

INVOLVING EMPLOYEES IMPROVES PERFORMANCE

Many business leaders will be familiar with the concepts and approach to management of Brazilian Industrialist, Ricardo Semler. The radical initiatives he has introduced at his Sao Paulo firm, Semco, are well-known:

- employees setting their own salaries and working hours
- the absence of written manuals and procedures
- elimination of the position of secretary/receptionist
- giving workers access to company books.

As exciting, thought-provoking and controversial as Semler's ideas are, they represent the extreme case of employee involvement in non-traditional areas of an organisation. Very few firms come close to totally emulating the Semler initiatives. However, organisations more than ever before are encouraging a higher degree of employee participation and involvement. The question facing many organisations is *'How can we initiate and sustain a greater level of involvement by employees in decision-making, planning and managing in areas that have been traditionally out of bounds to them?'*

Our experience tells us that the process of increasing employee involvement is not spontaneous. It has to be managed and there are many pitfalls and hurdles.

We believe that there are three key stages in achieving sustainable employee involvement in the work process...

Stage 1. Creating the Environment

Top management must clearly define their vision for the organisation, making the commitment to give greater involvement to all employees and dedicating the necessary resources and training to support employees as they assume more responsibility.

Stage 2. Managing the Process

There are three specific considerations...

1. Organisational. Concerns project management, structuring the workforce and organising and leading the effort.
2. Behavioural. Concerns group dynamics and how team members relate to each other and other parts of the organisation.
3. Mechanical. Concerns systems and procedural changes necessary to accommodate new ways of working.

Stage 3. Implementation

This is where many employee involvement initiatives fail. The keys to success are that top management must sustain and reinforce the vision, mistakes must be tolerated and learnt from, training and communication efforts must be redoubled, and everyone must learn to be tolerant and patient.

As Semco and many other organisations have demonstrated, effective employee involvement can bring substantial rewards - improved performance, lower costs, increased financial benefits for employees and a place where work is an enjoyable, creative experience.

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