Chapter 5

Work Design in the Coal Industry

Technical change provides opportunities for social change.
Eric Trist

WHAT IS STRATEGY?

Once you have obtained a reasonably good understanding of the problem to be tackled, the next step is to decide what to do and how to do it. This requires developing a strategy for action. Ideally strategies should be simple rather than complex and should be capable of being implemented without too much difficulty and stress. They should also fit with the culture of an organization as well as with its problems. Participative design can play a useful part here, both by getting ideas from groups with different roles and responsibilities and by ensuring that there is general agreement on what is to be changed before this change takes place. This will enable the change to take place in a favourable environment. However with major decisions that affect the running of a company, it is usually desirable that top management makes the final decision.

Strategy also needs to be continually reviewed as it can easily lose its relevance if the environment changes or if a closer acquaintance with the problem leads to greater understanding of the problem situation. Increasing knowledge will help identify those factors in the change situation which will be
easiest to reform and those which are likely to prove more difficult (Markides, 2001). It must also be recognised that while change is desirable it is also disruptive. This fact will influence the “how” factor. How can this change be introduced without impeding normal production activities and without disturbances that lower morale? Strategy should also take account of the future as well as the present. What kinds of circumstances are like to alter and may require a total rethink of strategy.

Once again, I suggest that this case study is very relevant for students and practitioners working in areas such as information technology where human factors are sometimes neglected by those responsible for change.

As this book is focusing on organizational problems, many of which arrive through the introduction of new technology, it is often wise to start the learning process by considering solutions that have already been tried and proved successful in similar situations. One of these might work again in the new situation, although it must be recognised that every change environment is different, modifications will almost certainly be needed and failure is always a possibility. The next case study incorporates a review of previous strategies. Looking at the past will also bring a recognition that the new situation differs in important aspects from the old and that a different approach is required. This, in itself, is an important lesson.

EARLY SOCIO-TECHNICAL DESIGN

The early socio-technical work on organizational design and the management of change was carried out in the British coal industry by members of the Tavistock Institute soon after the end of the Second World War. In the late 1940s the new British National Coal Board approached the London-based institute and asked the researchers there to undertake some research into the health of coal miners. Poor health was causing absenteeism and this, in turn, was affecting output at a time when coal was very important. A number of articles describing these health problems had appeared in the British Medical Journal, and these motivated the National Coal Board to try and solve them. They asked the Tavistock for help. The Tavistock team diagnosed much of this sickness as psychological in origin and related to the organization of work underground. They had a theory that health at work was adversely affected by the miners’ belief that new technology had caused them to have little control over their work or work situation (Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollock, 1963).
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