

Regenerative Work Systems

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Companies as traditional as those of the paper industry and as unorthodox as specialty-food mail-order houses are implementing skill- and knowledge-based work designs, an integral element of high performance work systems (HPWS). Such redesign or work systems emerge from a desire to provide employees with the appropriate motives and structures for increased productivity, improved customer service, and continuous business improvement.

The organizations implementing these work designs tend to favor high involvement and participation. They look beyond a system that focuses only on the duties and responsibilities of a job to one that focuses on helping workers becomes more flexible and more skilled. As employees gain new knowledge and demonstrate new competencies, they will grow in value. Conceivable, such a system will become self-reinforcing.

Unfortunately, there are built-in dilemmas. Consider the comments of one union president in a large paper company where the “top brass” is “hell-bent” on installing “high performance.” Despite the “bold type” in his voice when he speaks of HPWS, he speaks thoughtfully about the need for unions to keep changing themselves. He walks a 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. But how can it be good for the company to require all of us to have the same skills and to 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?

Some companies, including Colgate Palmolive and DuPont, have found an answer to this question.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

HPWS are traditionally based on the use of external rewards and punishments as sources of motivation. “For each skill you add – and additional tasks you perform – the company will give...” But this tends to backfire, as illustrated by these comments from a line manager in a large European factory:

In Colgate, 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 and didn’t have or need someone patting them on the back and saying ‘good job’ for that work. This was a big ah-ha!

External rewards and punishments are sources of motivation, but they are not what are needed to nourish intrinsic motivation.

What is needed is the intrinsic motivation University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi calls emergent motivation-motivation that results from connecting with work as a source of self-expression.

Emergent motivation is the only form of motivation that leads to tenacious exploration and sustained creativity. It is emergent because purpose arises out of the interaction between a person and what he or she perceives as a significant and meaningful context. Through this interaction, people discover their own rewards. Goals that have never existed before emerge.

A “significant and meaningful context” is clarified by looking at an example offered by a DuPont business manager:

Every person in our business knows first-hand, on a daily basis, what our customers’ markets are and what is required to have our customers 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 Colgate manufacturing site.

Researchers working on the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have found that if external 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 motivation. This is 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. A manufacturing director in Colgate commented:

When we initially bought our way out of the pay-for-performance in some of our plants, productivity dropped; where such pay still exists managers are compelled to keep redesigning the system for it to continue producing results. Even when operators help in redesign, it continuously draws energy out of 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.

The Power of Uncertainty

To develop intrinsic motivation means removing certainty from the domain of performance. No one can predict in advance what will happen – and amazing things can happen. 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 result that were considerable less creative

– and less personally rewarding-than those workers who approached work without a specific predefined goal or expectation from management.

Worker responded to the challenge that derived from having a personal connection to the market for their product offering. A powerful, self-managed motivation emerges:

Instead of being limited to a fixed set of skills and rewards that are always in limited supply, there is no 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.

[Before,] we had everyone climbing the same ladder. Now we can scale any wall – market change or customer retooling – infinitely faster. Everyone is climbing the wall on his or her 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.

A Regenerative Open-System Approach

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, or they may be stopped for preventative maintenance. In the event we cannot fix them, we replace them.

This sort of thinking is changing. A DuPont manager points out:

We switched metaphors and started thinking from a more organic model, one which 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 tree can grow, now do maintenance and provide fuel to keep a car on the road.

Emergent motivation is inherently self-regenerating; no energy need be expended by the organization. It results in unexpected benefits, such as

tenacity in the absence of a clear external reward, the building of character that happens with a self-disciplined individual, and as a person whose creativity is continuously expanding. As one Colgate operator commented: “You can’t but this kind of caring,” and 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 they can be and what the world they play in can be – and how they can contribute.

Emergent self-realized rewards come from mastering new challenges that offer the opportunity for each individual to make a unique contribution in a significant and meaningful context. The best news is that this sort of reward is infinitely flexible in every situation with each individual; no group of managers must select or administer them.

How does the union membership feel about working in regenerative work systems? One shop steward who has just started working 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 every felt my philosophy about work and that of the business were not in conflict somewhere. I actually 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 an interactively developed, yet self-determined description of his aims for contributing to the business and the unique set of supportive capabilities he plans to develop. They system that permits this development is not a matrix of cells, each with pre-specified skills and knowledge. Rather, it is flexible complex of work arenas, each of which serves as an appropriate focus area for employee contributions. This perspective provides boundaries that ensure that business needs are supported even as individual creativity is nourished.

A union president, this one in the new South Africa, gets 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 though as though I were the boss. I actually forget they are not my own personal customers like at my old shop. I never know life and work could be the same thing.