

Participative Management

Brian Watkin*

Participative management is one style of management. It is not necessarily the best in all circumstances. It was not the same as joint consultation or a consultive style of management, with which it is frequently confused.

Consultation is asking people what they think about a proposed change or a new policy. Participation is asking them to decide, with your help, what the change should be.

Perhaps there is a reduction in the working week agreed for nurses by the Nurses and Midwives Whitley Council. In the one case, the chief nursing officer may work out a scheme for implementation of shorter working week, announce it to her principal nursing officers and ask them to obtain any comments, criticism, or suggestions from their staff. When she gets the comments back, she may well decide that some of them are valid, and modify her scheme. This is consultation.

Another chief nursing officer may simply announce that a shorter working week has to be implemented, but how this is to be done, within the constraints imposed by Whitley agreements, is up to the staff to decide. It is unlikely that all staff will be able to participate directly in the development of a scheme, and for practical reasons most will have to participate through representatives. A committee may well be set up representing each grade of staff, with the chief nursing officer as a member. She makes it clear that she will accept many solutions devised by the group which is established hospital policy. This is participative decision-making.

Where it appropriately can be used, participation has a number of advantages, some of which it shares, in varying degrees, with consultation. The chief advantages are these:

1. Participation taps a rich source of ideas and creativity—on many subjects subordinates may know better than the manager the

needs of the situation, and participation allows them to contribute their knowledge and experience before the manager has nailed his colours to the mast.

2. Participation in group decision making helps members of an organisation to take a wider view, to see the needs of the organisation as a whole, and to look beyond departmental or divisional advantage.
3. Participation increases commitment and encourages people to feel the responsibility for the success of decisions and policies to which they have contributed—they become their decisions and their policies rather than those of the manager.
4. Participation eases the problems of adjusting to change—the evidence that change is required is placed before the group as a whole, and decision in the form of change is arrived at in a participative manner.
5. Participation, while imposing extra burdens on the manager initially, may in the long run make his job easier, since, with enhanced commitment, close supervision of subordinates will no longer be necessary.
6. Participation helps subordinates to develop as managers by giving them experience of taking decisions and standing by the consequences—it also assists their development as mature men and women.

There are difficulties and problems as well as advantages. Participation is time-consuming. In certain circumstances the benefits may not be enough to justify the time taken. Even if improved morale is the result, morale and efficiency do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Skill is required to make participation work, and a manager may do more harm than good if, in an

initial burst of enthusiasm, he attempts to change from an extremely autocratic to an extremely participative approach all at once.

Not all subordinates welcome participation. If their own preferences are of a relatively authoritarian style of management, they may feel uncomfortable participating in decision they consider should be taken by their superior. On the other hand, participation calls for a degree of involvement that some subordinates will not welcome. While doing a conscientious job, they do not wish to be further drawn into the life of the organisation.

A further difficulty may be posed by the structure of the organisation. Participation flourishes where decision making is decentralised, but there is less opportunity for effective participation where most important decisions are taken at the centre.

To adopt a participative approach to management does not mean that the manager abdicates his authority, or that he can no longer take routine or emergency decisions. A participative approach is appropriate in drawing up a major accident plan, but when putting it into effect quick decisions are required, and authority must be vested in individuals to take those decisions. There is no inconsistency here, merely a response to the needs of the situation.

The manager who wishes to adopt a participative approach must be prepared to move slowly. It will serve no useful purpose to announce: "From now on we are going to practice participative management." There is no magic in the phrase and its use in itself will achieve nothing. It may be a good plan to move gradually towards participation through consultation, but participative decision-making is essentially a group process. Involving a group of your subordinates in decision-making is something essentially different from delegating particular decisions to them individually. There is nothing wrong in combining the extensive delegation of certain types of decision with participative decision-making on other matters.

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* Senior Sister Tutor in Health Care Administration, University of Manchester.