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Manufacturing Change

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Abstract

This is a highly accessible presentation of organisational research, which demonstrates how ethnography can elicit a holistic understanding of across section of employees and thereby reveal a workplace culture. It suggests that change efforts fail if culture is ignored and offers a detailed account of how critical incidents translate into tools for change. The data analysis reveals the weakness in working relationships and how blame functions to prevent change. The Ideal Plant project emerges, which validates transformation tools to create cooperative workplace interactions and collaborative problem solving. The past and future, metaphorically represented as two different places, are connected by a bridge. The old way is bad, the new way is good and the present is a mixture of both.

Keywords

Ethnography, Collaboration, Ideal PlantMetrics

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Manufacturing Change

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This is a highly accessible presentation of organisational research, which demonstrates how ethnography can elicit a holistic understanding of a cross section of employees and thereby reveal a workplace culture. It suggests that change efforts fail if culture is ignored and offers a detailed account of how critical incidents translate into tools for change. The data analysis reveals the weakness in working relationships and how blame functions to prevent change. The Ideal Plant project emerges, which validates transformation tools to create cooperative workplace interactions and collaborative problem solving. The past and future, metaphorically represented as two different places, are connected by a bridge. The old way is bad, the new way is good and the present is a mixture of both. Key Words: Ethnography, Collaboration, Ideal Plant Metrics.

A recent MSc graduate in Social Research Skills, but with previous personnel experience, albeit well away from the line in the rarefied atmosphere of the 16th floor corporate offices, I was interested in reading Briody, Trotter, and Meerwarth (2010) *Transforming Culture: Creating and Sustaining a Better Manufacturing Organization* to see how this account of the car manufacturing industry in the United States compares with the industrial relations history of the car manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom. British Leyland, a conglomerate of top brands including Austin, Triumph, Daimler and Rover, was formed in the 1960s to rival General Motors in the worldwide market. Instead, despite its iconic car, the Mini, it epitomised all that was wrong with British manufacturing in the 1970s. General Motor's path seems to have followed a similar trajectory. Once the embodiment of American culture, by the 21st century, General Motors was in a state of near collapse, when it initiated this Ideal Plant Culture Transformation Project as one response to its declining fortunes.

This book charts the shift from mass production to lean production using the metaphor of a bridge to focus on organizational culture change processes, where a consensus is built around moving from an imperfect past towards a better future. The team spent years researching and developing the set of tools which they present here.

Briody et al. (2010) sets the scene with an introduction to the history of car manufacturing in the United States—an interesting story in its own right—of mass production and consumption. This is contrasted with the recent history of car manufacturing in Japan—flexible production—zero inventory and zero defects. Just as the Japanese used reverse-engineering, i.e. purchasing and stripping down of US cars to copy them, so too GM borrowed from the Toyota System i.e. quality and stakeholder engagement.

This book documents an applied hybrid research approach designed to maximise stakeholder input and buy-in. The whole process is participatory and community-based.

The researcher's ethnographic goal is to capture view of ideal plant culture and elicit contrasting views of current or past plant culture.

The research team gather, analyse and validate statements and stories from the plant floor, in the belief that soliciting views increases the probability of success. Workers connect with storytelling but may disconnect from the mission statements handed down from executives who think that the culture is theirs to change at will. Stories are vital to raise awareness, reinforce ideals, transmit knowledge and challenge resistance. Inevitably, pockets of resistance vie with pockets of transformation. Stories identify obstacles and enablers. Enablers are culture specific processes, which support transformation or at least temper the impact of obstacles.

The researchers draw upon concepts in change literature to explore the cultural dilemmas and contradictions which emerge as issues on the line. The dilemma of innovation versus standardisation, hierarchy versus empowerment, individual versus group are visible. In a classic say/do dichotomy, there is a contradiction between the stated goal of quality, where the actual goal is quantity.

The strength of the book is the description of the ethnographic approach, and detailed account of how critical incidents are translated into tools for change "transforming the present into a different future, rather than maintaining the past into an indefinite present." Ethnography makes an explicit commitment to grounding the researcher's interpretations in perceptions of those in field of study. This is an ethical stance, a move from researcher centered to an iterative process with stakeholders. The semi participant observer stance enables relationship building and an insight into the authentic lived experience, which makes the stories from the line so compelling. It is a compliment to the researchers that the participants enjoyed the process.

There are tantalizingly brief glimpses of life on the line. I love the story of how the material handlers aka scavengers keep the line moving. Their highly creative response to material shortages involves searching, hoarding and trading in parts, reminiscent of black marketers, but incongruous in a modern factory. The content analysis of statements about this behaviour reveals it as a negative adaptation to a blame culture. Blame avoidance helped reach quota but hid the structural problem of material shortages. The blame culture of the past was destructive—it had to change (Briody et al., 2010, pp. 52-56).

The stud gun story was almost comical with three senior managers at the scene of a breakdown, despite which the repair took place. On a purely technical level the repair was speedy and successful (Briody et al., 2010, pp. 107-111). On a relationship level, it was a failure, not atypical of the old culture but a breech of the attempts to move toward a new culture. This formed the basis of a video game, with avatars involving what-if scenarios to explore the interactions and confrontation. Interestingly the manager in question was on contract. It may not have been possible to unpack the incident fully, if he had had long service and permanent employment status.

The hoist story, sub-titled *problem solving as an enabler* (pp. 129-135) is another critical learning incident with both positive (ergonomic work practice) and negative (relationship) elements. This shows empowerment at work as subordinates provide input into both the definition of the problem and decisions around solving it. When responsibility rests with those closest to task both the speed and quality of decision making improves.

The Ideal Culture Plant culture comprises four balanced elements: one was the plant environment, then work practices on the plant floor, next was the work-force and last was relationships. There are issues around workplace structure, for example, the ergonomics which office staff take for granted, preventative machine maintenance, colour coded signage, rest rooms close to line, and team rooms away from noise. But it is the workplace dynamics, or relationships that are most problematic. Collaboration is advocated by all, witnessed by the sheer number of references emerges as the cross cutting theme.

Metrics establish a baseline from which to gauge change. The toolkit developed by the researchers creates metrics for understanding, practicing and measuring collaboration. The tools were tested and validated over two years. There are three relationship dynamics, engaging in positive interactions, working together on tasks, connecting with those in other roles. There are seven workgroup relationship features: trust, respect, cooperation, job empathy, communication, fairness, and conflict. Typically, the tools include a problem, a goal, information/insights, and practical problem solving exercises. The workplace disagreements case-study format allows workers to strategise about addressing conflict quickly and effectively. The hot spots tool opens discussions on known clashes. The format varies from computer game to a one page reference card for preferred behaviour. The key is regular use.

If there is a weakness it may ironically, that although the author's quote Romer's Rule—that evolution occurs incrementally as gradually changing systems keep on attempting to maintain themselves—there is no allusion to peak oil. The potential readership includes academics and practitioners alike. The former for the rigour of the research process and the latter for the tools which enable cultural change towards collaboration and cooperation. The author is complimented in the preface not only on her work, but on her documentation of it for use elsewhere. It is almost a manual for dissemination-of-innovation. This cultural change model is commended as a model for the American workplace.

For resources such as description, contents, and authors information about the book please go to http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=394590

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Author Note

Una Ruddock holds a MA in Management for Pastoral and Voluntary Services, an MSc in Social Research Skills, and is an Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. She has worked for over ten years in the community and voluntary sector in Ireland and previously worked in personnel in the United Kingdom. Her article *Vincentian Spirituality and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society* was published in 2008 in **Managing with Heart**, Joseph McCann and Moya Curran (Eds) (pp. 123-132).

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