Myths of High Performance Work Systems

#2: Regenerative Work Designs

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As a part of the move to increase productivity and rise to the demand of global competition, skill- and knowledge-based work designs as part of a High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) are proliferating across industries from companies as traditional as those of the paper industry to those as unorthodox as specialty-food mail-order houses. The promoters and adopters of the HPWS are striving for increased flexibility as well as encouraging skill acquisition and improved customer service. The greater goal of course is for such work systems to provide appropriate motives and structure for continuous business improvement. Several companies have found the idea that skill and knowledge based work designs can achieve this is very overrated and this is our topic for this issue—the myth surrounding these work systems.

The Long and the Short of Skill and Knowledge Work Designs

Skill- and knowledge-based systems are built around readily identifiable, clearly defined, and well communicated and understood sets of skills and knowledge, areas that are seen as needed to run a production or service organization at a high-performance standard. The centerpiece of these systems is the flexibility to allow the performance of a wider range of tasks and demonstration of a wider range of skills than is possible in a system that only focuses on the duties and responsibilities of the job. As employees gain skill or knowledge certification and demonstrate competency to the organization, the belief is that employees are encouraged to continue to grow in value. This comes about through the motivation to become more flexible, highly skilled workers. These systems are more successful in these objectives compared to traditional organization but they are not sufficient to the coming challenges of coming decades.
Unfortunately there are dilemmas in-built that cannot be easily worked out. We can better understand the dilemma of such work systems if we view them through the eyes of one union president in a large paper company where the top brass is Hell-Bent on installing High-Performance. In spite of this “bold type” in his voice when he speaks of HPWS, he speaks thoughtfully about the need for unions to keep changing themselves, given the changes in the world. He experiences himself always walking the fine line between fairly representing the union and working to ensure the business is successful. “I understand that our future is linked with the fate of the business, whether we like it or not,” he says, and continues. “But how can it be good for the company to have us all required to have the same skills and all be able to do every job the same way. That reminds me of the old ‘Jack of all trades, but master of none’ Am I missing something here?” he asks sincerely. His role puts him in a unique position to see and ask questions about some new practices. There are some companies who have passed through similar struggles with similar intentions and have found a their own answers to these questions.

**Uncertainty is a Higher Motivator than Certainty**

Businesses have a need for an increasingly self-disciplined and self-accountable workforce. But the nature of external motivation built into HPWS, systematically erodes such motivation. External rewards and punishments do motivate people, but it is not the type of motivation that nourishes intrinsic motivation. “In Clorox we found motivation had become management’s job. It seemed we were in a recurring loop where we had to keep the stimulus of new and different rewards in place or we lost momentum. We realized there must be something wrong since we knew a lot of these folks did inspired work in their community yet didn’t have or need someone patting them on the back and saying ‘good job’ for that work. This was a big ah-ha!” says a line manager in a large European factory.

What they were looking for was the type of intrinsic motivation University of Chicago Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi calls “emergent motivation”—the type of motivation that
is uniquely human and results from connecting with work as a source of self-expression. Emergent motivation is the only form that leads to tenacious exploration and sustained creativity. It is emergent because the aim arises out of the unique interaction between a person and a significant and meaningful context and through this interaction people discover their own rewards. It is the medium in which goals arise that have never existed before. The rewards coalesce out of an experience that is unique to the person and the context to which they are contributing. In one DuPont business, the organizational effectiveness manager is still incredulous about the power of uncertainty. “Workers who knew what was expected of them before they started any new block of skill, ended up producing results that were considerably less creative—and less personally rewarding—than those workers who approached work without a specific pre-defined goal or expectation from management.” The challenge came rather from a personal connection to the market, for their product offering. It is not, however, a free-for-all with people doing anything they want. But rather it is a matter of a capability and work design processes and systems that are built to be more outward directed—in the sense of contribution. By learning to link with a personal inner essence and by discovery of an emerging set of rewards from the contribution, a powerful self managed motivation emerges. “Now instead of being limited to a fixed set of skills and rewards which are always in limited supply, there is not limit to the number and nature of rewarding experiences one can have. They seem to bloom in people in the process of work itself, by seeing every new business challenge as an open-ended opportunity for new learning and development.”

“We did have to come to grips however with the traditional belief that people are primarily motivated to gain money, status, and power, which tends to cause a self-fulfilling prophesy,” points out the Clorox Human Resource Manager. “We had everyone climbing the same ladder. Now we can scale any wall—market change or customer retooling—infinity faster. Everyone is climbing the wall on their own ladder supporting the same business direction. If you can envision that, you get a sense of the power of letting go of external motivation systems.” This was offered by the vice-president of
marketing in a DuPont system who was sure at the beginning of the removal of the system of rewards prevalent for so long in his field, that there would be chaos; something akin to turning the “prison over to the inmates”

**Regenerative Open System Approaches to Motivation**

Emergent motivation is inherently self-renewing and self-regenerating without energy expended by the organization. It results in unexpected benefits, such as tenacity in the absense *no clear external reward*, the building of *character that happens with a self-disciplined individual* and a person whose *creativity is continuously expanding*, that cannot be achieved through External motivation. As one Clorox operator said, “you can’t buy this kind of caring” and as his regional business manager retorted, “we couldn’t afford to; it’s the stuff you hire experts for; it’s happening on our site every day by everyone.” What is happening here is that people are not connected to a personal objective or even necessarily to a team or business goal, but to the endless discovery of what is possible for them to become and for what the world they play in can be—and how they can contribute to its evolution.

Emergent self-realized rewards come from mastering new challenges in the environment that offer the opportunity for each individual to manifest a unique contribution in a significant and meaningful context. The best news is this nature of reward is infinitely flexible in every situation with each individual, no group of managers must select or administer them, and there are endless lists of emergent rewards. *Significant and meaningful context* is clarified by looking at a DuPont example offered by a business manager, “Every person in our business, knows, first-hand, on a daily basis what our customers’ market is doing and what is required to have our customer and *their* customers be the most effective they can be. It’s not measuring our company’s success that makes work significant and meaningful. It’s how the customers and customers’ customers success looks. It is significant because it makes a difference to the customer. It is meaningful because people invest themselves in it and grow as a result. Since this is a
dynamic and changing market, it serves as an endless source of motivation for creativity; but only when managers don’t filter it through ‘customer feedback’ or ‘customer demands’ or ‘productivity metrics’. Any filtered report regresses the work-system instantly into one based on ‘selected information’ which collapses the intrinsic motivation. It’s very unforgiving.” Emergent motivation cannot be evoked, sustained, or manipulated by “clarifying the correct maze for the rats to run down. It has to be an open field to get creative rats,” points out the “in-house psychologist” and packing operator in a Clorox manufacturing site.

Emergent motivation designs for work come from melding human thought with living systems processes. We have long designed our human work systems as though people worked much like the machines they operate. People were seen to need a continuous input of energy from an external source just as machines need electricity, gasoline, or other energy sources People are expected to run smoothly until they break down and then be fixed, or maybe stopped for preventive maintenance. In the event we can not fix them, we replace them. A DuPont manager points out, “we switched metaphors, and started thinking from a more organic model, one where an organism, human or plant, tends to have a built-in code that needs the appropriate context to live out its pattern. One of our jobs is to create a healthy forest that replicates the pattern in which a flower can grow, not do maintenance and provide fuel to keep a car on the road.”

The need to have workers self-initiating and having will to sustain work on a task, as well as increasingly taking on new challenges, is paramount in an increasingly competitive business environment. There is a significant amount of research to support the idea of working with emergent motivation. Researchers working on the relationship between intrinsic and external motivation have found that if rewards are removed, the energy to pursue subsequent opportunities devoid of reward is significantly reduced. Additionally, what has been rewarding in the past tends to be less satisfying over time and requires development of new rewards to sustain human motivation based on external reward. This was especially true in cases where the worker experiences little significance
for the task. It works very much like an addiction—you have to keep raising the dose to get the high. “When we initially bought our way out of pay for performance in some of our plants, productivity dropped; where such pay still exists managers are required to keep redesigning the system for it to continue producing results. Even when operators help in redesign, it continuously draws energy from the system. In working with regenerative designs for work where we link the uniqueness of every person with the effectiveness of the customer, the major effort we invest is to figure out what next strategic challenge we should set for our business, so we can put the boundless capability of our people to work,” says a manufacturing director in a consumer products company.

And how does the union membership feel about working in regenerative work systems? One shop steward who has just started working in such a system offers, confidentially, “I came out of one of those HPWS and I can tell you, this [regenerative] system is the first time I ever felt my philosophy about work and that of the business were not in conflict somewhere. I actual feel my development plan is like a contract between myself and the customers—present and future. The company’s job is to go get the next customer and keep the strategy moving in the right direction.”

The development plan of which he speaks is a interactively developed yet self-determined business contribution aim and a unique set of supportive capabilities to be developed. The system that enables this development is not a matrix of cells each with pre-specified skills and knowledge: rather it is one of guidelines regarding the nature of work arenas which, given the evolving values of stakeholder constituencies, serves as appropriate focus areas for contribution. It contains the specific singular commitment the person is making that will contribute to improved business, work-unit, and individual effectiveness. It also specifies that nature of personal and professional development that is to be undertaken in order to produce the higher order state of being and mental processing needed to achieve the aim. This approach providing boundaries that ensure appropriate thrust aligned with the customer’s strategy for effectiveness is maintained even as individual creativity is nourished.
But even more telling is one industrial relations manager’s comment regarding the unions “so-called” resistance to HPWS in retrospect. “If we had tried to really understand what was behind the union concerns, which we called roadblocks, at the time, we could have saved ourselves a lot of time, money, and agony and gotten into systems that worked better for all of us a lot faster. But don’t quote me on that; I’ll deny it!”

But a union president, this one in the Weyerhaeuser, should get the last word. “I used to come to work so I could get the money to put into the two small street businesses I ran. I just sold the second one because my life feels more integrated now. Now the real me can come to work, have a wild hair of an idea that can make a particular customer really successful and follow everything through as though I were the boss. I actually forget they are not my own personal customer just like at my old shop. I never knew life and work could be the same thing”

Who ever said union leaders aren’t philosophers.

Carol Sanford is a resource working with organizations around the world to introduce development capability into organizations and remove the self-defeating dilemmas inherent in many of the new work-designs. She also has been a contributing author to four books on developmental process in business. For opportunities to learn more about the experiences of the companies mentioned as well as others, please call (360) 687-1408. For a more detailed treatment of the subject of “Vitalizing Work Design” send $8 for postage and handling to SpringHill Publications, PO. Box 2283, Battle Ground WA 98604-7514.