Chapter 2

Socio-technical Design: Its Early History

Life is understood backwards but must be lived forwards.
Soren Kierkegaard

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the present and predict the future we need to learn from the past. A major part of this book will examine how ideas derived from an approach called socio-technical design can be used to improve the quality of working life for people at every level and in almost any kind of work situation.

HISTORY MATTERS

Socio-technical design, as its name implies, gives as much weight to the needs of people as to economics or production. It is now more than 50 years old. It started when a group of therapists, researchers and consultants decided...
to use their skills in the postwar world. They had acquired these skills while assisting war-damaged soldiers to regain their psychological health and return to civilian life. This group, most of whom had been associated with the London Tavistock Clinic before the war and some of whom were medically qualified, believed that the therapeutic tools and techniques they had developed could usefully be applied to the organization of work in industry. They saw this as restricting and degrading many lower rank employees, who were forced to spend their days carrying out simple, routine tasks with no possibility of personal development or job satisfaction.

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was founded by this group in London in 1946 with the aid of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. It was set up to bring together the psychological and social sciences in a way that benefited society. In 1948, when the Tavistock Clinic became part of the Health Service, the institute became a separate organization (Trist & Murray, 1993).

Because many of the original members were psychiatrists, all early members of staff were required to undergo psychoanalysis. There was a belief that they had to understand themselves before they could assist with the problems of others. Both the clinic and the institute focused on group rather than individual treatment. This was partly because of a shortage of staff but also because group therapy was a recognised and successful method of helping with problems. This therapeutic background meant that the staff was interested in results as well as theories. This led them in the direction of “action research,” in which analysis and theory is associated with remedial change. The institute believed that there should be “no therapy without research and no research without therapy.” Today this could be restated as “no theory without practice, no practice without research.” In 1947 a publishing company, Tavistock Publications, was founded and a new journal, Human Relations, was created in association with a research group led by Kurt Lewin and located at the Centre for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan.

In 1972 the socio-technical movement was formally internationalised by the creation of a Council for the Quality of Working Life, which I was invited to join. This council had members, usually academics, from many countries throughout the world. A number of academic groups became actively interested in socio-technical research. These included the Work Research Institute, Oslo, and groups at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States, York University in Toronto, Canada, and the Centre for Continuing Education in Canberra, Australia. Kurt Lewin at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor also had a considerable influence on thinking and action.
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