WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

The Dilemmas of Participative Management at a University

Joan Brittle is the new president of a large public midwestern university. Recently, she attended a workshop for new university presidents where she learned that most successful educational institutions today have adopted participative, team-based structures. While she has little formal education in management (she is a physicist by training), the team approach makes sense to her and fits with her personality and management style, which is all about cultivating strong relationships.

Following the workshop, she returns to her campus and enthusiastically charges a team of her top faculty to design a series of strategic initiatives for the school that both capitalize on the existing strengths of the institution and are responsive to emerging social trends. To ensure that she does not impede their dialogue, she does not join the team but asks one of the more senior faculty members whom she trusts to lead the team and provide her with periodic updates. She is confident that "many heads are better than one" and anxiously awaits the team's report, which she believes will affirm and extend her ambitious vision for the future of the institution. She feels that both the opportunity and the optimal path to greatness for the university are fairly clear.

The strategic initiatives team attacks the new challenge with enormous energy and enthusiasm. In three short months, they have developed a comprehensive plan featuring five initiatives for the school to pursue over the next ten to twenty years. When President Brittle receives their report, she is both stunned and disoriented. Based on her beliefs and perspectives, she assumed that the team would come back with a plan that was responsive to changing environmental conditions and apparent opportunities in the state. Instead, their proposal was mostly an (admittedly ambitious) extension of current faculty interests and offerings but did not suggest any kind of new direction or breakthrough. She wonders: How could this superb group be so far off base? From her perspective, the initiatives are too internally focused, reflecting faculty interest and expertise, and out of touch with the needs and desires of the board of trustees, the legislature, and the community. In addition, they do not represent any of her personal and professional interests in health and the life sciences.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the group wind up with initiatives that differed so much from President Brittle's expectations? What steps could President Brittle have taken to avoid the polarity of this outcome?

2. What does this situation tell you about risks and pitfalls of encouraging employee participation in decision making?
3. Based on your reading about teams, what would you advise the president to do now? Why?

One example of a quality-improvement team is a program called *Work-Outs* at General Electric, which was initiated by CEO Jack Welch in 1989. At General Electric, management selects up to 100 employees to attend a three-day conference (Stewart, 1991). A facilitator divides the employees into five or six smaller groups, and each group works independently for two days to identify problems with the company and to prepare a presentation to senior management regarding recommended changes. On the third day, the panel of senior managers is confronted by each group and its proposals, and the managers must agree or disagree with each proposal or ask for more information (in which case, the group agrees to supply it by a specified date). One vice president describes the experience in this way: "I was wringing wet within half an hour. . . . They had 108 proposals, and I had about a minute to say yes or no to each one" (Kiechel, 1994, p. 70). This is a dramatic example of how organizations are using teams to encourage creativity and to open the dialogue between managers and employees.

Virtual Teams

In response to a dynamic global economy, many organizations (and most large ones) have found it advantageous to maximize their geographic reach and become immersed in a wide range of local cultures. Companies ignore cultural differences at their own peril. Unfortunately, the geographic distribution of employees creates predictable communication difficulties associated with time and space, often resulting in serious misunderstandings. Fortunately, a range of technological tools has evolved to support these groups of people who work together across time and space in what are called **virtual teams**.

A superficial analysis of virtual teams can identify likely problems to watch out for, such as language barriers and differences in cultures, religions, work customs, and work habits. But deeper consideration reveals that all virtual teams engage in a developmental process that builds a negotiated order — a shared set of practices or "micro-cultures" that emerge among members (Gluesing, 1998). Some of the items that are typically up for negotiation include division of labor, sequencing of activity, and the nature and regularity of outcome assessment. In addition, virtual teams must work out more mundane but still vexing issues surrounding the use of electronic mailing lists, intranets, e-mail, and telepresence. This team-development process is highly social (if largely through electronic media) and involves the development of mutual respect and trust (Baba, 1999). It is highly likely that the development of