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The Quality of Working Life:
A new mission for the management of human resources in education

Abstract

Improving the quality of working life (QWL) is an
essential part of the search for alternative
organizational patterns.   This article reviews the
foundations of the quality of working life and describes
the philosophy which underlies this new approach.   It
is argued that quality of working life is applicable to
some extent to education.

Personnel management once viewed labour as a commodity
subject to the law of supply and demand (Scott et al., 1954;
Gagnon, 1955).   Thus might have begun the history in modern
management of what we call, a little pompously, human resources.
From the idea of "personnel administration" to the idea of
"management of human resources," by way of "personnel
management," a relatively short path has been followed,
increasingly paved by a concern for the well-being of the
employee.

Within the field of management of human resources, there
have been periodic analyses of future directions and trends.   In
almost every decade, an article appearing in a learned personnel
journal attempted to foresee the future of personnel management.
Van Hoorick (1966), Johnston (1971), and Odiorne (1979) attest,
like authors of earlier articles, to this constant concern for the
well-being of the employee in an organization.   Milton (1970), in

a critical study of the philosophies of human resources management from the beginning of the century, has reviewed this continuing concern with meeting the needs of the individual.

In contrast to the writings mentioned earlier, there will be no question here of predicting the management of human resources in the 1990s. I propose rather to present a recent approach to the management of human resources which is being increasingly adopted in certain Quebec firms, an approach the objective of which is always to attempt to improve the well-being of employees at work. This new concept is the "quality of working life." I start with the postulate that sooner or later, and more swiftly than one would believe, the world of education will be directly affected. Some people tend to react negatively to the thought that this concept comes from industry. We must remember, however, that it is not the first time that we have drawn from this source, especially when we consider the concepts of efficacy, efficiency, performance, organizational development, participative management by objectives, to name only a few.

Humanist philosophy

The concept of the quality of working life is inspired by the humanist philosophy of administration which came into being during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The humanist philosophy proposed a series of beliefs concerning the value of the human being and the employee's place in the firm. The quality of working life is thus situated in the wake of the school of human relations born of Hawthorne's experiments. Insofar as it is true that the humanist philosophy underlies the concept of the quality of working life, it is important to understand certain elements of this philosophy in order to better appreciate its various possible applications.

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Taylor (1911) was concerned with the human aspects of the firm. Many people are almost allergic to Taylor; all they retain from him is his idea of efficiency. They would be wise to reread Taylor more carefully to discover that he was particularly interested in employee development and team work. He recommended, for example, that an employee whose performance did not correspond to his initial training should not be brutally dismissed from his position. On this point Taylor well deserves his title of "precursor of the director of personnel services" (Barnabé, 1981a, p.34).

Following the Hawthorne studies, begun in 1923 at the Western Electric Company, Mayo and his colleagues at Harvard University experimented on the attitudes and reactions of various groups of employees (Mayo, 1933). The results revealed that productivity was a function of the team spirit that animates a

group of workers, and of their degree of cooperation. These results represent the basis of what has been called the human relations movement. Firms have since adopted various programs to ensure the well-being of employees. Among other things, it has been commonly accepted that the worker has the right to a fair salary, to reasonable hours, and to decent working conditions.

Concern for the well-being of workers within an organization continued with the birth of the behavioural science era. It is in the context of employee motivation and of new theories of management that this concern has especially manifested itself. Maslow (1943) presented his theory of motivation based on needs while several years later Herzberg (1959), on the basis of a study of 200 engineers and accountants, submitted his theory of satisfyers and dissatisfyers. As for theories of management, Argyris (1957, 1964) proposed greater integration of the individual into the organization in order to ensure his well-being at work. Finally, McGregor (1960) proposed participative management as a means to integrate the needs of the individual with those of the organization.

In brief, one objective of the humanist philosophy of management is to promote the psychological well-being of employees; it favours the individual. This philosophy is based on behavioural science and social-psychology. The manager who adheres to the humanist philosophy attempts less to control and to manipulate employees than to ensure a working environment likely to satisfy their higher needs. One will see later that the quality of working life inspired by this humanist philosophy proposes considerations for both the **context** and the **content** of work.

Why the quality of working life?

Albert Camus said, "Without work, life rots. But when the work is without soul, life smothers and dies." The quotation alone justifies the birth of the concept of the quality of working life and might serve as a motto for all those working in the field. Even if one does not challenge the changes that have taken place over the last decade within our society, one cannot help but be affected by the influence of these changes on the world of work. However, the argument that claims that the employee carries to work with him the social values of his time is well known (Viola, 1978; Barnabé, 1981a). In the world of work, employees accept less and less easily the content of the work and the context in which it must be carried out.

The humanist philosophy of management inherited from the 1930s has led us to believe that motivation and satisfaction, because they were believed to influence productivity, might improve the well-being of employees. But a review of studies on

motivation and satisfaction (Lawler, 1973) suggests that the most productive employees are hardly more satisfied than other employees. It even seems, according to Lawler, that higher output indirectly causes individual satisfaction. Furthermore, Dolan and Arsenault (1980) have called into question the conceptual and methodological problems inherent in the very notion of satisfaction at work. According to them,

> At the conceptual level, the notion of satisfaction at work results from a very complex interaction between the individual and his work, that it is influenced in an important way by satisfaction with life in general, and that finally this notion does not take account of the changes in attitude that may be produced over time. (p.45)

At the methodological level, the same authors declare that

> ...the measure of satisfaction not only does not permit distinction of the subjective from the objective in the individual observed, but each of the techniques (used to measure it) contains itself, in embryo, the subjectivity of the observer-experimenter. (p.47)

If the preceding is true, the fact of knowing, for example, that teachers in Quebec experience a very high level of satisfaction in regard to their teaching freedom and their possibility of fulfilling themselves at work (Lessard et al., 1980) does not allow us to conclude that the quality of teaching and the quality of working life are the better for it. Satisfaction at work remains a measure, not an explanation, of the quality of working life and constitutes a goal that deserves to be pursued on its own.

The well-being of employees that should normally be part of the mission of healthy management of human resources does not seem susceptible to realization solely by obtaining greater satisfaction at work. The quality of working life, which proposes to improve the well-being of employees, takes its raison d'être rather from awareness of the existence of a new work ethic. The young and the middle-aged no longer accept unfavorable working conditions, or difficult work, or work devoid of personal meaning. They no longer accept work as the sole goal in life. "Changing attitudes toward work, combined with the revolution in social values, have raised new interest in improving the quality of working life" (Rosow, 1981, p.14).

As was mentioned above an employee brings to the workplace some social values. It appears that society evolves more rapidly than the work place and that the gap between the two continues to widen. Let us recall society's changed attitudes and behaviours towards divorce, sexual morals, women's rights, authority, and institutions, for example. In comparison, conditions

have remained relatively stable in the workplace. Organizations still supply a philosophy of authoritative management that centralizes, bureaucratizes, and specializes, while employees demand just the opposite. It would seem, furthermore, that this disassociation of the social and work milieu may be the source of stress at work and of the premature physical wearing down of the employee (Dolan and Arsenault, 1980; Cherniss, 1980; Truch, 1980).

What is the quality of working life?

Although the notion of the quality of working life is relatively new, its real origins extend back to the years following World War II. Studies by members of the Tavistock Institute led by Professors Trist and Emery began in London in 1948. These studies at the Tavistock Institute are to the quality of working life what Hawthorne's studies were for the school of human relations. It was their studies of coal mines in particular that led the two professors to formulate their principle of joint optimization of the social and technical system (Boisvert, 1980). The reseachers concluded that the production of working groups increase when one takes into account the interdependence of the two systems (Kolodny et al., 1979). As a result, the Tavistock Institute contributed to the creation of a network of researchers and research centres in Holland, Sweden, Denmark, France and Ireland (Cherns and Davis, 1975).

In America, the concept of the quality of working life was disseminated widely with the appearance of the report, "Work in America", by a special task force formed by the U.S. Office of Health, Education, and Welfare (1973). The mandate of the task force was to examine the problems of health, education, and welfare in the United States from the perspective of the world of work. The report, the results of which were received as a present rather than a future shock, was widely disseminated, and officially rejected. For this reason the chairman of the task force decided the following year to publish privately sixteen of the fifty reports of experts summoned by the group (O'Toole, 1974). This last publication concluded that doing nothing to improve the quality of working life over the short term would contribute to increased social costs over the long term.

Having described the origins of the quality of working life, we may now turn to a description of the concept itself. Some people claim that it is neither a concept, nor a means, nor an end, but that it contains elements of all of these and defies any precise definition (Johnston et al., 1978). At times it seems easier and clearer to define it by what it is not (Mills, 1981). As the very expression "quality of working life" is not in itself very clear, it appears useful to review certain tentative definitions such as those proposed in recent literature.

Cherns and Davis (1975) proposed that the objective of the quality of working life did not consist only in improving the functioning of work within an organization. According to them, it should produce a better society. They supported their opinion by the postulate enunciated by Lawler (1973) that everything that happens to people over the course of their daily work has a certain effect on the life of an employee as well as on the life of society in general. The quality of working life, according to Mills (1981) supplies "to all individuals well-structured possibilities for actively engaging in a new interpersonal process of solving problems in the light of an improved quality of working life and a more efficient organization of work, in the best interest of employees and employers" (p.2).

One can easily accept these definitions based on the objective pursued. However, they have the disadvangages that they omit important components of the quality of working life. Thériault (1980) supplied a definition by components: "It is generally accepted," he wrote, "that a job involving a quality of working life is one with a certain degree of responsibility, autonomy, and possibilities of feedback on what is done, and variety" (p.41). On this point it is Trist (1981), the pioneer of the socio-technical approach that underlies the quality of working life, who provides us with the most comprehensive list of changes needed to improve the quality of working life. These are:

- Redesign of Jobs
- More Work Group Autonomy

- Layout Redesign
- Wider Organizational Changes

- Product Improvements
- New Roles for Supervisors

- Process Improvements
- Problem Solving Training

- Changes in Information Flows
- Interpersonal, Group Skills Training

- Changes in Support Services
- Management Development

Attempting to reduce the definition of the quality of working life to a mere sentence amounts, as Mills (1981) points out, to trying to describe an opera by whistling a few tunes. Nevertheless, Bergeron (1982) has proposed that the quality of working life is based on a humanist philosophy that considers work as an essential factor in the development of the human being, who in turn is considered the most fundamental element in an organization. It attempts to modify one or several aspects of the work place by the introduction of participative methods in order to create a new situation more favourable to employee satisfaction.

Applications to education

One must above all determine the condition essential to any innovation that will improve the quality of working life. Improvement would be improbable without employee participation. One might be tempted to believe that in education there is no room for concern for the quality of working life. It is true that the teacher's work is not as monotonous and routine as that of workers in the industrial sector and that the teacher enjoys greater autonomy than do industrial workers. It is also true that in the past the unions successfully negotiated for their members certain elements likely to improve their quality of working life. On the one hand there is still surely room for improvement in the quality of teachers' working life and on the other hand one must not forget all the other employees in the educational system.

A first application of the concept of the quality of working life might have to do with the decentralization of academic decisions. For example, why can't teachers teaching at a particular level in a school choose a textbook from the official list approved by the ministry of education? This has already begun in certain Quebec schools. Not only could they choose a text, but they could develop, cooperatively, methods, didactic material, and accompanying guides, and could evaluate the chosen text. It would not be impossible for a group of teachers to develop their own texts that might eventually be published and perhaps approved by the ministry of education. Currently, the study programs come from the ministry of education and are presented according to objectives to be attained, accompanied by the form and content to be transmitted. With all the educational projects that are particular to each school, can these detailed programs be suitable for all? Within the framework of their educational project, the teachers of a school might be able to develop a few study programs. The objectives and content of study programs could be determined by the ministry of education 70 to 75 per cent of the time, and the remaining 30 or 35 per cent of the time could be developed at the local or even the school level.

The decentralization of academic decisions is one of the technical aspects in the improvement of working life. Other technical aspects of teaching deserve attention. The Kratzman Report in Alberta highlighted these (Goble, 1982). It dealt, among other things, with the organization and participation of teachers, the completion of a growing number of forms and reports, the changing nature of children and adolescents, and communication with parents. These matters are non-negotiated aspects of the world of teaching which could be addressed by a committee for improving the quality of working life.

Another possibility for improving the quality of working life in education would be the creation of quality circles like those

invented by the Japanese. A quality circle consists of a group of 7 to 10 volunteer employees who meet regularly in order to identify, analyze, and solve problems. The only area known, or at least reported, where quality circles exist in education is in Michigan at the Muskegon School Board (Bonner, 1982). One of the quality circles of this school board includes a volunteer group of secondary school teachers, professionals, and office personnel who are particularly interested in children with emotional problems. Quality circles in Quebec education might address the analysis and solution of problems regarding working conditions. Even if the latter are negotiated at the provincial level, several aspects might be studied by a quality circle at the school level. With flexibility and cooperation, a quality circle consisting of administrators and employees might look, for example, at aspects of allocation of work within a school, at the role of professionals, at relations with the environment, and even at certain aspects of the teacher-student ratio. A quality circle formed of administrators, teachers, professionals, and parents might also take an interest in some other aspects of the quality of working life at the school level which definitely could influence the school life in general.

Conclusion

According to the Kratzman report in Alberta, the improvement of the quality of working life for teachers is itself a defensible goal. I would add it is a defensible goal in any type of work. The quality of working life rests on a humanist philosophy that considers work an essential factor in the development of the human being, and that includes modifying aspects of the work place. This is a concept stemming from the Hawthorne studies in the 1930s, from studies carried out in England in 1948 by the Tavistock Institute, and from all the studies on motivation and satisfaction in the 1950s and 1960s. This concept of the quality of working life was transmitted by the publication of the report, "Work in America", by a special American group whose mandate was to examine health and welfare problems in the world of work. Its importance was finally emphasized by workers' changing attitudes towards work.

Following the examples of several European countries, the United States, and the rest of Canada, Quebec initiated experiments to improve the quality of industrial working life. This was particularly the case at Steinberg and Alcan. In education, the concept of improving the quality of working life is just being explored. In Canada, Koch (1981) seems to be the first to have attempted to see some applications for education. The Kratzman report in Alberta mentions the concept; and careful experiments with the concept are carried out at the Muskegon School Board in Michigan. With all due modesty, this article is the first to describe to Quebec educators the origins of the

concept of the quality of working life, to define it, and to suggest applications for education.

We should probably await further developments, and especially the results of experiments to improve the quality of working life in the industrial sector, before seeing it flourish in education. One possible application, likely to improve the quality of working life in education, might be increased decentralization of academic decisions, whether in regard to the choice of textbooks or a program of studies. Quality circles such as those designed by the Japanese might easily be set up to identify, analyze, and solve certain problems involving working conditions or the quality of student life at school.

In the service sector institutions such as education, motivation and satisfaction certainly have a particular importance. But if one wishes to furnish solutions to the problem of new values towards work, the management of human resources in education will have as a new mission the improvement of the quality of working life. It must design means to provide employees in educational institutions real powers of decision, autonomy, and self-realization. The objective of self esteem and esteem for others, as well as of self-realization will probably be the challenge for the management of human resources in education in the last decade of the twentieth century.

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