

When it's time to reframe or renew an organization, a society or a community

It's a time of participation

John Burbidge — The Institute of Cultural Affairs

What do a Brazilian construction firm, an Indian machine tool manufacturer and an American aerospace company have in common? Yes, they are all metal fabricators of one sort or another. And they are all concerned over profit and marketshare.

But in the case of these companies, the common thread runs much deeper. It can be summed up in one word — participation.

Faced with an internal financial crisis in the midst of a national and global recession, the Mills Group of companies in Brazil was forced to make some radical changes. After trying on participatory methods for over two years, management began to see not just the value but the necessity of these approaches. Quite literally, their walls came tumbling down. Open offices replaced private cubicles; information began to be shared across departmental boundaries, and everyone started eating in the same lunchroom. A new ethos permeates the Mills Group today and their balance sheets reflect it.

In Bangalore, India, employee transport buses at the Widia machine tool company arrived seven minutes late everyday. An interdepartmental task force was put to work on the problem and came up with 25 reasons for the late bus arrivals. Honing in on the most serious causes, employees devised the following solutions: change factory timing to avoid peak traffic, reduce pick-up points, and bypass roads where traffic jams are common. Now buses are rarely more than a minute late. That's impressive in most countries but doubly so in India, where Indians jokingly distinguish between *Indian time* and Indian Standard Time.

When the US national defense budget began to be slashed, workers at the Lockheed Missiles and Space Company in Southern California understandably grew nervous. None more so, perhaps, than those in Lockheed's Research and Development Division where designing new products for new markets became a necessity. A series of participatory marketing workshops opened the door to new ideas and plans for new products began to flow — devices that allow computers to speak to one another, crisis management centers to help cities deal with natural disasters, and low-orbit satellites for global cellular phone communication.

These three companies are part of a ground swell of businesses which have come to see that when people have a stake in deciding the outcome of a process or product, they are more likely to be committed to its successful completion. The results of these companies' commitment to participative practices* speak for themselves. They include:

- Increased performance and productivity...
- A more focused mission...
- Greatly empowered team implementation...
- More motivated employees in an improved working environment.

Clearly, participation as a mode of doing business is here to stay. And the reason is obvious — it works.

* All these companies used participative processes in their change and improvement efforts; notably the *Technology of Participation™ (ToP)* developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). The ICA is a global social change organization working since the early 1960s in community and organizational development.

And it works in an incredibly diverse array of historical, political and business cultures. It has worked equally well in a Siberian sugar factory, struggling to emerge from 75 years of a centrally-planned economy; an Indian acrylic fiber company working against a backdrop of 44 generations of unbroken princely rule, as well as the legacy of centuries of British colonial administration; and a Malaysian insurance firm set in a tri-cultural nation where respect for hierarchy and authority has always been the rule.

Timing and the natural elixir of participation... The list can be extended. But in each case, when circumstances were ripe and corporate leadership was ready, participatory approaches to management were introduced into the company and eventually became the life blood of its operation. It is as if, below the surface of differences, there's a common water table which, when tapped, rises to the surface and transforms the situation, regardless of the setting in which it occurs.

Participation and the Russian personality... David Dunn notes that "Whatever the cultural context, there is in the Russian personality a natural affinity for participation and orderly progression of thought to a productive conclusion." According to Dunn, the key is eliciting this innate human propensity out of people's consciousness as a "basic and natural way" of being human together.

Is there an emerging global business culture? Two observations should be added to this discussion. First, in today's global business community, there is an international *business culture* that often pervades, and sometimes supplants, indigenous customs. Not surprisingly, in a number of cases those responsible for initiating new modes of participation in their companies are the bright young men and women who left their home countries to earn their MBAs in the leading management schools of Europe or North America.

Although products of different historical and cultural systems, these young people have bought into the values of today's global marketplace a general acceptance of increasing employee participation in decision making.

Second, it seems that participation has been most effective where creative leaders have blended innovative participative methods with traditional cultural patterns.

Participation at JK Fibre... The Indian JK Fibre company is an excellent example. Its training program, *Leadership Skills for Participative Culture*, involves employees in both modern facilitation skills and the ancient spirit practices of *pranayama yoga* and *surya namaskar* (greeting the sun). According to Cyprian D'Souza, this "retooling of minds and hearts" combines personal and professional development in ways that are mutually reinforcing rather than divisive.

Participation at Great Eastern Life Assurance Company of Malaysia and Singapore... In the case of the Great Eastern Life Assurance Company of Malaysia and Singapore, participative practices did not eliminate traditional respect for authority. If anything, they may have reinforced it, while at the same time diffusing throughout the organization a sense of responsibility for the whole company. As consultants John and Ann Epps point out: "Participation does not mean that every opinion deserves to be followed. Decisions must be made and designating the responsibility for making them proved important."

From option to necessity — The growing acceptance and application of participatory methods around the world is one of the most intriguing aspects of the phenomenon. Indeed, it seems that more and more often, participation is no longer an option but a necessity. In the words of Frank Powell: "Communities and organizations will either aggressively seek to enhance participation or they will see it happen in spite of their efforts to maintain control hierarchically. One way or another, it is happening universally."

Participation's role in the 21st century paradigm for living... Participation, though, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a wider circle of factors that define how human beings relate to one another in our times. It is a core component of the new paradigm of living in the 21st century, and as such, has a great affinity with kindred disciplines such as conflict mediation, dispute partnering and facilitative leadership, to name a few.

Note I said *discipline* in referring to participation and its affinity with other approaches to decision making. Many mistake participation for something that happens or does not happen, depending on the circumstances or the personalities of those in charge of a situation.

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"Managers who are genuinely interested in participative techniques are no longer looking for a program... They now seek a system, even an environment."

But as Laura Spencer underscored in the book *Winning Through Participation*, there is much more to participation than first meets the eye.

Managers who are genuinely interested in participative techniques are no longer looking for a program... They now seek a system, even an environment. They have learned, mostly by hard experience, that there are no 'quick fixes' for improving employee motivation and productivity.

The participation discipline's four tenets — Spencer outlines four basic tenets of participation which apply across the board, regardless of the context in which participation happens. She explains that participation is:

- An ongoing, integrated, whole-systems approach...
- An evolving, organic, and dynamic process...
- A structured process involving learnable skills...
- A dynamic requiring a commitment to openness from everyone involved.

Participation takes strong leadership —

There is one additional tenet I would add to this list: *participation demands strong leadership*. A contradiction in terms, you say? Surprisingly, no. Many who have tried to use participatory methods have discovered this but often too late.

As the author and former editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, stresses in her foreword to Spencer's book, leadership is an essential ingredient in making participation work. "It is almost a paradox," Kanter observes. "Participation requires better leadership than a machine-like bureaucracy. The leadership tasks may be shared or rotated but they must be performed. And one of the leadership roles is to provide a structure for participative planning."

The pivotal role of leadership in enabling participation to happen is underscored in many of the case studies that follow. Time and again, *ToP* methods have proven effective in transforming the culture of organizations where the leaders of those organizations have been committed to, as well involved in, the process of change.

The depth and breadth of participation's impact on organizations

Although participation is emerging as a dominant theme in all facets of society today, it is the business community that deserves much of the credit for establishing it as a *modus operandi*.

It was in the offices, boardrooms and production centers of some of the more adventurous global companies that participation first caught a toe-hold. And the word soon spread. Fueled by seminars on participatory management, books on organizational excellence, and videos on how to build more effective work teams, participation became a corporate mantra or buzzword. From New York to Tokyo, Bombay to Rio de Janeiro, companies began to shift both their corporate philosophies and everyday operations to allow for greatly increased employee participation in all aspects of their businesses.

Quality and participation — At different points along the way, particular aspects of participation have taken root. The preoccupation with quality, manifest initially in quality circles and more recently in the total quality management (TQM) concept, is an example of this. At the book display of a 1992 conference of the Association for Quality and Participation, I counted no fewer than 25 books with the word *quality* in their titles.

Participation and mobilizing intellectual resources — In addressing that same conference, management author, teacher and consultant Peter Senge noted that this current concern with quality suggests something profoundly amiss with American management systems today. In his analysis, the essence of management is the art of mobilizing the intellectual resources of everyone involved. But as Senge sees it, most American managers still operate out of the premise that "the top thinks and the bottom acts." For him, participation is fundamentally a thinking and learning process.

Participation and trust building — Others have emphasized different dimensions of participation. Tom Peters, in his book *Liberation Management*, highlights the critical role that trust plays in participatory management. He refers to trust as "the missing X-factor," an essential ingredient in today's business environment, but one so often lacking in many organizations. It is trust that allows conversations to happen, conversations which form the basis of today's knowledge-based economy. To underscore his point, he quotes a federal prison where trust has been created between inmates and staff through regular town hall-type meetings and inmate surveys. It's a case of "If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere."

Participation and breaking down organizational walls — Eliminating boundaries and what President and CEO of Levi Strauss and Company, Robert Haas calls “the most rigid boundary of all” — that between worker and managers — must be redefined. Addressing the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, he posed these questions:

- Why can't some employees set production goals?
- Why can't they monitor plant efficiency?
- Why can't they hire and fire new workers on whom they are increasingly dependent?
- And why can't they benefit directly from their initiatives which result in higher profits?

The Semco S.A. boundary breaking experience... In Brazil, the machinery manufacturer Semco, S.A. has already gone a long way towards answering these very questions. The Semco experience has been a strong motivator for other Brazilian companies moving toward more participatory management practices, including the Mills Group cited earlier.

Deciding that hierarchy was the single biggest obstacle to participatory management, Semco replaced its cumbersome pyramidal structure with three managerial circles and just four job titles — counselors, partners, associates, and coordinators — which included everyone in the organization. Furthermore, it insists that certain important decisions are made by a company-wide vote. ¹

But dismantling unhelpful hierarchical barriers doesn't imply the absence of organization. Rather, it is the basic organizational unit that has changed, from mammoth departments or divisions to small, self-managing teams. One of the most dramatic examples of the effectiveness of working teams is the Ford Motor Company's Team Taurus. Faced with the challenge of the success of their Japanese competitors, Ford turned over the development of the Taurus to multi-disciplinary teams that operated by consensus, without interference from top management. Working with amazing speed, the teams came up with a car which has outsold its competitors while giving a much needed boost to the American automobile industry.

Teamwork, boundarylessness, trust, and bottom-up thinking are but a few of the different faces of participation which are emerging in business today. There are others to add to the list. All are important and each is a doorway to a new

Participation when Semco needed a larger plant for its Marine Division...

Initially, it employed real estate agents to search for possible plant sites, but the agents were unsuccessful. So Semco's top managers turned the job over to the employees. In one weekend, they came up with three factories for sale near the existing plant. The company then stopped work for a day and sent everyone to inspect the properties. Next, the workers voted and chose a plant site the counselors didn't really want. Willing to trust the worker's wisdom, the company bought the building. Workers designed the layout and hired a top Brazilian artist to paint it. The result? In just four years, the division's productivity per employee increased 160 percent and its market share jumped from 54 percent to 62 percent. Commenting on the experience, Semco president Ricardo Semler said: We accepted the employees' decision because we believe that in the long run, letting people participate in the decisions that affect their lives will have a positive effect on employee motivation and morale.

participative mode of management, a new paradigm in business. But as Michael Ray, who conducts the New Paradigm Business course at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, cautions: “New paradigm business is not a static template of criteria that an organization either has or doesn't have. It is a process that is in a constant state of development.”

The universality of participation

While the private sector has played a leading role in introducing participatory concepts and practices, it is by no means alone in this regard. Its experience has been closely paralleled in a number of other fields — government, community development, rural development, education and more. The universality of participation as part of the very fabric of our lives becomes more apparent by the day.

New participation in politics — In the US, the 1992 Presidential election campaign heralded a new era as participation became a key word in the political vocabulary. Electronic town meetings or TV citizen forums became media tools for airing voter opinion. While this type of town meeting bears little resemblance to the original New England variety; it has set a precedent for a whole new style of political leadership in which accessibility and listening are key factors.

Participatory community decision making — Political candidates collecting citizen feedback electronically are not alone in this field. In 1987, a San Francisco non-profit and non-partisan media organization, Choosing Our Future, piloted a

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prime-time electronic town meeting with its local ABC affiliate television station. Designed to obtain instant public feedback on a critical political issue, the program combined a studio audience and panel with a pre-selected, random sample of citizens who phoned in their responses to questions which arose during the discussion. Six votes were taken during the one-hour show, which was seen by more than 300,000 people in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Choosing Our Future's director, Duane Elgin, sees this type of citizen participation as an essential ingredient of a healthy democracy. Involving citizens through electronic town meetings will not guarantee the right choices will be made, but it will guarantee that citizens feel involved and invested in those choices. Rather than feeling cynical and powerless, citizens will feel engaged and responsible for our society and its future."

Participatory economic development strategies — Not only has participation come of age in highly industrialized countries, much pioneering work on participation, both theoretical

models and practical implementation, has happened in the so-called *Third World*. As far back as 1976, a United Nations (UN) conference in Nairobi (Kenya), declared that participation be put at the forefront of development. By 1990, it had climbed to the top of the agenda when the UN held another conference (this time in Arusha, Tanzania) on *Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa*.

The World Bank, which earned a reputation in earlier years as a purveyor of large-scale, top-down development aid, has picked up on the necessity of participation in development. It has begun channeling funds to a number of non-governmental organizations working with grassroots organizations and has embarked on a "learning process" regarding participation within its own ranks.

International participation research and development... But these acknowledgments of the importance of participation from the development establishment came only after years of experimentation with participatory approaches on the part of development agencies and rural

people themselves. In the early 1980s, the Institute of Cultural Affairs co-sponsored a massive international project to define the key factors which had led to successful rural development worldwide. Known as the International Exposition of Rural Development (IERD), this 3-year, global program documented over 300 projects in 55 countries.

Participation processes and K-12 school reform — Another large and growing advocacy group for participation has been educators from around the world who cry for more effective, more relevant, and more holistic education. Almost all reform proposals have included some component of increased participation on the part of parents, teachers, administrators, and students in the total education process.

The Seattle experience... The City of Seattle is a case in point. Facing a growing sea of discontent about the state of its schools, it decided in 1990 to launch an Education Summit to gain input and participation from as broad a cross-section of the community as possible.

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“(P)articipation is not simply a luxury that only some people can afford. It is much more. It is a basic right of every citizen of the globe today.”



John Burbidge has been associated with the Institute of Cultural Affairs since 1971. This work has taken him from Indian villages to the European capital, Brussels. He is presently Communications Director for ICA West, the Institute's division serving the western United States. Graduating in anthropology, John has acquired skills in fund-raising, public relations, group facilitation, editing and writing. His articles have been published in magazines and journals in Australia, Canada and the United States. He is the editor of the book Approaches That Work in Rural Development and the ICA newsletter Initiatives. Australian born, John lives in Seattle, Washington.

Over one weekend, more than 2,000 parents, students, teachers, business leaders, neighborhood activists and elected officials turned out at 32 meetings to express their concerns and give their ideas about improving Seattle's schools. While many of the ideas generated in the summit were not unique in the educational field, the process used to elicit them was. It demanded and achieved inclusive participation from all those affected by the malaise in education.

The foregoing are but a handful of the many illustrations that could be given of participation in today's society. Certainly, the private sector has no monopoly on participation. What it has are the resources, marketing skills and international connections that have popularized participation and made it accessible to a ready, global audience. At the same time, as Peter Drucker and others point out, the private sector still has much to learn from the human change institutions of the non-profit world when it comes to participation and other key dimensions of modern management. Participation, we have found, builds common solutions to the never-ending challenges people face in their personal, community, and professional lives.

Participation and the nature of the universe — Scholar and teacher Margaret Wheatley goes one step further. Drawing on the insights of quantum physics, chaos theory and molecular biology she makes a strong case that the universe itself is a participatory phenomenon.

As she asserts: Nothing is independent of the relationships that occur. I am constantly creating the world — evoking it, not discovering it — as I participate in all its many interactions. Participation, seriously done, is a way out from the the uncertainties and ghostly qualities of this nonobjective world we live in. We need a broad distribution of information, viewpoints and interpretations if we are to make sense of the world.

A time of participation

Futurologist Daniel Bell once asserted that a dominating idea or an axial principle drives every major period of history. In the 18th century, it was equality. In the 19th, with the onset of the industrial revolution, it was rationality. For the post-industrial, information age in which we live, he said the axial principle was science or knowledge. However, as Belgian management specialist Roger Talpaert pointed out, the axial principle of our time is not knowledge, but participation.

“It is unthinkable today,” said Talpaert, “for people to contribute to any form of collective action without being able to influence goals and choices.”

Be it in the poorest village or plush company offices, the cry to be part of the solution and not merely a victim of circumstances has become one of the defining characteristics of life in our time. As such, participation is not simply a luxury that only some people can afford. It is much more. It is a basic right of every citizen of the globe today.

The need for champions — Like any historical phenomenon, though, participation needs its champions. It has found those in many places but nowhere so prominently as in the international business community. Led by men and women who have seen the end of the old order when authority, control and power were wielded from above, this movement for change has rapidly gained momentum in recent years.

A more inclusive, participatory ethic has taken root and there is no turning back. ♦

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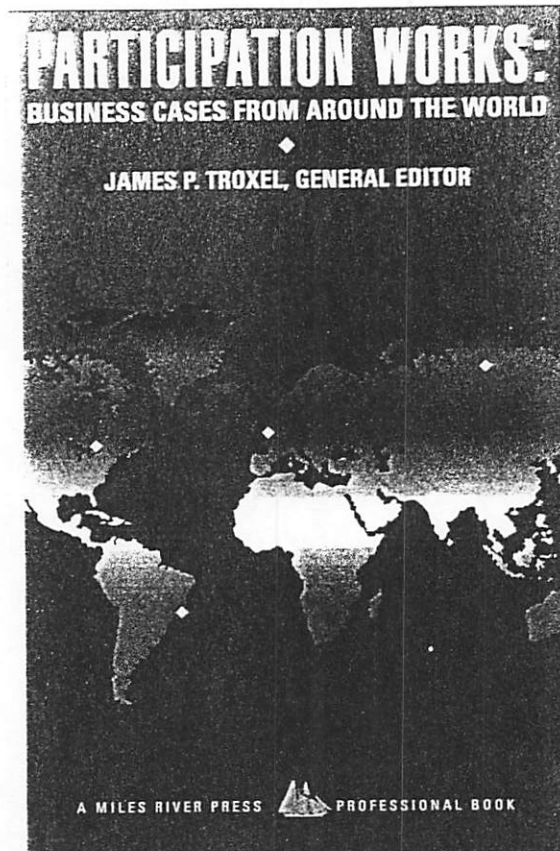
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*Only from
the alliance
of one,
working with
and through
the other
are great
things born.*

Saint Exupery, 1948

2

A Time of Participation

John Burbidge

9

Building Cross-functional Teamwork

Randolph E. Schwering

16

A Conversation with Sharon A. Thorne: Executive Director of the National Organization Development Network

H. Randall Webb

24

The Care and Feeding of Temporary Teams

William Kraus, Arlene Scott,
Theodore H. Scott & Lynne Yeannakis

33

Successful Self-Directed Teams and Planned Change: A Lot in Common

Robert A. Zawacki & Carol A. Norman

**Plus: Book Review
Letters to the Editor
Network News
Conferences & Publications**

A Time of Participation

John Burbidge

What do a Brazilian construction firm, an Indian machine tool manufacturer and an American missile and aeronautics company have in common? For one, they are all metal fabricators of one sort or another. And there are those rather fundamental issues of profit and market share. But, in this case, the common thread runs much deeper. It can be summed up in a word -- participation.

Faced with an internal financial crisis in the midst of a national and global recession, the Mills Group of companies in Brazil was forced to make some radical changes. After "trying on" participatory methods for over two years, management began to see not just their value but their necessity. Quite literally, the walls came tumbling down. Open offices replaced private cubicles; information began to be shared across departmental boundaries and everyone started eating in the same lunchroom. A new ethos permeates the Mills Group today and the balance sheets reflect it.

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bypass roads where traffic jams are common. Now buses are rarely more than a minute late. That is impressive in most countries but doubly so in India, where people jokingly distinguish between "Indian time" and "Indian standard time."

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These three companies, along with the others featured in this article, are part of a groundswell of businesses that have realized that when people have a stake in deciding the outcome of a process or product, they are more likely to be committed to its successful completion. The results of their using participative practices speak for themselves--increased performance and productivity, a more focused mission, greatly empowered team implementation, and a more motivated working environment, to name a few. Clearly, participation as a mode of doing

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business is here to stay. And the reason is obvious: It works.

And it works in an incredibly diverse array of historical, political and business cultures--a Siberian sugar factory, struggling to emerge from 75 years of a centrally controlled, planned economy; an Indian acrylic fiber



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company, working against a backdrop of 44 generations of unbroken kingly rule and the legacy of centuries of British colonial administration; and a Malaysian insurance firm set in a tricultural nation where respect for hierarchy and authority have always been the rule.

The list can be extended. But in each case, when circumstances were ripe and corporate leadership was ready, participatory approaches to management were introduced into the company and eventually became the life blood of its operation.

Two footnotes should be added to this discussion. First, in today's global business community, there is an international "business culture" that often pervades, and sometimes supplants, indigenous customs. Not surprisingly, those responsible for initiating new modes of participation in their companies are often the bright young men and women who left their home countries to earn their MBAs in the leading management schools of Europe or North America. Although products of different historical and cultural systems, they have bought into the values of today's global marketplace. One of those values is increased employee participation in decision making.

Second, it seems that participation has been most effective where creative leaders have blended innovative participative methods with traditional cultural patterns. The Indian JK Fiber company is an excellent example. Its training program, Leadership Skills for Participative Culture, exposes employees to both modern facilitation skills and the ancient spirit practices *pranayama yoga* and *surya namaskar* (greeting the sun). This "retooling of minds and hearts" combines personal and professional development in ways that are mutually reinforcing rather than divisive (d'Souza & d'Souza, 1993).

In the case of the Great Eastern Life Assurance Company of Malaysia and Singapore, participative practices didn't eliminate traditional respect for authority. If anything, they may have reinforced it while at the same time diffusing a sense of responsibility for the whole company throughout the organization. As consultants John and Ann Epps (1993) point out: "Participation does not mean that every opinion deserves to be followed. Decisions must be made and designating the responsibility for making them proved important."

The growing acceptance and application of participatory methods around the world is one of the most intriguing aspects of this phenomenon. Indeed, it seems that more and more, participation is no longer an option but a necessity.

PARTICIPATION--A GROWING DISCIPLINE

Participation, though, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a wider circle of phenomena that define how human beings relate to one another in our times. It is a key component of the new paradigm of living in the 21st century, and as such finds allies in other kindred disciplines such as conflict mediation, dispute partnering and facilitative leadership, to name a few.

Note I said "discipline" in referring to participation and its cohorts. Many people often mistake participation for something that happens or doesn't happen, depending on the circumstances of the personalities of those in charge of a situation. But as Laura Spencer (1989) underscored in her book *Winning Through Participation*, there is much more to participation than first meets the eye. "Managers who are genuinely interested in participatory techniques are no longer looking for a program..they now seek a system, even an environment," claims Spencer. "They have learned, mostly by hard experience, that there are no 'quick fixes' for improving employee motivation and productivity."

Tenets of Participation

Spencer draws conclusions from the work she and her colleagues have done over the past 30 years, notably the *Technology of Participation (TOP)* developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), using participatory methods in a variety of settings from small communities to multinational corporations. She outlines four basic tenets of participation that apply across the board, regardless of the context in which participation happens.

- Participation is an ongoing, integrated, whole-systems approach

- Participation is an evolving, organic and dynamic process
- Participation is a structured process involving learnable skills
- Participation requires a commitment to openness from everyone involved

There is one other tenet I would add to this list. Participation demands strong leadership. A contradiction in

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The Pivotal Role of Leadership

Leadership plays a pivotal role in enabling participation to happen. Time and again, TOP methods have proven effective in transforming the culture of organizations where the leaders of those organizations have been committed to and involved in the process of change.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF PARTICIPATION

Although participation is emerging as a dominant theme in all facets of society today, it is the business community that deserves much of the credit for establishing it as a *modus operandi*. It was in the offices, boardrooms and production centers of some of the more adventurous global companies that participation first caught a toehold. Drawing on the wisdom of the founding fathers of modern management, including William Edwards Deming, Peter Drucker and Robert Greenleaf, a new breed of managers began to emerge.

The word soon spread. Fueled by seminars on participatory management, books on organizational excellence, and videos on how to build more effective work teams, participation became a corporate buzzword. From New York to Tokyo, Bombay to Rio de Janeiro, companies began to shift both their corporate philosophies and everyday operations to allow for greatly increased employee participation in all aspects of their businesses.

The Trust Factor

Others have emphasized different dimensions. Tom Peters, in his book *Liberation Management*, highlights the critical role that trust plays in participatory management. He refers to trust as "The Missing X-Factor," an essential ingredient in today's business environment but one that is so often lacking in many organizations. It is trust that allows conversation to happen, conversations that form the basis of today's knowledge-based economy. To underscore his point, he cites a federal prison where trust has been created between inmates and staff through regular town hall-type meetings and inmate surveys. It is a case of "If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere" (Peters, 1992).

Boundarylessness

For CEO Jack Welch of the General Electric company, trust is also critical but the key is "boundarylessness," i.e., breaking down the barriers that divide employees and that distance companies from employees and customers. Welch calls for a willingness to listen and debate, then take the best ideas and get on with the job. "Exposing people--without the protection of title or position--to ideas from everywhere, judging ideas on their merits" is his message to the modern manager wanting to survive in the global marketplace (Tichy & Sherman, 1993).

Eliminating boundaries within the organization is a cry echoed by Robert Haas, president and CEO of Levi Strauss and Company. What he call "the most rigid boundary of all"--that between workers and managers--must be redefined. Addressing the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, he posed the questions: "Why can't some employees set production goals? Why can't they monitor plant efficiency? Why can't they hire and fire new workers on whom they are increasingly dependent? And why can't they benefit directly from their initiatives which result in higher profits?" (Haas, 1993).

In Brazil, the machinery manufacturer Semco S/A has already gone a long way to answering these very questions. Deciding that hierarchy was the single biggest

obstacle to participatory management, Semco replaced its cumbersome pyramidal structure with three management circles and just four titles--counselor, partner, associate and coordinator--that included everyone in the organization. Furthermore, it insists that certain important decisions are made by a companywide vote.

Such was the case when the company needed a larger plant for its marine division. Initially, it employed real estate agents to search for places but they were unsuccessful. So Semco's "top managers" turned over the job to the employees. In one weekend, they came up with three factories for sale near the existing plant. The company then stopped work for a day and sent everyone to inspect the factories. Next, the workers voted and chose a plant the counselors didn't really want. Willing to trust the workers' wisdom, the company bought the building. Workers designed the layout and hired a top Brazilian artist to paint it. The result? In just four years, the division's productivity per employee increased 160% and its marketshare jumped from 54% to 62%.

Commenting on the experience, company president Ricardo Semler said: "We accepted the employees' decision because we believe that in the long run, letting people participate in the decisions that affect their lives will have a positive effect on employee motivation and morale" (Semler, 1989). The Semco experience has been a strong motivator for other Brazilian companies moving toward more participatory management practices.

The Move to Self-Managed Teams

But dismantling unhelpful hierarchical barriers doesn't imply the absence of organization. Rather, it is the basic organizational unit that has changed, from mammoth departments or divisions to small, self-managing teams. One of the most dramatic examples of the effectiveness of working teams is the Ford Motor Company's Team Taurus. Faced with the challenge of the success of their Japanese rivals, Ford turned over the development of the Taurus to multidisciplinary teams that operated by consensus without interference from top management. Working with amazing speed, the teams came up with a car that has outsold its competitors and given a much needed boost to the American automobile industry.

Teamwork, boundarylessness, trust and bottom-up thinking are but a few of the different faces of participation emerging in business today. There are others to add to the list. All are important and each is a doorway to a new participative mode of management, a new paradigm in business.

While the private sector has played a leading role in introducing participatory concepts and practices, it is by no means alone in this regard. Its experience has been closely paralleled in a number of other fields--government, community development, rural development, education and more. The universality of participation as part of the very fabric of our lives becomes more apparent by the day.

A NEW STYLE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Where President Clinton has broken new ground has been his emphasis on inclusive input, consensus building and a team approach. Taking his cue from private corporations, he set a White House precedent when he invited his entire Cabinet to Camp David for a relaxed weekend planning retreat to focus on the administration's legislative agenda. Designed to allow people to get to know one another better and to coordinate strategy, the weekend used brainstorming techniques to garner ideas on a variety of issues. Even though what Clinton calls a Town Meeting bears little resemblance to the original New England variety, it has set a precedent for a whole new style of political leadership in which accessibility and listening are key factors.

A key dimension of Clinton's participatory style is his use of television. But he is not alone in this field. In 1987, a San Francisco nonprofit and nonpartisan media organization, Choosing Our Future, piloted a prime-time Electronic Town Meeting with its local ABC affiliate television station. Designed to obtain instant public feedback on a critical political issue, the program combined a studio audience panel with a preselected, random sam-

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ple of citizens who phoned in their responses to questions that arose during the discussion. Six "votes" were taken during the hour-long show that was seen by more than 300,000 people in the San Francisco Bay Area.

According to the director of *Choosing Our Future*, Duane Elgin, this type of citizen participation is an essential ingredient of a healthy democracy. "Involving citizens through Electronic Town Meetings will not guarantee the right choices will be made, but it will guarantee that citizens feel involved and invested in those choices. Rather than feeling cynical and powerless, citizens will feel engaged and responsible for our society and its future" (Elgin, 1993).

A RESPONSE FOR DEVELOPING NATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Not only has participation come of age in highly industrialized countries, but much pioneering work on participation, both theoretical models and practical implementation, has happened in the so-called Third World. As far back as 1976, the UNESCO conference in Nairobi, Kenya, declared that participation be put at the forefront of development. By 1990, it had climbed to the top of the agenda when the UN held another conference in Arusha, Tanzania on "Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa."

The World Bank, which earned a reputation in earlier years as a purveyor of large-scale, top-down development aid, has picked up on the necessity of participation in development. It has begun channeling funds to a number of nongovernmental organizations working with grassroots organizations and has embarked on a process of participation within its own ranks.

But these acknowledgments of the importance of participation from the development establishment came only after years of experimentation with participatory approaches on the part of development agencies and rural people themselves. In the early 1980s, the ICA cospon-

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sored a massive international project to define the key factors that had led to successful rural development worldwide. Known as the International Exposition of Rural Development (IERD), this 3-year, global program documented over 300 projects in 55 countries.

Representatives from those projects gathered for 10 days in India in early 1984 to share their experiences, discuss their insights and identify necessary directions for community-based development. Participants came from every culture and continent as well as from private, public and voluntary organizations. It soon became clear that the paramount factor, and, in many cases, the key missing link in development projects, was the authentic participation of community people.

Summarizing the research findings from the IERD, David Blanchard, Chair of Economics at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, stated: "The key to initiating and sustaining bottom-up development is motivation. The critical initial step in building local motivation is broad-based participation in comprehensive planning for solving community needs. Breaking the hold of decades, maybe centuries, of entrenched patterns of relationships and limited images of what is possible requires a new community consensus that appropriate planning may provide" (Blanchard, 1988).

EDUCATION REFORM

Another large and growing advocacy group for participation has been educators. Around the world, the cry for more effective, more relevant and more holistic education has been sounded many times over in recent years. The United States, appalled by continual evaluations that rank its students' academic performances lower than those of most other highly industrialized nations, has seen a flurry of school reform measures enacted across the country. Almost all reform proposals have included some component of increased participation on the part of parents, teachers, administrators and students in the total education process.

The city of Seattle is a case in point. Facing a growing sea of discontent about the state of its schools, it decided in 1990 to launch an Education Summit to gain input and participation from as broad a cross-section of the community as possible to begin to deal with the situation.

People responded. Over a weekend, more than 2,000 turned out at 32 meetings to express their concerns and give their ideas about improving Seattle's schools. Parents, students, teachers, business leaders, neighborhood activists and elected officials were all there. Several weeks later, over 600 people gathered for a citywide meeting to refine priorities and build action plans. Work on implementing these plans continues, aided by significant financial contributions from public and private sector organizations.

While many of the ideas generated in the summit were not unique in the educational field, the process used to elicit them was. It demanded inclusive participation from all those affected by the malaise in education and managed to achieve it.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing examples of participation in today's society are but a handful of the many illustrations that could be given. Certainly, the private sector has no monopoly on participation. What it has are the resources, marketing skills, and international connections that have popularized participation and made it accessible to a ready, global audience. At the same time, as Peter Drucker and others point out, the private sector still has much to learn from the "human change institutions" of the nonprofit world when it comes to participation and other key dimensions of modern management (Drucker, 1992).

The use of participatory methods in all sectors and all levels of society, across national and cultural boundaries underscores the fact that there is something essentially human in devising ways to bring people together in an open and inclusive way to build common solutions to the never-ending challenges they face in their personal, community and professional lives.

Participation: The Axial Principle

Scholar and management consultant Margaret Wheatley goes one step further. Drawing on the insights of quantum physics, chaos theory and molecular biology she makes a strong case that the universe itself is a participatory phenomenon. "Nothing is independent of the relationships that occur. I am constantly creating the world--evoking it, not discovering it--as I participate in all its many interactions," asserts Wheatley. Building on this premise, she states: "Participation, seriously done, is a way out from the uncertainties and ghostly qualities of this nonobjective world we live in. We need a broad distribution of information, viewpoints, and interpretations if we are to make sense of the world" (Wheatley, 1992).

Futurologist Daniel Bell once asserted that a dominating idea or axial principle drives every major period of history. In the 18th century, it was equality; in the 19th century, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, it was rationality. For the postindustrial, information age in

which we live, he named it to be science or knowledge. However, as Belgian management specialist Roger Talpaert pointed out, the axial principle of our time is not knowledge, but participation. "It is unthinkable today," said Talpaert, "for people to contribute to any form of collective action without being able to influence goals and choices" (Talpaert, 1981).

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Be it in the poorest village or plush company offices, the cry to be part of the solution and not merely a victim of circumstances has become one of the defining characteristics of life in our time. As such, participation is not simply a luxury that some people can afford and others miss out on. It is much more a basic right of every citizen of the globe today.

Like any historical phenomenon, though, participation needs its champions. It has found those in many places, but nowhere so prominent as in the international business community. Led by men and women who have seen the end of the old order when authority, control and power were wielded from above, this movement for change has rapidly gained momentum in recent years. A more inclusive, participatory ethic has taken root and there is no turning back.

At the same time, there is still much to learn about participation, even within the innovative walls of modern companies. One way to accelerate and enrich that learning is to examine situations in which participation has been intentionally applied. The case studies in this article are an excellent contribution to that effort. They are living proof that participation is truly enhancing people's capacities to live more fulfilling lives and to contribute to the betterment of their work places, communities and societies at large.

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