

COMMENTS ON EILON'S EDITORIAL
THE QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE (1976)

In his editorial on the quality of working life Professor Eilon reviews the two volumes on this topic edited by Davis and Cherns (1975). He has kindly given us, as contributors to the books, an opportunity to comment on the review.

After listing the changes for the worker that follow from the introduction of semi-autonomous group working, Professor Eilon writes that it is "No wonder that 'group technology' has increased worker satisfaction and moral (sic), has reduced absenteeism, and has consequently lead (sic) to improvements in key productivity performance indicators" (Eilon, 1976, p. 372).

Granting this central point, he raises what he regards as two very important issues: How are we to measure the net benefit to the community? And how are we to assess the net damage to those individuals who do not find it easy to advance their personal ends in small working groups?

We regard these as important practical problems, not as theoretical dilemmas. We do feel, however, that practical problems have to be kept in perspective, particularly with respect to time. These volumes report the gathering in 1972 of a large number of people who had become concerned about the quality of work. Few indeed had been actively engaged in field experiments and the associated problems of measurement. Of those who had been actively engaged, none had had a chance to measure the effects in other areas of community life. Many of those who came from United States universities realized that their chances of being funded in this field of study were slim unless they could show that the results were measurable. We think the papers on measurement should be viewed in this perspective. They were of necessity exploratory; and probably, for just that reason, richer in ideas for the future.

Let us add but one observation. Measurement is not yet a major problem. In practice it is not difficult to find measures for changes in a particular plant or office that management, workers and unions can agree on. Getting measures that could be put in the annual company report to demonstrate social benefits is further away, but perhaps not so far away as Professor Eilon imagines; many people have remained quite active in this field since 1972.

Professor Eilon's second problem is again a practical one: How is the individual to be protected with the introduction of semi-autonomous group working? Most critically it should be noted that this form of working frees the individual worker from the petty tyranny of supervisors. They cannot be needled and treated as children as in the old way. We cannot bring ourselves to consider the supervisors as being more important than the workers. As management have depended so heavily on these people for so long they should be prepared when eliminating their role to give them fair reward for services

rendered. What we do see as a problem is that some older workers may have become so accustomed to their narrow tasks that they want nothing else; however, they have lived with such task, for decades and there seems little reason why they cannot live with them for a few extra years. Maybe there are people who for reasons of birth, family background, schooling and experience want nothing more of their work. While we suspect that this problem will be around for quite awhile, we consider that it refers to a tiny minority.

We readily agree with Professor Eilon that the members of the conference of 1972 were enthusiastic but short of experience. We do not readily accept that workers or managers are so dependent on what social scientists accept as measures. No great precision is necessary, for example, before many significant decisions can be taken. Further we do not readily accept that workers are as hard-hearted about their peers as have been supervisors and their managers. We will allow one exception to this: when management set up a scheme of rewards that can only be achieved by the fit and greedy driving their peers to greater efforts. We certainly cannot agree with Professor Eilon that being motivated to improve things “almost invariably” introduces the sort of bias in measurement that nullifies the scientific value of the research. Is it not possible, for instance, to do scientific research into cancer with the explicit bias of eradicating it? We can imagine that someone looking for a thesis topic might wander into this field with an attitude of sheer indifference. But our minds boggle at the sort of misanthropy involved in starting from “different premises” (Eilon, 1976, p. 368).

References

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