Chapter 4

Analysing Problem Situations: The Dock Workers of Liverpool

Where shall wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding?
Book of Job

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

The book now introduces some case studies on organizational design and asks you to think what you would do if you were a manager, researcher or consultant in the same situation. As we have seen, change and its environment are often complex and difficult to understand. The change initiators, frequently management, may know what they are trying to achieve but may have little understanding of the problems involved in the introduction of a new system or of the uncertain reception it may be given. Wise change agents will start by obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the situation that will receive the change and of the problems that may accompany its early use. This information,
if wisely applied, will assist the creation of well thought-out strategies that lead to effective application. Successful change depends on comprehensive knowledge. Without this, decisions will be taken in the dark and lead to consequences which are undesirable and little understood. Metaphors may be helpful here. Gaining an understanding of a problem situation can be seen as similar to a rock climber working out the route for a future climb or an army commander making a battle plan before moving into action. What I am proposing is the creation of a “management map” before any implementation action is taken.

I would also like to stress the importance of knowledge and experience of the kind of problem in which many variables may affect the outcome. This could be especially useful for those implementing technical systems such as information technology. Technical problem solvers frequently see technology as the dominant variable and give it exclusive attention. The consequence is that a neglect of other interacting variables, especially those relating to people, can lead to system failure.

THE LIVERPOOL DOCKS AND THE DOCKERS WHO WORKED THERE

The case study I will use as an example of how to gain an understanding of a complex change problem is the port of Liverpool and the loading and unloading of ships there in the 1950s. This university-based research gave me my first real understanding of the complexity of introducing change and of the need to understand the change situation (Simey, 1954). It can appear a dated case study but it is interesting and useful to look at unfamiliar situations. Also, it may turn out to have great relevance to change in the future. Ulrich Beck, the well-known German sociologist, in his new book The Brave New World of Work suggests that the full employment society will soon vanish (Beck, 2000).

He believes that life is becoming increasingly insecure and that those factors that used to complement and reinforce each other—full employment, guaranteed pensions and high tax revenue—are now being threatened. In the future, he claims, we will all experience considerable insecurity and risk in our working lives. He sees this threat as a result of unregulated global capitalism which, in Europe, is breaking the historical bonds between capitalism, the welfare state and democracy. He believes that a likely scenario for the future is a return to uncertain and volatile situations similar to that of the Liverpool docks in this case study. In his opinion, technology will provide no solution to
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