

Vanguard Articles - Participation

Many managers seem to think that participation means having task forces or committees for everything; they set them up at the drop of a hat regardless of the fact that it might be more sensible to solve some problems in other ways. The task forces often remain in place once they have finished their initial work, or they find more to do and turn themselves into standing committees. Managers, eager to show they are 'participative', count the task forces they have set up rather than focus on what is being accomplished.

Despite the appearance of action, many managers have misgivings about participation: 'I can't involve my people in everything - it's my job to make the decisions'

This is right - but not quite right. The manager chooses who to involve and when to involve them. There are times when an individual decision is better than a team decision but it is the manager's job to see that the right decisions are made (rather than make them all himself/herself).

Participation is knowing who to involve and when to involve them

The research on leadership and decision making makes it clear that the use of teams for decision making is most effective for purposes related to staying ahead of change, as follows:

- To gain new ideas and experience
- To get collaboration, ensuring that many will be trying rather than one
- To allow those who feel they can make a contribution to get involved
- To build consensus on a critical issue
- To allow people who will be affected to influence decisions and hence be committed to them
- To tackle a problem that goes across boundaries
- To develop and educate people through their involvement

Participation is a means for getting work done

Participative managers are recognised by their ability to:

1. Communicate openly
2. Establish close relationships with others in the organisation
3. Organise frequent team efforts

These abilities enable them to access the information and resources and gain the support they need to perform effectively.

There are times when participation is not appropriate, namely:

- When one person is clearly the expert
- When those affected by the decision acknowledge and accept such expertise
- When someone has to deal with this issue as part of his normal workload (and it would be up to him to form a team if necessary)
- When no real development needs would be met by involving people
- When there is not sufficient time
- When people are working well on their own
- When the decision has already been made

In the last case, however, it might be of value for managers to invite participation on how best to implement the decision.

Delegation is not abdication. Delegating responsibilities does not mean abdicating your managerial responsibility for monitoring and supporting the work. The manager should stay involved, know what is going on and support the work with information and advice.

'People want to be involved in the big decisions'

This is not true. Initially, at least, most people only want to be involved in local issues, daily annoyances and things they see as inhibiting performance. So many trivial wrongs persistently survive in organisations simply because no-one asked the operators how they might be righted (and even if they had been asked, the operators probably felt that their answers wouldn't be listened to).

An agricultural service organisation supplying tractors with drivers allowed the drivers to choose the tractors bought for their use. The owner's logic was simple. Tractor drivers have a habit of liking different machines for different reasons. If he allowed them to choose their own they would be more productive and care more about their machines. He was right.

It surprises some managers to find that their employees care about and have good ideas about the way their work is organised.

People usually don't feel as informed about bigger issues, indeed, they may feel threatened if their contribution is sought. On local issues, people have a lot of experience which they are usually keen to bring to bear on the problem.

'This is democracy gone mad'

It could be if you let it, and if you did it would serve you poorly. People do not perform well with unrestricted freedom - you should not let them simply go and do whatever they want. Instead, you should help them by establishing the ground rules or limits of the work you want them to do.