options regarding QWL. But equally important, we hope that our conclusions generate discussions on ways to prevent workers and their unions from being silent victims in the crimes of mismanagement.

The Origins of Mismanagement

The practice we commonly call management—the design, control, and evaluation of the work process—came into existence at the turn of the century with the methods and ideology of

Scientific Management.

Scientific Management, which received its origins from the writings of Fredrick Taylor, came at a unique time in American history. It was at the beginning of large-scale manufacturing, made possible by technological advances and the surplus of immigrant labor. It was a time of incredible wealth and incredible poverty, as the captains of industry expanded their control over the social, economic, and political structures of our country.

In this chaotic social environment, scientific management emerged as an all-encompassing social philosophy. It diffused the chaos of American social structure by designing an allegedly egalitarian method of production. It demanded a strict analysis of each production process and its eventual fragmentation into its simplest parts. Not only was simplicity necessary to turn potential labor of immigrants into labor power but simplicity reduced all workers, regardless of ideology or national origin, to equal partners in the eyes of the production process. Indeed, the ideology of Taylorism professed to diffuse differences not only between workers but between workers and managers. It was a neutral technique, said Taylor, that would finally resolve labor disputes by taking the eyes of labor and management off the distribution of the pie and focus them on making the pie bigger.

Scientific Management was considered a very liberal idea at the time. It professed that wealth did not necessarily make one a manager, but training in scientific methods of management did. The tenets of Taylorism encouraged the development of management as a discipline separate from engineering. It also encouraged the development of systematic ways of analyzing workers as "problems" that management must solve.

Scientific Management was a response to the power of the collective worker, the group which Taylor saw as the source of inefficiency and lost production. In his eyes, workers banded together to limit production because it was in their interest to do so. He called this "soldiering" and he designed the scientific study of work to combat it. Scientific Management was designed to take all the knowledge of production away from the workers and place it in the hands of management. In this way, management could learn what needed to be done to control the process of work.

As Taylorism succeeded in fragmenting, simplifying and routinizing work, increasingly higher levels of management were necessary to put the pieces together as part of the sequence of production. Simplification encouraged development of hierarchy. While workers were ordered to do increasingly narrower tasks, supervisors and middle management overspecialized. Each layer

of management knew a limited portion of the production process. Only the top levels could put it together. As division between worker and top management increased, complex bureaucracy needed to exert control. What has been created in the process is a thick layer of middle management whose main skills lie in the control of the attitudes and behavior of workers.

The professional manager, the person who made the really important decisions effecting everybody in the firm, became increasingly removed from the production process. The concerns of these generic managers became profit and their own personal advancement, not the production of specific goods or services.

By mid-century the economic diversification of the major companies allowed the concern for the profitability of the entire corporation to override the importance of any one product. The skills necessary were not industry-specific but concerned with control of social resources, workers, and supervisors. By the time William H. Whyte wrote his classic work *The Organization Man* in 1956, the deskilling of management was well on its way. The financial system made possible the achieving of great profit without concern for production. The national slide into paper entrepreneurialism had begun.

The result of this evolution of management is that the knowledge that has been removed from the worker and offered to managers, like pearls before swine, has been ignored and lost in the shuffle. That knowledge was supposed to allow managers to evaluate and control production, but today's managers are most proficient in evaluating profits. Managers have been deskilled. A system which allows car makers to make as much profit financing cars as making them is doomed to failure. These managers have given us corporate mergers and plant shutdowns while they jump from one company to another just a step ahead of the grim reaper. They've given themselves golden parachutes while their worker victims receive concessions, layoffs and unemployment lines.

This increasing gulf between workers and top management is the source of mismanagement and the reason why now, more than ever, the knowledge of workers is essential to the enterprise. Yet middle management is unable to make use of this knowledge because its power is over subordinates; it is a power intended to control, not to encourage participation. An avalanche of managerial techniques have been developed specifically to help middle management control workers without changing the power relations of a firm. Quality of worklife and employee involvement programs are some of the most sophisticated of these control techniques.

Because workers suffer the consequences of this systematic mismanagement, they have little choice but to take back from management the knowledge which was once theirs. Like all labor struggles, this will be a fight over control. Management is not going to give up control on its own, even as the problems of mismanagement worsen. It is up to organized workers to wrest it away while there is still a chance.

A truly empowering QWL program might offer such an opportunity just as long as we recognize that no group with power is going to give it up easily. To demonstrate this premise, we present below what we see as three main directions of QWL activity. The first two are management initiated and controlled, and function exclusively within the workers' domain. The third model is designed to be initiated by the union and extends worker power from the shopfloor into the upper reaches of management.

Management-Controlled QWL Programs

Most QWL programs are developed in non-unionized workplaces. In such cases, managerial control is absolute. Management can design, implement, adjust, and do anything it wants to the program. In most cases, this means that the program will be designed to give workers a feeling of involvement and a psychological satisfaction in participation, but management will take care to restrict any "involvement" to the arena of social interaction. Workers will get together, at some managerially appropriate time, to let off steam about the problems of work. In the process, some employees will demand that something be done about certain inefficiencies or problems and these demands might even result in decisions to correct problems. But the very structure of the program is designed to clearly separate the process of decision-making from that of implementation.

The primary task of this kind of program is to effectively blur, in workers' minds, any differences that might exist between the employees and the managers.

First, the plant culture is designed to be overtly non-conflictive. That is, managers and workers are described as being in the same boat, rowing against the same currents, working for the ultimate good of the company, the city, the state, the country, the system. Conflict between workers and management might have served a purpose when the pie was growing and the battle was over the size of the slice, but now the battle is to save the pie or make it bigger and for this we must all unite. To develop this non-conflictive work culture, management installs mechanisms to

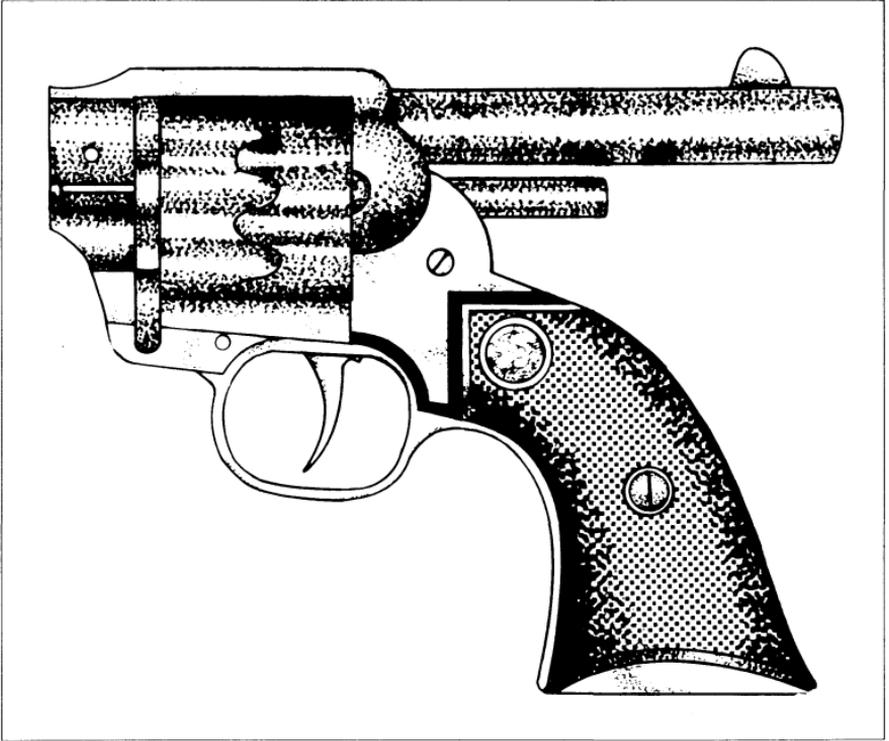
instill the values of the corporation in the employees.

Many management controlled programs are designed to begin exerting an influence on the workforce even before an applicant is hired. This is done by inserting employee "involvement" in the hiring of new workers. After filling out an application, the potential hire is called in for an interview with a personnel administrator. If the personnel administrator is satisfied with the qualifications and attitude of the applicant, a second interview is scheduled with the plant manager or the immediate supervisor. If the applicant survives this review, a third interview is scheduled, this time with members of the work group into which the applicant might be hired. The applicant is given the impression that the workers can torpedo his or her employment opportunity. In fact, the work team representatives are under the same impression. But whether workers accept or refuse an applicant is irrelevant to management, since two levels of managers have already approved of the individual. A candidate without the right qualifications or with attitudes in conflict with the "new design" plant culture would not have made it to the peer interview stage. Managerial power is preserved while giving the appearance of allowing employees to make decisions.

Once a worker is hired into this employee involvement culture, management maintains its power by splitting the workforce into Quality Circle style discussion groups, which meet weekly under the guidance of a supervisor. Since the possibility of shared control of the agenda or discussion is never really an issue, supervisors can encourage or discourage whatever discourse they desire. Issues that management wants to discuss are encouraged and those that it wants to avoid are discouraged. In this process, managers help to develop the leadership they desire among the workforce by rewarding those that support management's agenda with personal attention and/or material rewards. This king-making probably will have the managerially desired effect of fragmenting the workforce even more and pitting worker against worker.

If management is really serious about pitting worker against worker, it will design a process through which workers will appear to evaluate each other's work and then have these evaluations play a significant role in receiving raises and other types of rewards. To increase the impression of team work and togetherness, management might read these evaluations at work group meetings.

It is not difficult to imagine how incredibly nasty all this can get. Insert, for example, a few employees who want to organize a union, who have some doubts about management's benevolence, or who notice that while the boat might be the same, some people



COLT DOESN'T SHOOT STRAIGHT!

A popular UAW rank-and-file graphic characterizes management at Colt Industries.

have life vests while others hold the anchors. Then all the smoke clears, and we see that management has in place a formidable control structure that it can use to control the attitudes and behavior of its employees. We see that the applicant screening mechanisms now include a hefty dose of information about unions and how they don't fit into this "new design" environment. We see how work group meetings are used to identify and persecute pro-union people while supervisors keep a daily scale of the union sympathies of "their people." We see how discussions at group meetings concentrate more and more on the evils of unionism and on the personal shortcomings of any "loser" who is stupid enough to support unions. We see how increasingly the group meetings become captive audience meetings, keeping workers from their work, developing an acceptance of mismanagement as part of an anti-union strategy, and even disbanding productive work groups because they are dominantly pro-union in their attitudes.

The purpose of managerially controlled involvement programs

is to get the workers involved in controlling each other as much as possible, to keep the really important decisions out of their reach and away from their attention and to satisfy the symptoms of powerlessness while doing nothing about its sources. Without a union in the picture, this is not too difficult. Yet, many of the same mechanisms which serve to make managerially controlled employee involvement programs a farce are at work in cooperative management-union employee involvement programs.

Management-Controlled QWL With Union Cooperation

Since the first union-management agreement was signed by the UAW and GM in 1973, thousands of unionists find themselves working together with management in some type of worker involvement program.

While most union leaders who support these programs do so out of the conviction that the dignity and respect of workers is enhanced by them, there is no doubt that many unions are entering into cooperative agreements without fully understanding the repercussions. Often cooperation becomes a reaction to perceived weakness and a gesture for survival. In the building trades the proliferation of the Labor Management Committee (LMC) is a perfect example. Despite the equal representation of union contractors and union leaders, most LMCs deal exclusively with how workers' attitudes, wages, work rules and fringe benefits are responsible for the dramatic decline in union construction work. Cynical union members now claim that LMC stands for "Let's Make Concessions."

Typically, a union will enter a cooperative agreement with management as a result of some management initiative. Either management will unilaterally introduce some sort of problem-solving group program or it will request the union's participation in designing such a program. If the union approves, a consultant will be brought in to tailor the program to the needs of the specific industry. Whether the union participates in this or not seems to be irrelevant since most programs look very similar: problem-solving groups of some sort meet, usually voluntarily during company time, to discuss work-related issues and suggest solutions.

Even though most unions agree to cooperate in such a program only if contractual issues are not discussed at the meetings, the group, once established, seems to be governed by its own rules. While strong unionists might try to orient the discussion away from contractual issues, the group dynamics often make this

impossible. Stewards might hear grievable complaints but notice a decrease in actual grievances filed. Inexplicably, worker morale seems to go up, productivity increases, and a friendlier management appears, seemingly overnight. Workers see participation in group meetings as rewarding, a place where they have management's ear. The union does not disappear, but it becomes more and more inconsequential in the daily operations of the enterprise. From the managerial perspective, all seems to be working well. The union has joined the management team.

By far the best review of how well-intentioned management-union QWL programs can weaken unionism is presented by Mike Parker in *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to QWL* (Labor Notes, 1986). Parker draws from his experience in the UAW to highlight certain drawbacks of union-management cooperative programs. He points out that the very design of such programs—the small group dynamics involved and the managerial approach to “teaching” unionists about management—serves to coopt and coerce workers into viewing the experience of work from a managerial perspective. Unionists learn not how to identify and remedy management-created obstacles to efficiency and democracy, but how to view the problems of efficiency and democracy through the eyes of management. While holding up cooperation as an intrinsic good, the implicit assumption is that the essential questions facing workers and managers today are not only of mutual interest but are questions that only managers know how to ask.

This process of cooptation and coercion is reinforced at every regular meeting of the joint problem-solving group since the most pressing problems are discussed and handled here, not at the yearly contract negotiations. No wonder that Parker considers the unstoppable surge in QWL programs to be a new and improved version of Taylorism with the purpose of helping management achieve five major goals:

- 1) Acquire still more of the knowledge of the workers.
- 2) Achieve greater cooperation from unions in introducing new technology.
- 3) Acquire new flexibility and greater control over production decisions.
- 4) Acquire more contract concessions from unions.
- 5) And, undermine unionism as an American institution.

The message conveyed by this type of program is clear: unions are no longer vital to the operation of the modern workplace. They are anachronistic to today's fast-changing work environment.

We agree with Parker's assessment of the dangers facing unions which cooperate in managerially controlled programs and his call for developing union-based QWL programs. Yet these programs need to be more than a union imitation of the managerial model. As long as unions work within managerially defined structures of existing QWL programs, they will be at a disadvantage.

Union-Empowering QWL Programs

Some unions are beginning to view the so-called employee involvement craze in a different light. These unions are beginning to plan and implement ways the QWL process can be used to further labor's agenda. They see the core issues in setting up a program as who controls it and whose power is enhanced—the union's or management's.

Many of these labor leaders have been forced to learn the hard way the tough realities of unionism in the 1980s. The globalization and deregulation of the economy have placed many U.S. companies on the endangered species list, often making concession bargaining the only alternative to plant closings. Likewise, the current trend of Wall Street corporate raiders gobbling up enterprises and liquidating assets to finance future takeovers has exacted its toll on unions and their members.

Many unions have adopted the strategy of making concessions today and hoping the losses can be recouped when employers get back on their feet. But concessions plus hoping for a brighter day do not give unions the necessary tools to fight back in the future, even if a brighter day arrives.

Around the country workers are pointing to the excesses of entrenched management as the major cause of poor performance. Simply put, workers are saying they are being forced to pay for mistakes they have absolutely no control over. Some union leaders are saying that unions must become players by extending the collective bargaining process to issues across the entire range of managerial decision-making. Many of these leaders are using joint labor-management employee involvement programs to accomplish these goals.

A model for union empowerment through QWL programs is developing. After studying or directly working with these programs, we feel certain important elements must be pursued to accomplish a truly empowering program.

First, there should be joint and equal representation of the union in all QWL decision-making committees, staffing and budget determination.

So-called facilitators should come out of union ranks and be carefully selected for their commitment to union goals. One of the major drawbacks in the previous model is the fact that facilitators come from salaried employees, consulting groups, or view themselves as "neutral"—neither union nor management. These are union positions and should be viewed as such.

The union must appoint its own members to committees and at least half the staffing of the program should come from the union. Top union officials should sit as equals with top management on an overall steering committee which has final authority on all QWL matters. Management must agree that there will be no retaliation because of one's participation in the program.

All official program communications should be jointly approved. But the union should maintain its own union communications on the QWL program to insure that the rank and file understand union goals in the QWL process.

Secondly, *the structures of union employee involvement programs must respond to already existing union and management structures found in the enterprise and must be modeled on current collective bargaining procedures.* Independent structures such as quality circles naturally tend to be posed as alternatives to the union and lend themselves to easy manipulation by managers and consultants.

Unions should avoid the so-called "neutral consultant" trap. Some union programs allow for two sets of consultants, one set hired by and accountable to the union and one set for management. For the union to be able to get across its own perspective, it must conduct its own non-joint training. Before a program is even started, the union should have its own separate training and strategy sessions.

Before each meeting of the joint committees and small groups, union members should meet and set their agenda. In setting up a program, unions should insist that time off work be allocated for these separate strategy sessions and for follow-up meetings where relevant. Unions would never think of entering a negotiating session with no goals or agenda. The QWL program is merely another set of negotiations over different issues.

Thirdly, *union empowering programs must be designed to deal with all levels and areas of management decision-making, most of which are currently off limits to collective bargaining.* Scheduling, inventory control, use of outside vendors, capital expenditures, supervisory levels, and purchasing issues are all key areas of mismanagement. Essential to this point is the union committee's complete access to vital company information, and

unions must demand that union representatives in the program be trained to understand and use this information.

Finally, it is important that management not reap all the economic benefits of a union program which corrects mismanagement. *Workers should be guaranteed a major share of all cost savings and surpluses resulting from the program. These should be above the employee's regular salary.* Distribution of workers' share of cost savings should reinforce worker solidarity. All gains should be shared by all workers regardless of participation in the program. Some unions are proposing that the workers' share go into a supplementary benefit trust fund administered by the union to provide for extra benefits such as child care and automobile insurance.

Conclusion

The labor movement struggled for years to develop an appropriate response to the devastation that Taylorism wrought upon the work force. Unions were effective in doing so once they looked past the veil of neutrality found in the Scientific Management literature and saw it for what it was: an attempt to break the power of workers and their unions. The industrial unions of the 1930s and 1940s picked up on Taylor's technique of codifying the work process and turned it on its head. What resulted was the modern system of collective bargaining over work rules.

Unions have been so successful, in fact, that management has been forced to develop a new labor relations system to fight the power of workers and their unions. Call it positive labor relations, employee involvement, or quality of worklife, management's goal remains the same. There is now abundant evidence that shows this new "cooperative" weapon of management's is an extremely efficient tool in undermining unions and that the labor movement, with few exceptions, does not know how to fight back.

When confronting these programs in non-union environments, organizers must show how union programs really bring about workplace democracy. When management brings their consultants into unionized environments, we can't afford to ignore it or play along with management's initiatives. Nor can we afford to fall into management's trap of playing the spoiler, thus appearing to large segments of the work force as obstructionists. In both cases, the basis of a successful counterattack is a positive alternative which offers workers a real chance of taking command of their destiny.

Unionism is the highest form of employee involvement and we can not let management steal our thunder with their new style

labor relations. The QWL movement has been very successful for management and it is not going to go away. Unions must develop their own skills in this area if employee involvement programs are to be used to obtain union goals.

The debate currently taking place within the labor movement over this issue is indicative of how far we have missed the boat. One side claims that employee involvement is cooperation and thus destroys the most basic ingredient of trade unionism: adversarialism. The other side says we must cooperate because nothing else works. Both sides are setting up their own straw man: Should we be adversarial or cooperative? In fact, these new cooperative initiatives are being used everyday by management as an adversarial approach to unions. It's about time we used them the same way.

Some critics will say there is too much risk involved, that trying to use QWL for union goals inevitably will lead to enterprise unionism. Our answer is that of course there is risk and unfortunately many unions have already bought into management-controlled programs. This is all the more reason that a union model of real employee involvement should be put forth.

We must learn the lessons of the early industrial unions and begin to use worker participation programs as tools to further the interests of workers and their organizations, just as earlier unions responded to Scientific Management by developing their own system of work rules. By far the most serious problem facing workers is the consequences of rampant mismanagement in our economy. We feel unions must begin to develop employee involvement programs from an empowerment perspective and begin to militantly demand that workers have a greater say in all their employer's decision-making. ■