

People first: Strategies of empowerment in work organizations

DONATA FRANCESCATO ()*

MONICA MORGANTI ()*

In the early years of the development of their discipline, community psychologists planned and implemented primary and secondary prevention initiatives above all in educational and recreational institutions and within the social and health services, usually operating in the public rather than in the private sector (Francescato, 1977, Francescato, & Ghirelli, 1988; Palmonari, & Zani, 1980).

This bias towards the public sector was partly due to the background of the first community psychologists in universities and social services, that led them to work in environmental settings with which they had the greatest familiarity. But there were also ideological reasons for their reluctance to operate in business and the manufacturing world. The business world was perceived by them to be dominated by the values of profit and competition, and to be organized according to bureaucratic and hierarchical criteria which allowed little importance to the well-being of the people involved both as customers and as employees.

Thus community psychologists believed they

could not operate in this world without losing their own values. Besides, the «work environment» as understood in its most traditional sense had for decades been the exclusive province of psychologists of labour and organization, especially in the United States, to the exclusive benefit of the ownership and management.

This perception of the business world began to change in the 1980s, thanks to a series of concomitant factors. Community psychologists began to see that the working environment could be a determining factor in the well-being of the individuals who work there, and could be as much of a factor in stimulating physical and psychological health as schools, the family, and social services. So they began to engage in training, research and consultancy for companies and trade unions.

The emphasis on prevention and interest in weaker members of society which characterize this discipline led them to concentrate on certain areas, such as the psychological consequences of unemployment, the relationship between unemployment and mental illness, the planning and evaluation of various strategies for the prevention of illness and accidents, and the prevention of stress on entering and leaving the labour market.

(*) University of Rome.

In the 1990s, this commitment on the part of community psychologists is increasing: several scholars and consultants base programmes for companies and trade unions on empowerment adapting concepts and strategies for action which were originally developed in the 1960s and 1970s in order to increase the power of marginal groups in American society (Alinsky, 1971; Ryan, 1971).

But why was the business world so attracted to ideas about empowerment at the end of the 1980s that writers on organization like Peters (1987) and Block (1987), who belong to the traditional economics-driven school, could argue that employee empowerment was the only way for American business to regain its competitive edge? It is likely that a range of factors generated a *Weltanschauung* which has in turn facilitated at least a partial integration of the social-economic needs and the values of personal freedom which underpin the concept of empowerment in community psychology.

In this paper we shall try to show how past and future experiments in the changing social context could favour theoretical and methodological advances in community psychology with regard to the workplace.

1. SOCIAL CHANGE AND PERSONAL CHANGE

With increased international competition Taylorist models of organization have become ever more obsolete, and the enhancement of human resources has become a primary objective for companies which see a determining competitive advantage in increased involvement of the workforce. Everywhere in the world companies are seeking organizational models which will lead to both high production and increased satisfaction of the workforce (Klein, 1990; Toffler, 1990; Cuneo, 1992).

Peters (1987) holds that this change represents a genuine revolution for the traditional work environment which already functions in a situation of accelerated change and high uncertainty in every sphere of organizational action.

Several other authors (De Masi, & Bonzanini, 1987; Toffler, 1990; Naisbitt, & Aburdene, 1990; Porter, 1990) argue that western society is in the throes of a historical transition. Apart from the

more general shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, in the past few years the rhythm of change has altered in spheres as varied as economics, politics, technology and psychology.

In fact we are in the presence of important changes which are often contradictory, such as changes in the field of economics involving the creation of increasingly transnational areas with companies which merge and create alliances. At the same time, large-scale enterprises are in crisis: in the 1980s only 23% of mergers between large companies in the United States were successful, while the highest productivity may be found in areas such as Los Angeles where 90% of workers are employed by companies with less than fifty employees. «Small is beautiful» becomes the catch-phrase just as gigantic mergers take place, because large companies have been seen to be less innovative at a time when success depends more than ever before on continuous improvements in products and on the ability to adapt them to the shifting needs of specific market niches.

The Fordist model of mass production diminishes in importance as markets break up and fragment. The distinction between product and service also diminishes, and companies have to compete on the speed with which ideas can be transformed into better products. In the future, economic success will increasingly depend on the quality of products and services, and on flexibility in marketing them.

The importance of individuals as intelligent consumers is extended to the workplace. According to Peters (1987), in the United States companies have tended in the past to minimize the role of the workforce, unlike those in Japan and some parts of Europe. Now the time has come to emphasize the role of individual employees. This may be achieved by assigning hard physical labour and some intellectual work to machines, increasing support technology for decision-making (elaboration of data and predictions) and for communications (data-base, satellites, data transmission).

Creativity, flexibility and the acceptance of increased personal responsibility are the demands made on the individual. Modes of decision-making and accepting responsibility are forced to change, so that successful organization becomes

flatter, with fewer levels. Companies must emphasize quality and service, develop sensitivity to change in the field in which they operate, and be quick to change.

Success in achieving these objectives depends on a workforce which is well-trained, continuously up-dated, prepared to perform different tasks and to work with others, and above all emotionally involved in the roles which they themselves help to define. Whereas in the old-fashioned organizational all that was expected was obedience to hierarchy and the carrying out of orders, so that in what Marx termed «alienation» employees brought to the company only their «rational» self and distinguished between their emotional involvement and ethical commitment on the hand and their work-performance on the other, now the opposite is required. Hence we speak more of collaborators and less of subordinates.

In part, today's employees are already in a position to become effective collaborators, since they are better educated and more professional. The prestige, power and earnings of professional groups are all increasing.

While the traditional sources of power were strength, the law, and financial means, today knowledge has come to the fore. This if, of course, a kind of power most commonly found amongst professionals: in his study of wealth in the United States, Philips (1990) affirmed that in the 1980s the wealthy became wealthier and professional increased their quota of national income. Derber et al (1990) argued that professionals have become too powerful and constitute a new body of «mandarins» which employs the monopoly of knowledge to establish control structures which are out of tune with democratic ideals.

Confirmation of these new status of professionals comes from data which reveals that in all Western countries parents wish their children to become professionals and that many young people enter the work environment with high professional expectations – to have a creative, important, autonomous and highly-paid job. At the opposite extreme there are large minorities of women, disabled people, youth, and various ethnic and immigrant groups which find difficulty in entering the work environment or even establishing relationships with it.

Thus it is impossible to make generalizations about workers or white-collar staff even within the workforce. Instead, the workforce is made up of quite different groups which are differentiated according to the ambitions and choices of lifestyle of the individuals who are part of them. Such a situation clearly presents new challenges to companies, but also the trade unions which can no longer conceive their membership in terms of categories but must consider the desires of individuals through the various stages of their lives.

Several authors stress this renewed importance of the individual (Lasch, 1979; Francescato, & Ghirelli, 1988; Giddens, 1991), and believe that we are experiencing a series of changes in the psyche of the individual. The Oedipal personality which is typical of a patriarchal society seems to be giving way to the narcissistic personality, causing widespread change in attitudes to time, gratification, work, family and interpersonal relationships, and relation to authority. Lasch asserts that many people visit psychotherapists today on matters concerning problems of identity more often than was the case in preceding decades.

We believe that continuous economic, social and technological change has legitimized the idea of personal change. For in more traditional societies individualism was discouraged, and personal identity was much more closely linked to the identity of the group; it was, in a certain sense, a *given identity*. On the contrary, industrial society provided the opportunity to sell one's own work in the market, allowing personal emancipation from the clan and encouraging both the purchasing of products and lifestyle as aspects of personal identity (*a purchased identity*). Now, in a changing society, it is possible to observe a further change in the development of identity: We can still purchase objects, and do so in an increasingly differentiated way in order to assimilate them to our personal tastes (the one person market), but at the same time we seek to modify our bodies and our psychological characteristics (*a created identity*).

Today, the attempt to create a self which is different and in continuous evolution is feasible partly as the result of certain technological innovations in the field of the social sciences (training, psychotherapy, self-help manuals). Thus in

the past few years a possible agreement has emerged between the new need for companies to find motivated and involved collaborators and individuals who seek in work the same possibility for growth, self-realization and self-expression as they do in everyday life rather than security and money.

Thus employers are faced with a multiple challenge: they must survive and develop globally while promoting participation and high commitment on the part of their employees, first of all in order to achieve the quality which is necessary for market competition and secondly to guarantee improvement in the quality of life both in the workplace and in the community in which they operate. In addition, they need to favour or assist the emergence of optimum conditions of civil and political cohabitation in the community: it is known that the opening or closing of a factory can modify the quality of life of a city or of several villages.

While this is the situation throughout the Western world, the particular case of Italy offers several unusual opportunities and many specific problems. This is because there is a reciprocal link between organizations and society, as several disciplines and in particular community psychology emphasize.

The culture, institutions and services of a regional community constitute the background in the Gestalt sense of each specific organization, influencing the operation of the company in such aspects as economic and ethical success or failure. In the case of Italy, the «Tangentopoli» or «Clean Hands» trials and the presence in some zones of blackmail by organized crime have influenced the operations of many companies, just as the success of companies in areas such as Prato and Ancona – to take just two examples – has benefited from favourable and helpful infrastructure, services and relationships with public bodies.

Moreover, companies influence the evolution of the communities in which they operate, in polluting or respecting the environment, in industrial relations and in relations with the community. If an organization chooses to employ through patronage, pay bribes to politicians, or percentages to the Mafia, then it will reinforce acceptance of a mafia culture amongst the local population; if it chooses to operate according to

different ethical values, then it will contribute to the spread of these values among people who see for themselves that it is possible to act and live in another manner.

In the 1990s the values of community psychologists and many progressive organizations have moved closer together and it is now possible to experiment with new organizational models in order to achieve a new quality of life both within and outside the company. Success in these changes requires large-scale mobilization of the psychic energy which is part of the organizations and their territorial networks, so that individual persons become a strategic key to change. As Agnelli (1992) wrote: «success of a company depends on enhancing the creativity, entrepreneurship and knowledge of all those who work in the company. The enemies to defeat are the excessive verticalization of many of our companies, personnel systems which reward conformity rather than creative intelligence, and, last of all, an “Italo-centric” attitude.»

Nowadays all experts criticize the bureaucratic order and the ideology which sustains it, even though the cult of the charismatic leader survives and attempts are made to preserve the old powers in new forms. As Salvemini (1992, p. 115) expresses it:

«The organizational challenges of the present time are notable for their intrinsic discontinuity. Turbulence resists predictability and the possibility of control, by resisting precisely the primary condition on which classical management theory was based.

It becomes impossible to foresee present-day change rationally and through numerical forecasting; imagination and intuition are indispensable.

«The intrinsic complexity of the environment is therefore too vast for the accepted management and leadership systems, a fact which in turn completely overturns the organizational paradigm. It is no longer a matter of drawing up a precise internal organization chart or procedure systems according to pre-established rules, since such formality may become a weakness while methods used

should be extremely sensitive to contingencies and extremely flexible.

«All this appears to lead to a dramatic defeat of planning and logic and the triumph of the weaker aspects of thought [...] but the real difficulty of modern company management is that [...] a lighter managerial style must in any case work together with more consolidated criteria and formal techniques of management [...] and] the secret of success thus lies in the ability to fuse cultures and competences which are intrinsically contradictory, such as flexibility and standardization, control and participation, short- and long-term perspectives, formality and experiment, and complexity and simplicity.

«In brief, science (the entire resources of the logical and analytical management theory which lies behind twentieth century organizations) and art (all those elements which have not hitherto been part of economic and business studies).»

Unlike community psychologists, Salvemini (ibidem, p. 116) believes that the aim of this integration is to create new organizational conditions in which individuals are no longer the end but the instrument:

«The main element is the new organizational structure, which is flat, cellular and highly articulated horizontally. A strong and often monolithic corporate culture, which is often tolerant of diverging sub-cultures within the company, exists side-by-side and in tune with this more atomized structure. The whole structure is run by a charismatic leadership in the person of the chief executive which is accepted by members of the organization, who find in the corporate culture and the authority of the leader the motivating factors of their own professional and personal identity.

«A further important condition is the conscious deployment of people as the chief patrimony of the organization, and as the crucial mechanism for integrating the diverse sub-units.

«Lastly, the capacity for continuous transformation is marked by a generally

accepted philosophy of change which is not planned but understood in a flexible manner by people and structures in such a way as to allow continual reactions of mutual adjustment both internally and in terms of the environment.»

In this changed political, social and business context it has become possible to conduct experiments in community psychology which are clearly aimed at favouring the emancipation and empowerment of employees and the citizens of the community in which the company operates. Salvemini's approach still bears signs of the instrumental use of people considered – albeit in party unconscious fashion – variables which may be manipulated in order to achieve aims of production. In the approach of community psychology, on the other hand, people may only be involved if they are respected and if the objective and subjective conditions for their personal growth exist in the organization.

What, then, are the strategies which community psychology adopts in order to «put people first» in work organizations? We believe it necessary to adopt strategies of various levels of complexity, and propose a model which allows the cumulative use of various strategies of empowerment with objectives which gradually increase in ambition and cover a wider field. These strategies can be outlined as follows:

- a) strategies of empowerment based on individuals or teams of employees to increase their knowledge and competence through training;
- b) strategies of empowerment based both on individuals and on organizational change;
- c) strategies of empowerment involving networks of individuals, organizations, and social forces and institutions of the area.

2. THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT IN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

Rappaport (1981) was one of the first authors to attempt a definition of this concept, in the sense of «favouring the acquisition of power», or, in his view, increasing the possibility that individuals and teams might actively control their own lives.

Levine and Perkins (1987, pp. 352-3) defined empowerment as follows:

«An essential path of change is empowerment in the form of increasing access to resources for social outcasts. One of these resources is information (to know strategies necessary for adapting to the environment), the other is social organization (greater involvement and participation in defining problems and taking decisions).»

In general, this term has been used by community psychologists to indicate the patterns and processes by which social outcasts acquire greater power, through participation in citizen associations.

Kiefer (1982) noted that active participation in organizations and associations favours and increase political awareness and an enhanced self-perception of competence. He defined empowerment in terms of individual acquisitions: the achievement of political ability, of knowing-how and knowledge, which constitute the ability to participate with competence.

Empowerment comprehends a three-dimensional process which includes:

- a) the development of a stronger sense of self in relation to the world (less sense of impotence and alienation);
- b) the construction of a more critical understanding of the political and social forces which influence one's everyday life;
- c) the elaboration of functional strategies and the search for resources for the achievement of personal aims and socio-political objectives.

One strategy of development of the community consists precisely in favouring this process of individual growth of citizens through participation in significant experiences.

As the result of many hereditary and environmental factors, many employees on the lower levels of the hierarchy have a lower level of instruction, less knowledge, and fewer opportunities to use the resources of the environment in a conscious manner.

One preliminary strategy of empowerment, which is for example used by Swedish trade unions, aims to overcome this cultural dis-

advantage with basic instruction in English, maths and general knowledge. This may include all kinds of experience, whether carried out by training in the classroom or by using computers and other audiovisual or data transmission systems, with the aim of increasing knowledge per se, knowing how to do and knowing how to be.

Amongst the most innovative experiences of this kind are those developed to improve not only technical or business competences in employees but also their interpersonal and social competences. Several companies have developed courses for executives and managers and in some cases also for blue-collar workers, on such arguments as how to improve personal communicative ability, how to give constructive feedback, how to present one's own ideas, how to speak in public, how to build working relationships with others, how to solve problems, and how to become more creative.

Along the same lines, there are courses aimed at improving the psychophysical well-being of employees, such as courses on stress management, on a healthy life-style, on managing anxiety, on insomnia and other personal problems (Fulcheri, Novara, 1992). Some companies have also started preparatory courses on assuming new managerial or professional responsibilities, retirement and early retirement.

These are the most common training strategies, because they are the easiest to implement. Community psychologists usually plan and run training programmes, although their role differs from that of «classical» company trainers in the novelty of some of the training initiatives and in teaching methods which involve greater participation. Taken as a whole, however, these strategies are to be considered only partially useful in achieving true empowerment since they are limited to the first step: they increase employee competence but leave the organization untouched. Besides, the abilities which are strengthened in the programmes mentioned above are mainly technical-social rather than emancipatory, and emancipation is inherent in the concept of empowerment for community psychology.

Certain company manuals and courses on empowerment, usually those directed at middle managers, seek to explain the origins of the patriarchal bureaucratic power which reigns in many traditional companies, and thus manage at

least in part the objective of rendering the reader more conscious of the socio-political factors which influence his own self-esteem and his performance. They therefore have the advantage of increasing awareness of the various forms of historical and social conditioning to which we are all subject (Block, 1987), and to examine the problems linked to our twin impulses towards autonomy and dependency.

The limit of these approaches to empowerment is that they are often based solely on an individual and voluntary point of view: «You can become powerful; you can choose if you want to.» While the fact that these courses emphasize the possibility of choice of each individual is certainly important, it is equally important to avoid creating false illusions and overstating the power that an individual has to change. It is essential to bear in mind the inevitable connections between individual behavior on the one hand, and external organizational pressures and support or obstacles on the other.

In a similar approach to individual empowerment some companies have created internal counseling services. A psychologist is placed at the disposition of employees with personal or work problems in order to assist them in finding efficacious solutions by means of brief therapeutic or support sessions or other forms of rapid intervention (such as relaxation therapy).

From this point of view, Bruscaaglioni (1992) offers an original contribution which considers the subjective aspects of individual empowerment. He holds that the emergence of certain attitudes whose scope is to increase the individual's sense of being able to choose are the basis of empowerment and its development. He also affirms the importance of going to the roots of our desires in order to discover our dormant, hidden or forgotten potentialities.

Empowerment entails the development of the ability to imagine oneself in the situation in which we desire to live, and to rethink the reality in which we live: «Thought, reflection, action, and experiment are complementary in providing new information and feedback about oneself: it is important to think-imagine-hear oneself, but then, at a certain point, it is necessary to act, even in a minor way, perhaps even more symbolic than real. In fact, at a certain point, only action can provide further information not only

about the reaction of others but also, and above all, about oneself (Try, and you'll at least know more about yourself)» (Bruscaaglioni, 1992, p. 19).

According to Bruscaaglioni, empowerment is a «bridging concept» linking the opposite extremes of staying permanently in the present situation and change.

The process of individual empowerment is based on four operational phases which go from the rise of a new need or desire to the investment in a thought-experiment of oneself in the situation where the need-desire is satisfied (seeing oneself as if in a film), to the emphasis of the new internal and external resources which are necessary, through to the experimental action and the final phases of mobilization of the internal resources and the search for and acquisition of external resources, with the fullest possible operational experimentation of the new possibilities

3. EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES WHICH REQUIRE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHANGES ON THE PART OF ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

Heil (1990) surveyed around two hundred empirical research projects concerning experiments in organizations with differentiated forms of employee participation in the process of decision-making. In most cases, these experiments had led to an increase in both production and employee satisfaction. The greater the extent to which the experiments had been carried out at the request of employees, the more each employee felt able to influence the various kinds of decision made in the organization; the greater the extent to which the employee was a shareholder or had an economic interest in the success of the company, the more personal productivity and satisfaction increased.

Peters (1987) also held that the implementation of a true process of empowerment entailed acting on both the hard and the soft dimensions of the organization. He used many proposals made decades ago by psychologists of the human relation movement, from the socio technical approach to organizational change and from the advocates of humanistic psychology (Rogers,

Jacques, McGregor, Maslow, Bennis, Chin, and others).

Peters held that it was necessary to believe in two basic axioms. For psychologists, the first echoes Rogers' theories on human potential, that «There is no limit to what an average person can do when involved, trained, supported and motivated». He listed a variety of ways in which companies had involved their employees through participation in teams which were concerned with all aspects of company life. The second axiom is once again based on the results of social psychology, underlining the necessity that each employee be placed in a semi-autonomous team. The shift-leader and assistants become consultants to the members.

In our experience, there is a tendency to create an excessive dependence on the simple creation of teams in this kind of project in organizational empowerment, as if a highly-committed working environment were only possible to achieve by dividing employees into teams. In this way teamwork becomes an objective in itself rather than a means of involving employees, and often leaves the rest of the organization unchanged. We believe that it is essential to act on a series of factors: for example, to modify the system of internal communications to really provide employees with greater power and the possibility of being responsible and creative.

Usually an attempt is made to create the most efficient and accessible computerized information systems, and to foster informal communication networks. The Japanese were quick to act in this area, and created group mechanisms which guarantee communication from bottom to top in protected situations (Van Wolferen, 1990).

It is also necessary to intervene on the dimension of retribution. Both Peters (1987) and Heil (1990) record that the companies which have enjoyed huge leaps in productivity are those which have introduced various modes of profit-sharing (about 20% of American companies), or of company ownership through share transfer to employees (only 10% of American companies, even though a 1974 law favoured such share transfers). Other companies have achieved good results by paying for knowledge acquired by employees as well as for their work performance, or by linking incentives to the productivity of teams or entire departments.

A further fundamental element which increases employee empowerment is the reduction of hierarchical levels by flattening organizational structure. In this way there is a drastic reduction in the number of people who control the work of others, and many staff functions are moved close to production lines to be more useful to them; it also coordinates and facilitates communication between teams working on different projects. This changed role requires more interpersonal competence than previously, and indeed much of the work of community psychologists is in this area.

The problem is, as Case Study 2 makes clear, to assist workers and operators directly involved in customer service or product creation but usually on the lowest hierarchical level to accept greater responsibility and more power of decision. A further objective is to convince their immediate superiors to forget the habit of command and control in order to help them become «consultants» for the various work-teams, mediators between them and other lines, and promoters of initiative, rather than functioning as filters which block all communication from the lowest levels.

According to Peters (1987), the creation of a highly-committed working environment requires the elimination of all useless status symbols (such as reserved parking spaces for executives, separate canteens for managers and workers, carpeted offices with paintings for executives, and so on), and diminish salary difference between managers and workers. Besides this, it is necessary to render the company less bureaucratic by eliminating the procedures which compel an employee to obtain twenty signatures in order to start up a project. It is also useful to encourage ideas and provide support for ventures which fail. Above all, it is necessary to create an atmosphere in which all employees are aware of and involved in what the company produces and why it does so, and understand how their own role might assist in achieving the objectives of the company. Finally, there must be some shared basic values which compensate for the lack of bureaucratic rules in the everyday running of the company and – above all – in emergencies.

As several researchers have found (Heil, 1990), when these attempts to create high-commitment working environments are successful

they enable a higher degree of employee emancipation and a higher level of empowerment, since they facilitate the acquisition of such information as is necessary to achieve a better understanding of the organization in which one lives and also the power to influence change. Yet such attempts are only successful when they go beyond the mere generation of new competences in employees to change the organizational structure, the reward system, the formal and informal communication systems, the leadership style and the way of working. For this it is essential to act contemporaneously on the structural-strategic, functional, psychodynamic and psychoenvironmental levels. In fact one of the most successful strategies that has been employed to generate this type of participatory change is multidimensional organization analysis.

4. STRATEGIES OF NETWORK EMPOWERMENT

These modes of encouraging empowerment derive from the most radical strategies of community psychology, in order to favour the development of community and the sense of community. The objective is to promote positive strategies amongst work organizations, trade union organizations, health, social and recreational services local political institutions, ministries and groups and associations in a given area in order to confront problems of common interest together.

An example of this kind of empowerment strategy is to be found in Case Study 2, in which operations in training, research, coordination between various official bodies and network building were carried out on behalf of young people aged between 14 and 29 in a Central Italian town.

Less complex examples of a similar nature concern the empowerment of people taking early retirement who are loaned by a company to community associations for voluntary work. In this way the competences which they had gained in the company are revalued and redeployed in the community for the benefit of both the community itself and the employee – who avoids in this way the sense of uselessness and depression

which follows the cessation of an active working life, especially in men. Other examples include the use of company facilities such as large meeting rooms by local associations, or company sponsoring of events, parties commemorations and projects for the improvement of the local area or a larger area.

Some applications of empowerment have facilitated youth entry into the workforce through courses on setting up in business, where local companies act as tutors to newly-formed small businesses. An interesting example may be seen in the experiments, of the Norwegian Work; Life Center; which was founded with the joint sponsorship of the major trade unions, the association of businessmen and the government. This Center had provided assistance to hundreds of public and private firms to set up and to create participatory forms of organization and management. The most interesting aspect of these experiments is that the Norwegians have used a network model, encouraging the greatest possible integration between local organizations, companies, unions and various associations operating in the area. In such cases, empowerment has been achieved not only by increasing knowledge on the part of all participants concerning their community and the availability of resources for the various projects, but by uniting the various competences and resources to create completely new creative synergies. The «thinkable», to use Bruscajlloni's terms, has first become «possible» and then by means of successive experiments «real».

Case Study 1

A example of empowerment of workers and managers by means of multidimensional organizational change.

The company is the subsidiary of a multinational in the confectionery sector, based in a town in the northern part of Italy, at present in the advanced stages of transformation from a traditional factory to a high-commitment working environment. The factory in which we have worked with Ecopoiesis for the past three years has 700 workers and 300 further personnel com-

prising office staff, technicians, managers and executives.

We were originally called in because the German parent company had decided to experiment with team-work in the German factories and in four foreign factories. We were invited to assist in planning training programmes which would enable workers accustomed to working alone, under the wing of a foreman to work in teams and with greater autonomy. At the same time, a German consultancy team began to work with mixed teams of workers, managers and executives on the cultural changes that were necessary to implement an experiment in high commitment. The corporate culture of high commitment considers people as collaborators and tries to encourage their commitment in order to enhance both productivity and the quality of life of employees and their work satisfaction. But as we have seen to switch from a traditional factory to a high commitment factory requires changes in various organizational dimensions: people must learn to work in teams and the team is considered the base unit for carrying out work, which is no longer considered as a duty or complex of duties but rather as a system in which people work side by side with technology. There is an integration of diverse competences with the aim of arriving at a product for whose quality everybody is responsible.

Work is organized not only to be productive, but to offer the possibility of learning and involvement; both hard jobs and the most sought-after jobs are rotated. Each component of the team is encouraged to learn the skills needed to carry out all aspects of the team task, and are rewarded for this.

The team operates within a less pyramidal organization: this experiment was planned to conclude with just three levels. Team members must themselves acquire the necessary competences for planning, production and controlling, and a significant part of the work consists of self-evaluation. They are trained to improve cooperation amongst themselves and with other teams in the factory, and to have the ability to resolve problems even in situations of conflict. Employees are no longer evaluated in terms of presence and performance, but over a range of competences and knowledge relative to the technical aspects of their work (knowing how to

run the plant), the business aspects (understand the needs of the company's marketing department, etc.), and the interpersonal aspects (know how to give negative feedback on a colleague in a positive way, run meetings, etc.).

Each person and each team is responsible for some decisions, and co-responsible for the running of the departments. Supervisors modify their functions: they change from leadership based on the authority of the role (as the boss) to exercising power based on competence, and they have to concentrate on facilitating the growth of competences in their teams (as a tutor). Their role shifts to the planning of work, and from the resolution of technical problems – which are now mainly delegated to the teams – to consultation, assistance, coordination and training.

Usually, the transformation of a traditional plant to a high-commitment plant takes four to five years. This is because the achievement of high commitment and high performance concerns both hard components (increase of productivity and quality, the diminution of costs, accidents and waste, and more generally all the objective indicators of efficiency) and soft components (increase in the sense of belonging to the company, dedication to work, work satisfaction, and personal and professional growth of employees).

In this culture change an important role is played by training, initially specific training for team-work (as was the case here) but above all training towards a vision of the company as a system based on interdependence and cooperation.

A high-commitment factory may be conceived as a network of people who commit themselves reciprocally by requesting (as customers) the performance of tasks to colleagues (the suppliers), who in turn agree to provide them in the shortest possible time with the maximum possible quality. Thus good running of the company depends on creative and effective reciprocal collaboration, and on profound knowledge about the general functioning of the plant. Such a new systems mentality also requires the ability for reciprocal communication, collaboration and trust relations between people of different hierarchical levels and between different functions. The acquisition of such a vision implies notable

change with respect to the corporate culture of a more old-fashioned company.

Bearing in mind all these problems, our training programme was developed in four directions. A special training programme for team-work was created for workers, who attended in groups of 8-11 with their foreman; four days, separated in time as two distinct two-day modules, consisted of units of theory on

- increasing knowledge of various aspects of team-work, and increasing participants' ability to be good team-members;
- understanding behaviours which facilitate productivity and team membership;
- running meetings and keeping minutes;
- better communication within the team, and how to give negative feedback in a positive manner;
- understanding interactions between individual and team objectives;
- playing the role of consultant to a colleague with a work problem.

Other training units had the objective of rendering the participants competent in the following areas:

- defining team objectives and responsibilities with the need and expectations of the team's suppliers and customers in mind;
- devising training programmes for the development of the team in terms of company needs;
- working out plans for internal rotation, and holiday calendars;
- proposing evaluation plans for the team and its members;
- defining the internal and external support role of the team.

The need was later felt to integrate these sessions with two further modules of one day each. In addition to the team members and their foreman, managers from the department were also present – participating from the point of view of multidimensional organizational analysis. The objectives of these extra modules were:

- to increase collaboration and communication between team-members and the various hierarchical levels;
- to increase knowledge of the various organi-

zational theories, and of the objective and subjective dimensions of organization;

- to increase an understanding of the functioning of the department as part of a multidimensional system;
- to increase the ability of the participants to identify the problem areas and strengths of the various dimensions of their own organization;
- to increase awareness of the interconnections between the subjective and objective dimensions of the organization which must be taken into account when fostering organizational change;
- to identify the priorities of change in the relationship between team and department, and to propose innovative solutions;
- to improve the decision-making process.

We used classroom work with the involvement of the various hierarchical levels because we believe that it allows a better opportunity for comparison, and for making a common effort to find solutions which can be applied immediately on returning to work. A commitment made in front of others is also easier to keep. It is therefore a valid method for reinforcing processes of system and fall-out change, since it brings together the training and the subsequent application of knowledge and competences which have been acquired. In fact, to this end a training experience within the department was planned between the two modules. This entailed a team meeting and the study and planning for a new plant, the team-management of which was supervised during later training modules so that it was possible to make a first pragmatic check on the competences which participants were acquiring during the course.

In this way, participants in the training can immediately see whether and how they have learned anything and whether and how what they have studied is in fact applied in the period between the modules. It is also possible in the classroom to learn to perceive the factory from multiple viewpoints and to resolve real problems with the new methods by using the advice of their colleagues and bosses – which is both given and received in a spirit of reciprocal help. This also means that the contents of the course are in part decided by the participants themself-

ves, and the problems used in exercises derived from their own everyday experience in the factory problems such as safety in the workplace, shifts, personnel evaluation.

A further part of the training project concerned the foremen in particular, with the objective of supporting them in the difficult transition from boss to tutor and their function as guide and assistant to the newly-formed teams in applying the new social and technical competences. In fact the primary task of this new team-manager is to guarantee the rapport between team results and company business.

This specific intervention aimed to strengthen certain attitudes, competences and knowledge which are necessary to operate in a high-commitment context. The aims were:

- to increase participant knowledge of various leadership styles, and of the technical and personal changes which are necessary to change from «old-fashioned foreman» to the new role;
- to increase the knowledge of the different aspects of teamwork, and their ability to function as a good consultant to the team.

In this case, too, the practical experience of the foremen was exploited. The first day of classroom training, in which the aims of the project were discussed and guidelines for team observation were handed out, was in fact followed by a period of about two months in which the foremen kept a weekly diary on the functioning of the teams which were their responsibility. Their observations and the problem which arose were then the subject of discussion during the training module of three days. After this module, had other tasks to perform on returning to work, such as keeping minutes of all the meetings they attended and noting episodes in which they had been able to help a team-member. In this way, they were able to verify the theory they had learned in the classroom in everyday practice, and then return to the classroom to discuss the experiences of their everyday tasks.

The last direction in which we worked was the encouragement of change at the legal, economic and organizational level. This was carried out in parallel to the various training projects concerning the growth of empowerment of workers, teams and foremen.

A coordinating committee consisting of the managers of various departments was set up to monitor the implementation of the transition, and a mixed group of workers, managers and personnel experts was formed to formulate new methods of reward. New contracts were negotiated with trade unions which included rewards over base salary for acquisition of competence in the social, technical and business areas, and for team and department productivity.

Our intervention stimulated and supported the personnel department, which had initiated the lengthy task of studying the competences to be encouraged and the means of evaluating them. The first data from the department in which the change was carried out show an increase in productivity and a decrease in absenteeism. We propose to carry out a longitudinal study to verify the level of satisfaction and productivity over the medium and long term.

Case Study 2

Network empowerment in a Central Italian city

About three years ago, Ecopoiesis was approached by a large cooperative which runs temporary housing and homes for the handicapped and elderly. The chairman was looking for a «youth project» which he could set up with funds which the city council was making available to act on youth problems. We suggested a research project on the needs and desires of youth between 13 and 26. We helped them to devise several questionnaires: for schoolchildren and for adults working with youth. We also formulated a model for interviewing youth who had left school before completing their schooling.

The results of this research, which emphasized great difficulties in relationships with school, were discussed with the one thousand interviewees in a series of public meetings, and were published with the assistance of both private and public associations. Two interesting facts emerged from this preliminary survey:

- a) the high discrepancy between youth and adults in perceiving the problems and desires of the former;

- b) the existence of two forms of early school-leaving: one as the result of academic problems, and one due to precocious development.

This research led to the request to train a group of adults in key positions in the community with regard to youth, in order to improve their ability to understand and communicate. Trade unionists, officials from the employment office teachers, managers of youth associations and sports clubs all participated in special training programme. Apart from improving communication, the programme aimed at joining the participants in a network which could exploit and integrate the different provenances and competences so that they could formulate common projects for the youth of the city instead of starting isolated initiatives.

Several projects with multiple sponsors did in fact derive from the formation of this network, including:

- a) a «youth information» centre, set up by the city council, guilds and unions to provide information about job and apprenticeship possibilities;
- b) a project to train «community workers» to assist youths who wander the streets with no reference point after leaving school (EU funds were obtained to this end);
- c) an environmental psychology research project in a problem area, to mobilize and train resources within the area itself;
- d) a magazine for youth produced by youths who formed a cooperative under the tutorship of similar already-existing organizations;
- e) an original initiative: using school-leavers as tutors to provide help to others who risked leaving early as a result of failing exams.

This network empowerment experience reflects the ideological roots of the concept as it is understood in community psychology. Youth here passed from being helped to becoming co-protagonists in initiatives to help others, and other members of the network benefited from the competences acquired by participating in the various projects. Indeed it is above all through the experience of planning and implementing

such projects in one's own community that people acquire the technical and emancipatory competences which then allow them to present themselves to the world with increased power. These competences render them capable of knowing where to find resources, how to develop them, and how to influence the world in which they live. The process makes both individuals and organizations more competent, so that the cooperative which originally approached us has now increased its range of activities and its internal organization. It has sent most of its members of training courses, so that they will be able to run new projects; it has also offered and received advice from other cooperatives, and from political and trade union organizations.

In sponsoring this empowerment the role of community psychology was initially that of helping to overcome the deep-rooted diffidence between organizations with different mandates and often contrasting ideologies, seeking to create a climate of trust in which new opportunities for mutual growth might emerge. To propose and organize the first meetings, and bear in mind the complexity of the local situation, is just as important a function as helping the various groups to establish realistic common aims.

Once the network is informally set up, the community psychologist attempts to make it completely autonomous and diminishes his or her involvement by delegating competence to the members of the network themselves. A virtuous circle is created by increasing the competence of each member of the network and the associations from which they come. In this virtuous circle, not only can each individual association achieve its own objectives and guarantee a better quality of life for its own members and customers, but conditions are created in which there is opportunity for growth for other organizations and a greater level of competence for the community as a whole.

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ABSTRACT

The Community Psychologists in the 80's began to see that the working environment could be a determining factor in the well-being of the individuals so they began to engage in training, research and consultancy for Companies and Trade Unions.

The objective is to promote positive strategies amongst work organizations, Trade Union Organizations, health, social and recreational services, local political institutions, Ministries and Associations in a given area in order to confront problems of common interest.

Once the network is informally set up the community psychologist attempts to make it completely autonomous and diminishes his or her involvement by delegating competency to the member of the network themselves.

Conditions are created in which there is opportunity for growth for other organizations and greater level of competency for the community as a whole.

Key words: Community psychology, Work environment, Organizational changes.

RESUMO

Os Psicólogos Comunitários nos anos 80 começaram a perspectivar a qualidade dos contextos profissionais como um factor determinante no bem estar dos indivíduos e envolveram-se na consultoria e formação às Empresas e aos Sindicatos.

O objectivo desta actividade é o da promoção de estratégias positivas de trabalho conjunto com as Empresas, os Sindicatos, as Organizações de saúde, de intervenção social e recreativa, as Instituições Políticas Locais, os Ministérios e Associações várias de modo a confrontar problemas comuns.

Quando a rede está informalmente estabelecida, o Psicólogo Comunitário tenta torná-lo completamente autónomo e diminuir o seu envolvimento através da delegação de competências para os membros da rede. São assim criadas condições nas quais há oportunidade de crescimento de outras organizações e aumentar o nível de competências da comunidade como um todo.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia comunitária, Contextos profissionais, Mudanças organizacionais.