

From System Design to Democracy

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PD methodologies create better systems and products, as research and experience have demonstrated. The potential ripple effects of this new approach, however, are less well recognized.

First, PD contributes to changes in the organization in which it takes place. Front-line workers feel increased competence and confidence. Their views are more clearly heard and the organization changes to give higher priority to their interests. In the best of circumstances, there is a shift in the power relations within the firm toward more democratic norms.

Second, PD is an extension of larger social forces. In Scandinavia a key reason for the emergence of PD approaches is the labor movement's social democratic orientation. In this country it was the women's movement that popularized the new models for group dynamics that underlie participatory methods. And, I would argue, PD is approaching mainstream acceptance mostly because the current worldwide structural economic crisis has prompted the acceptance of new, post-Taylorist, business ideologies. These ideologies endorse "worker involvement" as the latest way for business owners to take advantage of workers' creativity and energy—although the passage from theory to practice reveals many organizations using new participatory rhetoric as a cover for continuing old hierarchical realities.

Third, PD has a potential impact on the larger society as a model and source of wisdom for transforming the way government relates to its citizens and for the way the public sector relates to its clients. PD embodies at least two principles that are worth making explicit:

1. Workers—and customers—are intelligent, creative, and productive contributors to organizations if they are empowered to express their insights, apply their expertise, exercise their decision-making capabilities, and given responsibility for the impact of their actions.
2. PD holds that, contrary to Taylorist belief, good ideas are as likely (perhaps more likely) to come from the bottom up as from the top down. Front-line workers and customers know what works, what doesn't work, and have lots of ideas on how to improve things.

In calling for worker initiative I am not ignoring the need for leadership. But my father taught me there are two kinds of leaders: those about whom, when its all over, people say, "He did it." And those about whom, when its all over, people say, "We did it," and they feel proud and empowered by the process.

For example, assume a new situation has arisen. An organization's leaders could disseminate information about the situation and outline several general possible approaches. These materials (perhaps in printed form, perhaps as videocassettes) would be given to front-line people, along with time to examine them and access to people who could answer questions and provide more detail. Participation in discussion groups would be voluntary, but all who attend would be able to make comments and offer suggestions. These inputs would be collected and aggregated and then incorporated into a revised and more detailed series of alternatives, which would again be sent out for review. The process would continue until the leadership determined that no new insight was being gained. They would then select a policy. Once a plan was selected, everyone would be expected to accept it and contribute their best. People who refused would be subject to the regular disciplinary process.

It is no secret this country's public sector is in deep crisis. Contrary to the slogan that "government is the problem," the public sector remains our only vehicle for making collective decisions about our society and implementing common solutions. The increasing ineffectiveness of the public sector in recent years is a key contributor to the decline of the quality of life in our society and the loss of faith in citizenship values.

It is not impossible to figure out what is wrong with the public sector. The forces that led to the decline of government services were the same ones that previously led to the decline of the private sector. In their new book, *Reinventing Government*, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler describe it this way:

... 100 years ago the word bureaucracy meant something positive. It connotated a rational, efficient method of organization—something to take the place of the arbitrary exercise of power by authoritarian regimes. Bureaucracy brought the same logic to government work that the assembly line brought to the factory. . . . [But] the kinds of governments that developed during the industrial era, with

their sluggish, centralized bureaucracies, their preoccupation with rules and regulations, and their hierarchical chains of command, no longer work very well. They accomplished great things in their time, but somewhere along the line they got away from us. They became bloated, wasteful, ineffective. And when the world began to change, they failed to change with it [1].

Fortunately, although it seldom makes the headlines, there already is an enormous amount of experimentation going on throughout the public sector. From small towns to the Defense Department, entrepreneurial public sector managers are finding new and radically better ways to achieve their missions. But these efforts need to be put into a framework that can be explained to the public and replicated in other areas. PD has already provided a methodology for organizational revitalization in the private sector when used in combination with other efforts to improve quality, timeliness, and customer orientation. There is much to be gained by also applying these insights to the public sector.

Just as IT managers play a strategic role in the reinvention of business operations, socially concerned IT professionals can play a vital role in the rejuvenation of U.S. society. We have expertise in various information technologies. We know the transformational potential of those tools. And our experience with PD lets us contribute to the creation of a new vision for democracy that is partly based on the concrete opportunities that IT has made available.

Most of all, as Gary Chapman, director of CPSR's 21st Century Project, has stated, we need to help people realize that computing and information technology does not merely mean Nintendo, word processing, and spreadsheets; that it is central to the entire shape and direction of our economy, our government, our civil liberties, social services, culture, and the entire quality of life.

We must remember we will only be effective if we act within the context of larger coalitions of working people and citizens seeking to create meaning in and gain power over their lives. And we must stay humble and modest about the ultimate contribution we can make to such a movement. We have even more to learn than we have to teach. **□**

Reference
Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector from Schoolhouse to State house*, Addison-Wesley, 1992, 14, 11–12.