

Taming The Autocratic Boss

C. Raymond Rogers

Dictatorships can be stifling. In an autocratic organization, employees seldom participate in decisions that affect them. By establishing a collaborative environment, you allow everyone to play a role in making your organization a success.

Three different organizations in three different situations achieved the same results. What was the common denominator?

In one facility, first-time-through capabilities went from 89% to 98.7%.

At the second facility, results from a J. D. Power Survey showed that customers rated a car built on a new line as No. 1 in its class.

At the third facility, the firm won the Malcolm Baldrige Award - five years after Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, exalted the firm for establishing a new paradigm for manufacturing.

So what's the common bond among these three organizations? All three changed from operating with an autocratic environment to operating with a collaborative one.

Learn From Others

Organizations like the ones mentioned can teach us much that we can apply to our own organizations. For example:

- A collaborative organization needs a strong leader to get started.

- Leaders have to possess courage to change the things they can change, patience to accept the things they cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

- Three areas must change for a company to become a collaborative organization: the behavior of the leader(s), everyday interactions, and the work environment.

When discussing the changes that need to occur in an organization - the environment, interactions, and leaders' behavior - skeptics lament that these factors are too much like apple pie and motherhood. The critics are absolutely right. The principles and concepts are so simple that hardly anyone fails to subscribe to them or to deny their importance. Getting organizations to change and to behave so that individuals feel they are part of the collaborative process,



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however, is not simple.

Change Takes Time

The organizational metamorphosis from an autocratic to a collaborative organization takes time and patience. Leaders - union and management - in too many facilities are like little children on a trip asking, "Are we there yet?" The reality is that the moment a leader commits to changing his or her organization from autocratic to collaborative, the organization already is *there*. Organizational change is a process and a journey. The process creates the new environment. However, done piecemeal, getting to the place where individuals comment on collaboration by saying, "That's just the way we do things around here," will take five to eight years. If planned, the metamorphosis will take two

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to three years.

The first step in establishing a collaborative environment is defining what involvement will look like. This step includes determining what type of interactions will take place and what kind of behavior leaders will model on a daily basis. One way to get started is to use the accomplishments of collaborative organizations as benchmarks. To illustrate, following is a summary of what we have found in those companies that have made the change and now are saying, "That's just the way we do business around here."

Benchmarks of a Collaborative Organization

Have you noticed that when people enter a church their behavior changes? They become quieter. Likewise, our behavior changes when we enter a football stadium. We become louder. Employees' behavior changes when they enter a collaborative environment; they become more involved, interested, and dedicated.

Achieving a collaborative environment requires rethinking the current functional structures and information systems. In some facilities, creating small business units forces manufacturing, maintenance, and quality control, for example, to form new alliances. This new structure increases communication, enhances priority setting, and improves the measurements of quality, cost, and delivery.

One way to increase collaboration is to reduce functional barriers. And that in-

cludes barriers between engineering disciplines. In bringing about the desired change from an autocratic to a collaborative organization, an organization's engineering staff plays a critical role. For example, in many organizations, engineers influence equipment design and layout, parts design, and method of production, all of which impact the way workers and managers interact as they perform tasks.

Engineers need to collaborate, not practice their various disciplines in isolation and then "throw their airy ideas over the wall" for the next engineering group. One example of collaboration, *simultaneous engineering*, in which all engineering disciplines - including maintenance - work together, has made a difference in a number of organizations. This approach makes a great deal of sense. Yet for more than 50 years, most companies have not practiced it. Is it any wonder that facility managers, supervisors, and workers question an organization's sanity, when they are given parts that don't fit together easily or machines that don't run properly? Yet, these members of the organization are requested and required to *build quality*.

Simultaneous engineering, then, is a prime example of breaking down barriers. Similarly, for example, ad hoc groups of engineers, supervisors, and floor workers might focus on developing an ergonomically correct piece of equipment and, in the process, abolish tradi-

tional barriers.

Information systems must be altered in a collaborative environment. Most current systems are designed to provide information to the top managers. In a collaborative organization, information flows up, down, and sideways. The key question to ask is, "What information is required to ensure that a specific task meets 1) the required quality level, 2) the delivery of the quantities needed, and 3) acceptable cost parameters?"

In a number of collaborative environments, anyone involved with a machine has access to information about that machine. SPC charts,

making, the critical differences between an autocratic and a collaborative organization rest in the answer to two questions:

- *Who is involved?* The collaborative organization involves in a decision anyone who has information relevant to the problem. Furthermore, anyone with a problem involves anyone else whose commitment is required in order to ensure the successful resolution of the problem. For example, when a machine has a problem, an operator stays with the machine to answer critical questions from the maintenance technician. That way, the technician isolates the

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IN DECISION MAKING, THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AUTOCRATIC AND A COLLABORATIVE ORGANIZATION RESTS IN THE ANSWER TO TWO QUESTIONS:

WHO IS INVOLVED? HOW?

process capability estimates, and data and task procedures are easily accessible. The information also is updated constantly as improvements are verified.

Problem Solving, Decision Making, and Planning

As regards planning, problem solving, and decision

cause of the problem more rapidly. Similarly, lift truck drivers provide ideas and recommendations about specifications before the company buys new trucks.

- *How are people involved?* Managers and leaders in a collaborative organization seek advice, opinions, and



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concerns. They make decisions based on consensus much more frequently than do managers in autocratic organizations. Leaders in a collaborative organization know the value of honestly asking questions of and listening to the people who will be affected by a decision. However, in a truly collaborative organization, managers and leaders will use a full range of behaviors from making a decision alone to securing full consensus. The way they decide in a given situation will depend on the situation - on the needs of others for information, on maintaining everyone's commitment to the organization, on the impact of the decision on the development of people, and, of course, on time. Time, however, is the last consideration.

Managers' and Supervisors' Behavior

Herb Stone, facility manager at General Motors' Wentzville Assembly Plant and a proven collaborative manager, says, "I work harder, but enjoy the work more than [with] any other approach to management that I've tried." In a collaborative environment, managers and supervisors are both customer- and employee-driven. Clear differences exist in the way managers and supervisors behave when working in a collaborative rather than an autocratic organization. As one supervisor put it, "I used to spend my time enforcing compliance to procedures. Now I spend my time removing barriers between groups and eliminat-

ing excessive procedures." Another supervisor, commenting on his facility manager, put it this way: "Jim is constantly helping me understand what we have to accomplish and then asking me what I need to get the job done."

Leaders in a collaborative organization work at turning over power, information, and decision making to others. Developing skills of the team members is a high priority for each leader. Collaborative organizations highly reward coaching, which leads to skill improvement.

Mistakes in a collaborative organization are viewed as an opportunity to learn. They signal, not a need to punish, but a need for training, coaching, and counselling.

The End Result

In a collaborative organization, managers and supervisors have honed their coaching and counselling skills. Interactions are handled in a common-sense way, within the bounds of common courtesy. Objectives are shared, and the entire organization is caught up in a constant flow of energy toward accomplishing those objectives. Whenever a collaborative environment has replaced an autocratic environment, bottom line improvements in quality, cost, and customer satisfaction have been the end result. ■

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