Chapter 8

Involving Employees in Design: Rolls Royce

O brave new world, that has such people in’t!
Shakespeare, The Tempest

INTRODUCTION

This chapter moves away from a concentration on the “what” to do and focuses on the “how” to do it. An important strategic decision at the start of any change project is how it is to be managed. The options here range from letting the technical suppliers assume a management role. This is often done with software vendors when the purchasers have a poor understanding of the new technology, but it can be a high-risk strategy. Another option is to let specialist groups or management take responsibility for bringing in the new system. This can often result in a system that works well for management but less well for other groups. The approach I recommend is the democratic one of giving a large degree of responsibility for the organizational design and implementation of the new system to the future users. The case studies which come next will show how this can be done.
PARTICIPATIVE DESIGN—
THE USERS TAKE OVER

An early project that confirmed my belief in democratic design took place in a firm that made building products called TAC. Consultative participation was used here, leaving the final decisions on how a new work system should be designed and jobs restructured with the traditional systems design group, but ensuring that there was a great deal of consultation and discussion with staff at every level in the user department.

In TAC the work of a department dealing with customer orders was being changed from a batch computer system to a real-time application, and this was seen by the systems design team, who were computer technologists, as providing an opportunity for increasing both efficiency and job satisfaction through the redesign of work. At the start of the TAC project, there was a considerable amount of informal consultation, and primarily as a result of the systems analysts’ own ideas of what would constitute an efficient form of work organization, it was decided to split the department into two groups, with one group responsible for data preparation and the other for handling customers’ orders. But, before this decision was made, at the request of the systems group I asked all the department staff to complete a questionnaire on how job satisfaction could be improved. I handed this out to each clerk myself and at the same time casually suggested that they should think about ways in which work and morale could be improved.

The systems analysts next called a meeting to describe their proposed new departmental structure, which they believed would work well, but I, and they, now had a surprising and, for me, very defining experience. When the proposal of a dual structure department was put to the clerks by the systems team it was immediately rejected. A spokesperson for the clerks told the meeting that the informal discussions that had taken place, together with the questionnaire, had led them to do a great deal of thinking about the nature of their work problems and their own job satisfaction needs. As a result of this, they had recognised that an aspect of work that led to inefficiency and mental stress was the constant bombardment of demands and complaints from customers. They had therefore worked out their own solution and wanted to tell the meeting about this.

They argued that the proposal put forward by the systems analysts would not alleviate this problem while, at the same time, it would create a data preparation group whose work was extremely routine and dull. Their alternative suggestion was the formation of a number of small, multiskilled groups in
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