

The Management of Self-Managing Groups

Fred Emery, November 1989

This title is not meant as an oxymoronic play on words to disparage either the notion of management or of self managing work groups. The title is meant to remind us that even if responsibility for co-ordination and control of workplace activities is largely vested in the workplace operators there are still the problems of managing the support and renewal of these groups and their relation to corporate objectives. In this context 'corporate objectives' should not be thought of as simply goals devised by top management to suit their whims. Corporate objectives reflect the multiple external relations that must be sustained if the corporate body is to survive, let alone grow.

It might be thought that existing management structures and practices can readily cope with the management of a workforce that is organized as self managing groups. An argument along these lines would be that each group could be regarded as equivalent to an individual in the traditional bureaucratic organization. If that were so then all that would be needed is close observance, by managers, of good 'Human Relations/Human Resources' practices. I will argue that that is not so.

First, the shift to SMGs (self managing groups) radically changes the content of the management task and the *amount* of managing that is required.

Second, the relation between a manager and an SMG cannot be properly described as being a superordinate -subordinate relation.

Third, the tasks of management cannot be effectively conducted in superordinate- subordinate relations between managers.

I will expand on each of these three points.

The change in management's tasks can best be appreciated by comparing these with those required by the modern bureaucratic form of organization. (The traditional bureaucracies were typically civil services. The administrative systems they evolved were less visible than the practices of secured tenure and organizational loyalty by which they sought to insulate themselves from external influences. However, the so called management sciences are no more than the systematization of the bureaucratic administrative principles.)

The 'system principle' of bureaucratic organization is that 'decisions about co-ordination are made at least one level above that at which the tasks are carried out'. Only by following this principle is it possible to isolate, for overseeing and evaluation, the work of each and every individual and thus control the work performance of the individual. At each level in the bureaucratic organization including the managerial levels, the same principle is followed. At each level there is always some individual with designated responsibility for supervising what is actually being done by subordinates. This work of supervision is the necessary work of bureaucratic management, and for a great many managers, their main work.

In government departments and in statutory bodies, it is easy to live with the demands of supervisory work because they live in a relatively slowly changing environment defined by law and official regulations. In a very real sense, the only work they can find to justify their jobs is that of turning inwards to check what their subordinates are up to. The only external matters that they have to watch are the influences on their political masters and the top civil servants make sure that this is no concern of their subordinates.

In private enterprises on the other hand, there is constant tension between the demands of the supervisory task and the demands of the 'boundary riding' task. This latter task is that of watching the changing relations between the organization and its environment and planning for the maintenance or adaptation of those relations. Private enterprises are, by comparison, highly exposed by their competitive environments. If these environments start to change rapidly and in unexpected ways, then it becomes harder to justify the costs and sluggishness of the bureaucratic

form of organization. As private enterprises grew to corporate size at the turn of the century they adopted bureaucratic forms of organization (Chandler, 1977). These private bureaucracies burgeoned with the emergence of increasing numbers of staff functions and then the move to divisional forms, with each division wanting its own staff.

Middle management in the corporations could sometimes almost, but not quite, achieve the remoteness from external realities that was built into civil service roles. By the middle of the nineteen sixties it was obvious that the corporate environment was becoming increasingly turbulent and corporate management started to live with almost constant organizational restructuring. (By the mid seventies 'organizational restructuring' had become a standard managerial response to any problem). It became obvious that the primary task of senior management was boundary management. Having to manage internal problems was a diversion from their primary task. Even middle managers found that their primary service to their departments was in watching both the organizational environments and their seniors so that they could anticipate the next restructuring. But at all levels the managers had to find time to co-ordinate the activities of their subordinates in order to maintain internal control. Typically this work absorbs more of their time than does their primary task.

With the shift to self managing groups, depending on the conceptual demands of the work, the amount of work to be performed by middle managers is radically reduced and their remaining tasks become more demanding. Effective management probably requires only a third to one half the number of middle management positions required by the bureaucratic system.

The demands on the remaining middle managers also change. They have to be able to plan their own department's work for a much larger time span, and they have to be able to contribute to fire fighting or troubleshooting in many departments other than their own.

The time span of middle management must increase with the extension of the time span of planning at the workplace. With the introduction of group working the latter typically increases from a few hours to a weekly span. Operational plans have also to be more explicit and more detailed with respect to all of the parameters that effect group working e.g. supplies, maintenance, storage, feedback of results, staff levels. So long as middle management could work through experienced supervisors it was often enough to give the senior supervisor a general idea of targets and guidelines and let them get on with the job. This is far too sloppy when negotiating agreements to explicit and detailed plans is the major tool for relating group work to corporate goals.

The 'trouble shooting' requirement arises from the fact that the amount of work required for even this more demanding planning will rarely warrant the appointment of one middle manager for each department. To justify middle management appointments the appointees must be deployable to assist with temporary management crises wherever they occur in the enterprise. Their spare time, when pooled, becomes a valuable reserve force for higher management.

The second change noted above, is that the relation between management and workers is no longer properly described as a super- subordinate relation. The relation is more complementary in the very real sense that both parties accept that the sufficient conditions for changes in organizational goals or procedures may proceed from either party, depending on the particular circumstances. The key to this change is that middle managers cannot, with the aid of their supervisors, narrow challenges to their judgement down to individuals. They are confronted by the considered judgement of groups whose members have practical, up to date experience of what they are talking about. Individuals may not be consistently strong on logic but a process of challenge and discussion within a group means that the group can arrive at a consensus on the correct logical deduction. Managers will ignore this at their peril. Taken as a complement to management's analysis of the situation it greatly enhances the chances for adaptive action.

Management of this complementary relation requires leadership on the part of the middle managers. It is not enough to hand down orders and instructions as if 'to the manner born'. It is not

enough to try to blind the workforce with science and figures. Middle management must negotiate targets and plans with the work groups and re-negotiate them when unforeseen contingencies disrupt those plans. In all of these negotiations the middle managers have to give credence to the greater knowledge that the work groups have of the ongoing work but must, when necessary, be able to lead those groups to see the logic of the over riding plans and objectives of management. Middle managers must exercise this leadership in a face to face context if the corporate objectives are to prevail over the run of negotiated agreements with the work groups.

Introducing a term like 'leadership' is almost an open invitation to slack thinking because it defies strict definition. However, when a situation demands leadership we can be painfully aware of its absence. Thus, analysis of World War II records makes it very clear that the American Army was painfully deficient in leadership at the lower officer levels compared with the Wehrmacht (van Creveldt, 1982). What calls for leadership in the new work situation is the necessity to keep the complementary aspect of the management worker relation to the fore whilst ensuring that corporate objectives are attained. A middle manager displays a lack of leadership if he sacrifices the latter in order to avoid arguments. Equally, a lack of leadership is indicated if a middle manager thinks that every argument has to be won, not just that in the run of arguments the corporate objectives must prevail (even if the corporation, not the middle manager, has to change its objectives!).

Lack of leadership would also be indicated if the manager failed to provide support e.g. supplies, maintenance, training, personnel help, when the need could have been foreseen. Finally, we would expect to find a lack of leadership if a group that was on a learning curve plateaued out for no good technical reason. As we have indicated, leadership is like justice, hard to define positively but very easy to identify in its absence. In the case of leadership it may be because leadership comes in so many different shapes and sizes. Only a couple of features seem to show up all the time (almost all!) in leadership behaviour. The leader is credited with having a bigger picture that makes sense of the picture the group are working to, the leader is credited with more than average commitment to a mission they subscribe to and that the leader accepts that their relation is one of mutual dependency.

We are not concerned here with charismatic leadership nor with the selection of people 'born to lead'. Our concerns are much more down to earth. When a work group is locked into their immediate tasks, managers in their leadership role, have to remind them of the broader context within which their efforts will be judged. Safety is one such matter, as in group working individuals are known to voluntarily take risks that they would not take if they were working on their own. Whilst the work group may relax a bit and take things easy after achieving some immediate goal, the managers must be planning the resources and targets for the next stages.

If some individual seems to be exploiting the goodwill and tolerance of the group or, conversely, the group seems to be unfairly dealing with some individual, then the managers must find some way of reminding the group of their mutual dependency and the standards of conduct that that demands. If managers shrug it off, let slip or turn a blind eye in these kinds of situations there is a failure of leadership, the managers are failing in their duty to actively represent to the work group the constraints and requirements of their broader organizational context. If managers fail in these matters one can expect a work group to quickly perceive that fact and then to withdraw its own commitment to pursuit of organizational goals. In my experience, work group in this situation do not regress but tend to freeze at the levels of performance that they have attained and ignore opportunities for further improvement.

Where and how are organizations to find or create such leadership qualities? MBA programs do not produce these qualities and standard managerial selection procedures do not select for them. Some Japanese corporations have innovative procedures for selecting managers with leadership qualities but the Bushido code that they conform to is incompatible with the challenges we are discussing.

Modern armies have come to realize that they need to select, train and promote officers for their leadership qualities. Industry now confronts the same demands. Unfortunately, most armies have been so hidebound by traditions and social statuses that they have solved few of the problems.

The British Army was confronted with this problem after its losses at Dunkirk and the need to vastly expand its forces. The 'leaderless group' selection procedure and 'regimental nomination' were devised to meet their need. (Wilson, 1951) The former procedure was subsequently adopted by the British Civil Service for entry into its general administrator grade.

These measures do not seem to go far enough.

It seems more likely that we will have to consider the practice of the Wehrmacht and the Norwegian Merchant Marine, selection through initial service at the workplace. This is not to suggest that future managers should first wear a hair shirt or undergo the humiliating and demeaning experiences usually dished out to potential officers of navies and armies. Initial participation at the workplace will do little unless it is participation in self managing work groups. In such work settings we are able to see how an individual meets the conceptual challenges involved in multiskilling which includes the tasks of co-ordination usually associated with first line supervision. It also enables us to see if the person is able to effectively exercise personal leadership in the group. The persons themselves can get a feel for whether they are cut out for managerial roles all with financial gain, not cost, to the individual or the organization! When an organization then commits itself to financially support education for the transition to management, it knows that it is putting its money on a likely winner.

Special entry paths will always be necessary for some specialists but this seem the way in which we can best identify people who can contribute to managing in a way that will itself become more collegiate in form.

References

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