

Is Genuine Improvement in Organizations Possible?



The Cynic's Doubts

Every manager has had the experience of enthusiastically learning new techniques and methods that are designed to make people more productive, only to have their attempts to apply them lead to disappointment.

The people who work for them don't respond in the way that they anticipated or, perhaps, they respond as anticipated at first but then soon return to their same marginal level of performance. This sort of discouragement is almost universal. It is found in attempts to stimulate productivity by such techniques as incentive plans, re-design of the working environment, time management seminars, assertiveness training, training in negotiation and delegation techniques, and so on.

One company, for example, sent some of its key management personnel to a seminar on time management. These managers came back very enthusiastic about their experience and about the prospect of improving their use of time. They began recording their activities to identify what they were doing throughout the day that was a waste of their time—activities, for example, that could be performed by secretaries or by other

subordinates. These managers believed that they could become 25% more effective by eliminating the nonproductive tasks they were performing—non-productive for them personally—and as a result of this would accomplish a great deal more in their overall management responsibilities.

After an initial surge, these managers soon did get some additional time. They were momentarily pleased with this realization of their efforts; but they soon discovered that even though they had more time, they were no more effective as managers than they had been before. Productivity did not increase. Morale did not improve. Subordinates did not take more initiative or responsibility than they had taken in the past. Nothing of consequence changed. The managers now had more time but they had no idea how to use it to advantage. They were (so-called) effective time managers, but their time management made no difference.

In another company an executive level management team was sent to a seminar on marketing where a great deal of very technical and well-designed training was given for analyzing the marketplace, determining competitors' positions, analyzing the government's posture and its impact on the market, and so on. Upon their return the executives distributed this information to the relevant middle-level managers in the company and then watched for the anticipated results.

The results never appeared.

People in the company went through the motions for a while (there were lots of memos, for example) but the programs never quite got underway: the necessary studies were never completed properly, jealousy between departments prevented the degree of cooperation that was required, key people could not agree on some of the facts (after all, the studies had never been completed). And so on. To some of the other department managers it appeared that these executives had gone to a seminar and returned with a so-called new religion to 'save'

the company.

But within eight months the effort simply died. The executives knew the marketing information and they passed it on to other managers; but they never could get those managers and the other people in the company to implement the changes required by the information they received.

The information, the time, the money, the effort—all had been wasted.

These are just two examples of management problems: (1) learning a new management technique only to discover that it seems to make no difference, and (2) acquiring valuable information and ideas that, despite their value, prove almost impossible to implement due to the resistance of key managers and subordinates. There are many others. Here are a few, a bit more individualized:

- A department head who seems intelligent but who has elaborate excuses for repeated shortcomings in their department. Frequently these excuses are worked out in advance in their mind. 'I'm doing my job right,' they say. 'Why can't they?'
- A vice-president who will only hire mediocre people who pose no threat to their position.
- A foreman who pushes and berates their people constantly, and the more they push, the more the subordinates seem to drag their feet and to need the foreman's prodding.
- Co-workers in a department who are preoccupied with rumors and building armies against one another and against management.
- A comptroller who insists that reports and other control devices be designed their way ('I'm the expert in these matters') despite objections by the departments who use them.

All ten of the examples presented so far have two major elements in common. The first element (which was directly illustrated by the first example) is this: Management problems are extremely difficult to solve; they *resist* solution.

People have been devising management techniques and problem-solving strategies for years—and for good reason: despite the techniques and the strategies, the problems persist. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on management information, yet executives constantly face disappointment as they attempt to implement the new ideas and concepts they have learned.

These executives want genuine improvement in their companies—they sense the possibility of a psychologically easy, highly productive working environment—but it seems to elude them despite their best efforts to achieve it.

It is this reality—the general failure of even prodigious and ingenious effort to eradicate management problems—that makes many people doubt whether such eradication is possible. If attempts at genuine improvement so often fail, they say, why continue to believe in its possibility? Repeated failure ought to be sufficient proof that the success we seek doesn't exist but is instead a mere delusion—a utopian daydream—or, perhaps, even the duplicitous invention of those who write management books and give management seminars.

These people are cynical about the possibility of genuine change. They have seen dozens of gimmicks trumpeted as the formula for success, all to be replaced by new, improved formulae at someone else's seminar; they, once in lower management positions themselves, have seen superiors return from week-long seminars with a degree of excitement and resolve that, at the first sign of a difficult problem, still gave way to the 'old,' preferred style of management; they, in short, have seen old wine in new bottles so often, and in so many different forms, that they have begun to disbelieve in

any but old wine possibilities.

They are cynical about the possibility of genuine change and their cynicism is well-founded.

The Possibility of Genuine Improvement

Is the cynic right? Are the usual management problems insoluble?

To answer these questions, consider the second major element common to all of the earlier examples of management problems: They are all *people* problems.

It is a person who, as sales manager, seems deliberately to waste their time on inconsequential details. It is a person who, as vice-president, sees each applicant as a threat to their position and thus hires only those who are mediocre. It is a person who, as foreman, berates and punishes their people so that their performance only declines. And they are all persons who, as key managers and subordinates, resist the implementation of new ideas and strategies into the corporation.

There are two aspects to this. First, the manager manages people. One who is in charge only of such corporate assets as equipment, capital, inventory, and such, is not a manager. Only when one is entrusted with the human assets of the corporation—when they are given subordinates to supervise—are they called a manager. A person, then, may perform many other functions besides managing, *but in their capacity as a manager their concern is with people.*

(This was overlooked by the managers in the first example. They forgot that effective time management is useful only in the service of effective people management; if not used to that end, time-management techniques themselves become a waste

of time.)

The second aspect is that the manager themselves is first of all a person. They are not primarily a technician; a strategist; a balance-keeper; an evaluator; a problem-solver; a teacher. They are primarily a person, a person with qualities, or attitudes. *And those personal qualities, or attitudes, will determine their effectiveness in everything they do as a manager.* The degree to which they are successful in supervising subordinates will depend almost exclusively on their mindset toward them.

So, when we say that management problems are people problems, we mean, first, that the problems requiring management ability are problems concerning people. The manager who deluges themselves with technical debris, so that they are unable to entertain and solve people problems, is simply not a manager—whatever they and others may call them. They may, even so, be a brilliant marketing analyst, a superb technician, a scintillating lecturer and image-maker. But they are not a manager.

Second, by saying that management problems are people problems, we mean that the manager is first of all a person and that it will be in virtue of their personal qualities, their attitudes, that they either succeed or fail in their management responsibilities.

The reason for the frustration of the managers and executives in all of the above cases, then, is that even though they know what ought to happen, and they learn the techniques, the techniques fail because the people haven't changed.

The people have some new concepts and some new methods, but they still have their former mindset. As a result, these new techniques and methods are employed with this mindset to do the very things they were doing before: evading responsibility, protecting precious domains, fanning petty

jealousies; in short, annoying and provoking one another in the same manner as before.

In such circumstances, things may change a little bit for a little while but when crises appear everyone subsides into the same old patterns of behavior. In fact, the only noticeable result after a few months is that now everyone is more cynical than ever about the prospect of genuine improvement in the company, short of firing everyone (else) and bringing in (nearly) all new people.

So, techniques and strategies are secondary in management. Fundamentally, what must change are people—their mindsets, their feelings about one another and their jobs, their willingness to cease accusing others and to take responsibility for their own conduct. When these changes occur, then various management techniques and strategies can be successfully implemented. When these changes are absent, implementation of the same techniques and strategies will be in vain.

We can now appreciate the cynic's doubts more fully. They are right that management problems are intractable, when the approach to them is made by conventional management methods that only address behavior and not mindset. And since they have never seen any other kind of approach, they are right, based upon their experience, in disbelieving in the prospect of genuine change. They have never seen it.

But the cynic's failure to see such improvement—indeed, to see any but the conventional techniques-and-strategies approach at all— is due to the failure of the business world generally to see that management problems are fundamentally people problems—mindset problems—and that conventional techniques and strategies are therefore largely irrelevant to their solution.

This raises the possibility, not previously taken seriously by the cynic, that an approach that doesn't rely upon techniques

(even human relations techniques), but instead focuses on changing people's mindsets, may succeed where conventional efforts have failed.

If the possibility is not real, then the cynic is right. If nothing superior to the conventional approach exists, and since the conventional approach doesn't seem to work, what we have called management problems are, indeed, intractable and we are doomed to languish in them.

If, on the other hand, the possibility is real, then the cynic is wrong. Management problems, which are people problems, can be solved. (This is important because only people can solve the other kinds of problems.) Then, with evasion of responsibility, accusation, and excuse-making largely eliminated, the business can finally get down to performing its proper task: production.

Is Genuine Improvement Possible?

So, then, is genuine improvement possible?

The answer is yes, provided that we address the real problem. Management problems are people problems, and people can change. They can produce. They can cooperate. They can improve. In short, they can grow.

But only if we first address mindset, making the needs, objectives, and concerns of our coworkers integral to our role as manager.

If we don't, we will continue to be beset by problems.

Fortunately, that doesn't have to be the case. It is precisely because management problems are mindset problems that they can be solved.