Chapter 1

The Problems of Managing Change

The world changes and technology comes and goes but human problems remain the same.

MANAGING CHANGE AS PROBLEM SOLVING

Managing change of any kind requires effective problem solving. This is especially the case when the change involves designing and implementing new work systems or rethinking current organizational structures. We know that problem solving is a difficult and complex process, yet too often it seems to be limited to a fast decision to do something followed by a series of actions which intuition suggests will achieve the desired result. This is very similar to shooting in the dark. There is no way of knowing that the proposed actions will lead to a solution or even that the problem can be solved. The alternative, whenever possible, is to create a well thought-out, logical path to a desired result.

Effective problem solving requires the control of “entropy.” Entropy is a term used by physicists to describe energy that exists but is unavailable for productive use. When applied to problem solving it can be described as energy that is time-wasting because it is not being used to good effect. The word covers
inappropriate strategies and actions that make little or no contribution to solving the problem. Energy of this kind can lead to chaos. The problem becomes increasingly confused and insoluble and ideas on how to deal with it become more and more clouded and uncertain (Mumford, 1999). The first message of this book is that effective problem solving requires an avoidance of inappropriate or redundant activity and its replacement by efficient and ethical strategies so that appropriate goals are both set and met (Mumford, 1999).

**COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING**

Problem solving with difficult and complex problems requires recognition of the interaction that is taking place between psychological, economic, technical, cultural and political factors. Questions that need to be asked and answered are, Who wants to solve this problem? Who will pay the costs of a solution? Can technology assist a solution? What kinds of solutions will be culturally, socially and politically acceptable? (Forrester, 1969). Another feature of complex problems is that they are rarely stable but tend to alter over time. Changes in the environment, particularly in its economic context, may cause problems to be rethought and redefined. Where technical change is concerned innovative new developments can also affect the nature of the problems that have to be solved.

Very complex problem solving is often a balancing act with problems being partially solved then returning in new forms, some of which may be as difficult or more difficult to solve than the original dilemma. Many solutions that are politically attractive because they are cheap and acceptable to industry and government can lead in the wrong direction. The early responses to mad cow disease provide many examples. Symptoms but not causes were being addressed. The answer is in understanding the social dynamics of the problem and identifying the pressure points where improvement can be secured.

Designing a problem-solving programme or strategy is communicating an ethical position, a set of values, and a series of practical operations designed to achieve a desired result. This communication stretches from those designing and implementing the programme to those benefiting from its results. If time is available, a safe strategy is to proceed in stages so that each part of a programme can be tested out before the next is implemented. It can then be reversed if it has proved to be a mistake. Another useful strategy is looking for “amplification,” an amplifier being a device that, if given a small amount of
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