

What Do American Workers Need to Be Productive? (And What Are Their Managers Giving Them?)

Jay Hall, Ph.D.
Teleometrics International

There is an ancient Chinese curse that says, “May you live in interesting times!” If we consider events of the last twenty-five years, it might seem that the people of America are living in interesting times.

During that time some of our favorite notions about ourselves, our role as an industrial power and even the American Dream-have been challenged at home and abroad, as never before. In a few short years, we have witnessed an alarming decline in our capacity to produce hard goods or provide quality service. We have watched somewhat helplessly as people from foreign shores have replaced us as leaders in technological development and manufacturing. Some of us even prefer their products because the quality is so much better than what we have produced. And, unable to produce ourselves, it seems that some among us are even willing to part with pieces of our most cherished national real estate if the price is right.

To appreciate just how “interesting” life in America has become, consider our performance record of the last several years.

- Since 1973, the growth of U.S. productivity-in terms of Gross Domestic Productivity per employee (GDP) rather than GNP which includes productivity from U.S.-owned companies in foreign countries-has slowed to a crawl, averaging about a half percentage point per year.
- During the same period, Japan’s CDP growth rate has been six times greater than that of the U.S. The GDPs of France and West Germany grew four times faster, Great Britain's three times.

- The U.S.A. is the world’s largest debtor nation. In a little over four year's time – 1982 to 1986 – we went from the largest creditor with \$141 billion owed us to a net debtor position of \$264 billion, a swing of \$405 billion.
- Two-thirds of the U.S. National debt is owed to banks owned by the Japanese.
- The U.S. merchandise trade deficit in 1986 was \$156.2 billion – the largest ever recorded by any nation in history – and in 1990 was still \$101.2 billion.
- The U.S. infant mortality rate is only slightly better than that of Third World Countries.
- 25% of the U.S. population is considered functionally illiterate.
- And, while education is considered to be a key issue in all this, the U.S. ranked 14th out of 16 industrialized nations in its per capita expenditures for education.

Clearly, we have problems. American productivity, quality of life, and competitive position have all declined significantly in but a single generation's time. Interesting!

What is going on? How has a once proud people – so abundantly blessed with natural resources – come to such a point? How can the industrial leader for 20 years following World War II suddenly find itself lagging behind the very people it defeated and the countries it helped rebuild? Why can't we compete as we once did? Have we suddenly lost our technological genius? Our drive? What's wrong with us?

Interesting questions for interesting times. In looking for an answer, we have tried creative accounting and cost-containment, work force reduction and automation, more money and more technology. Americans love countable and predictable solutions to their problems. But when tangible measures fail to stop the bleeding, as most have, a lot of people target labor as our problem, they say, is an American work force less skilled, less committed and less disciplined than its Oriental and European counterparts. And what do we do about that? Historically, we've more or less ignored the human side of productivity. It appears we no longer have that luxury.

Many a manager, in recent years, has looked to Japan for the solution. In yet another interesting development, some have decided to imitate the "great imitators." Most have come home with new slogans about quality and teamwork and a handful of management concepts originally produced in the United States over 40 years ago- nothing very new nor even very Japanese. Maybe, instead of looking for revolutionary management techniques and other quick-fix gimmicks, it is time we took a look at ourselves. Maybe all we really need to borrow from the Japanese is their philosophy that "a problem holds the seed of its own solution."

There might be practical value in such a perspective – especially when so few "apparent" solutions have worked. Looking at our productivity dilemma in a different way might allow us to define the problem more accurately. Maybe those who blame labor for our national woes are wrong; if they are, it certainly wouldn't be the first time that a problem was misdiagnosed because someone looked only at symptoms. If on the other hand, they are right, the sooner we come to grips with the issue the better. In either case – in the spirit of Japanese problem solving – we might discover a much-needed seed of solution by looking to the problem itself. If, in fact, the American worker is the problem, the most straightforward way to find out what's wrong is to ask the worker. If that diagnosis is faulty, the way to find out what is wrong is still to ask the worker.

There are two fundamental questions that can be put to the American worker: What do you need – what policies, supervisory practices,

incentives, latitude, and the like-to do your best work? And: What is your management providing? Over the past three years, we have put such questions to over 10,000 American workers-managers and non-managers, males and females, young and old, salaried and hourly, union and non-union-in large and small organizations all across the country. Their answers are surprising, and they may hold the seeds of solution for many of our productivity ills. Some people will not like the answers obtained or their implications. But problems of national performance are too serious for any of us to reject or ignore data which, if acted upon, might set things right. In this spirit, let us consider what the American worker has to say about our problems of productivity.

AMERICAN PRODUCTIVITY: A SURVEY OF PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Some 10,227 American workers were surveyed over the three-year period from 1987 to 1990. The survey sample covered a wide cross section of organizational types, worker demographics, and geographic locales in the United States. Workers were surveyed from organizations engaged in automotive, manufacturing, engineering, financial, petrochemical, insurance, electronics, retail, service, fast-food, health care, education, research and development, high technology, and government activities. The average age of those reporting was 41 years with an average of 6.6 years with their organizations. While not all respondents supplied complete demographic information, it appears that the survey sample is fairly representative of today's U.S. work force.

Top and upper managers account for 7% of the data; middle and lower, 24%; and roughly 69% of those surveyed were non-management. Males made up 52% of the sample, with female workers contributing 11% of the data; 37% failed to identify gender. Salaried employees were in the majority, accounting for 63% of those surveyed, along with 37% hourly. Among hourly workers, 65% identified themselves as union members and accounted for 10% of the total survey group.

THE SURVEY

Using a survey technique called *Quality Potential Analysis*TM, workers were asked to characterize their current work situation in terms of such issues as management values underlying priorities and policies, employee involvement, persona I autonomy and authority, motivational practices, teamwork, job design and resource allocations, social climate, and problem-solving procedures. From among several capsule descriptions, they were free to choose the description-or combination of descriptions-which best captured their actual day-to-day work environment and, moreover, they could indicate on a numerical scale how accurately these descriptors captured and portrayed their particular situation.

In the same manner, drawing from the same descriptors, workers were asked to portray the conditions that they felt would most support, allow, and encourage their best work. They could, of course, choose existing or different conditions in this regard.

*Quality Potential Analysis*TM has proved to be a highly reliable survey technique and the data it yields have been validated as predictive of multiple productivity criteria in many diverse settings. As such, it is a powerful research tool for determining what workers need to be productive and how, in turn, existing conditions compare with those desired.

Unlike many of the random-item “shotgun” surveys in use today, *Quality Potential Analysis*TM is firmly based in a theoretical model - The Competence Process which, in turn, has been confirmed by years of scientific research. The advantage of such a survey is that the results obtained may be linked directly to our issue of primary concern - productivity!

In practical terms, this means that the information obtained from 10,227 American workers may be used not only to pinpoint major

causes of our current productivity dilemma but plausible solutions to the problem, as well. Because of its focused and criterion-referenced properties, some brief background on The Competence Process and its relationship to actual and potential productivity may pave the way for a greater appreciation of what American workers are telling us

COLLABORATION, COMMITMENT, AND CREATIVITY: THE CONDITIONS FOR PRODUCTIVITY

The fundamental premise underlying the Competence Process and the present study is that workers possess both the ability and desire to do what needs to be done - *i.e.*, the necessary talents and motivations for productive effort. They bring this basic human competence to work with them everyday and will use it in their work to the extent that organizational conditions permit its expression. The organizational environment, therefore, is critical to individual and collective potential being expressed in a productive way. Research has revealed the environmental conditions – all created by management – which facilitate and encourage the expression of human competence in productive work.

Although the capacity and need for doing what needs to be done are widely distributed among the work force, this fundamental competence will only become manifest if conditions allow and reward its expression in the doing of work. In our research, we have discovered the essential characteristics of the work environment necessary for the release of competence within the organization to be conditions which encourage collaboration, commitment, and creativity. Workers have little control over such conditions. Managers, therefore, determine organizational productivity because they create-or fail to create-the environmental support conditions for productivity.

¹ For reliability and validity information on the Quality Potential AssessmentTM (formerly known as Competence AnalysisTM), as well as an in-depth discussion of the Competence Process and supporting research, see Hall, J., *The Competence Connection: A Blueprint for Excellence*, The Woodlands, TX: Woodstead Press, Inc., 1988.

Conditions for Productivity

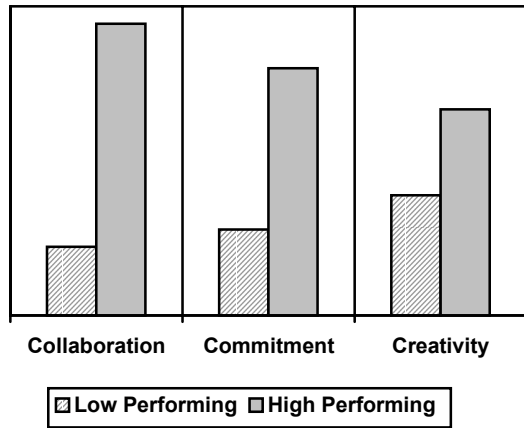


Figure 1. Overall comparisons of dimensions of competence in low-and high-performing organizations.

PRODUCTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Because it is possible to measure the dimensions of collaboration, commitment, and creativity within an organization through the technique of *Quality Potential Analysis*TM, we have been able to study the relationship of such Conditions to productivity. In one study, we compared productive with unproductive organizations and, in every case, found productive organizations to be characterized by significantly greater supports for collaboration, commitment, and creativity than were unproductive parts of the same organizations. The major conclusion from this research is that, as Figure 1 reflects, productivity varies as conditions for competence vary. The differences between productive and unproductive environments are so great that they may be achieved by chance fewer than 1 out of 10,000 times. Therefore, for those of us concerned about productivity, the implications are clear: If we want people to produce, to do their best, we must provide them with an organizational environment that supports their natural capacity and need an environment that supports their natural capacity and need for doing what needs to be done, for working productively.

HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS

The story doesn't end with productivity. Our research also showed that people have very clear ideas about what they need to be productive and, in a second study, we found that health and morale—those factors determining quality of work life are directly impacted by the degree to which conditions for productivity are in place.

How people feel about where they work, the work they do, and themselves has obvious significance for how they perform. We cannot separate morale or job satisfaction from productivity. But intertwined as they are, the work-morale interface is one of the least understood dynamics in management.

Our research demonstrated that, at its core, level of morale reflects worker expectations that they will or will not have the opportunity to perform competently. No anticipation that competence will be either allowed or re-warded equates with low morale. An expectation that one's commitment and creativity will be encouraged, facilitated, and valued is the handmaiden of high morale.

ACTUAL-NEEDED DISCREPANCIES

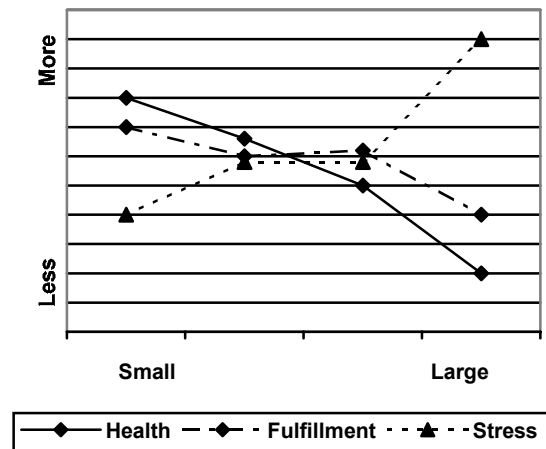


Figure 2. Health, Fulfillment, and Stress in the workplace as a function of the discrepancies between Actual and Needed Conditions.

Therefore, low morale may be thought of as a stress effect. Stress in the workplace results from discrepancies – a gap between what we have and what we need to do our work. Demands that are not commensurate with the time or resources available promote stress. Objectives with inappropriate pathways or procedures for their attainment create stress. And the frustration of a desire- realistically, a need-to perform well results in stress.

Manageable stress, events that people can respond to and do something about, can be a positive and growth-promoting experience. But stress that is beyond the influence of one's own efforts-irreconcilable discrepancies between what the organization requires and what it affords or allows - exacts a huge psychological and physical toll. Health may be the most noteworthy victim of frustrated competence.

Our research revealed that the greater the discrepancy between existing conditions for competence in the organization and those which people most desire, the lower the job satisfaction and the poorer the morale. Figure 2 summarizes the results of one study in which feelings of health, fulfillment, and stress were measured as a function of the discrepancy between the conditions needed for personal productivity and those under which people actually worked.

The message is clear: The more that actual conditions in support of collaboration, commitment, and creativity coincide with those workers say they need, the greater feelings of satisfaction will characterize their work experience. Conversely, the more disparate actual and desired conditions become, the more feelings of frustration and stress dominate and satisfaction turns to dissatisfaction. In time, people under stress either leave or, worse still, give up their expectations that work can be a fulfilling experience.

Therefore, by way of background, we can say that proper conditions in support of an expression of workers' collective competence foster productivity. At the same time, discrepancies between needed conditions and those actually provided by management determine the overall morale and health of the

work force. The role of management in the creation of the organizational environment and, therefore, in the productivity and quality of life which such an environment allows seems obvious. With these facts in mind, let us see what American workers have to say about what they need to be productive and what their managers are giving them.

CONDITIONS FOR PRODUCTIVITY

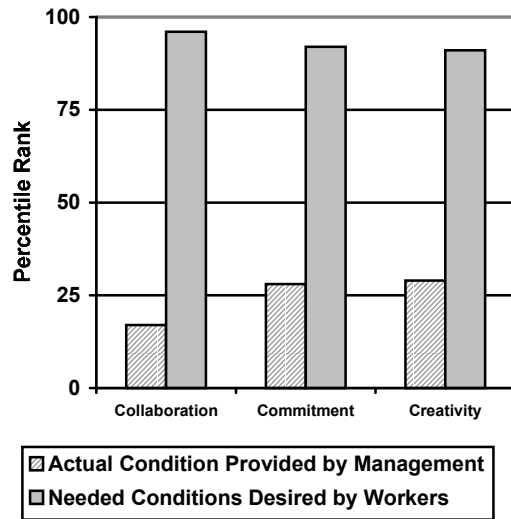


Figure 3. Comparisons of conditions needed for productivity with those actually provided by management, as reported by 10,277 American workers.

RESULTS: A SUPPRESSION OF COMPETENCE

The most noteworthy finding from our survey is that an overwhelming number of American workers-some 97%-desires work conditions known to facilitate high productivity. Workers uniformly reported-regardless of type organization, age, gender, pay schedule, or level in the organizational hierarchy-that they needed and wanted in their own workplaces those conditions of collaboration, commitment, and creativity which research has demonstrated as necessary for both productivity and health. Just as noteworthy, however, is the finding that the actual conditions of work supplied by management are those research has identified as *competence suppressors* - that is, procedures, policies, and

practices which prevent or punish expressions of competence and most characterize unproductive organizations. Indeed, in terms of the organizational norms for Quality Potential Assessment™, American workers place their organizations, on the average, at the 17th percentile-in the bottom quartile-of organizational supports for truly productive effort.

In Figure 3 the differences between what workers say they need to be productive and the conditions actually afforded them by management are graphically portrayed. Quantitatively, these differences between needed and provided work conditions are so great as to be expected by chance fewer than 1 out of 10,000 times.

But graphs are sterile and bloodless. They neither inspire nor point the way to creative problem solving. Indeed, they even obscure workers themselves and what they are trying to tell us. Therefore, let us listen in qualitative term. First of all, American workers are saying they need a collaborative organizational system to do their best work but are receiving from their management a system that discourages or prevents any collaborative effort. To collaborate as partners in the production process, American workers say:

- They need policies and procedures based in a system of management values where people are valued as human beings who can satisfy their various personal needs through doing the work necessary for the organization to satisfy its needs. They need a management which recognizes that the organization and its people are equally dependent upon one another. They need a philosophic commitment to shared powers of decision making, as well as rights and privileges, so that human potential can be brought to bear on common task and social objectives of every - management and worker - concerned with truly productive effort.

But...

The actual policy and value system under which they work could not be less in accord with workers' expressed needs. They report that management operates from an autocratic, authority-obedience orientation wherein people

are valued solely on the basis of the kinds of work they do. Rights and privileges are disproportionately meted out on the same basis, thus promoting a management-labor "class" system. With little trust of subordinate personnel, management is unduly concerned with issues of control and punishment.

- Workers need a support system for employee involvement - both logistical and emotional - wherein the needs of employees to receive and to contribute information are recognized. To do their best work, workers say they need access to problems, information, people, and solutions. They need not only a recognition of their acquired job knowledge, but opportunities and encouragement to bring their operational expertise to bear on production issues.

But...

They are barred from the problem-solving process. Management provides a restrictive system where the informational needs of workers are ignored. Information is unilaterally managed by and limited to those with authority; work is standardized and not amenable to change; and employee suggestions or ideas regarding production problems are neither desired nor tolerated. Managers are insensitive to both the task and social support needs of workers. Peoples' aspirations and potential contributions are preempted by management's concern for power and control.

- To join in, workers say they need an atmosphere of trust. For genuine collaboration, they need to be able to take management's word at face value, to know that their ideas, once sought, will actually be considered for incorporation in work decisions and policy review. They need tangible evidence that work experience is valued by management and people can expect to have influence on issues germane to their work. They need their managers to provide feedback on employee suggestions, keep people informed, and allow verification of managerial intent. b short, they need a management with credibility.

But...

Workers, in actuality, report an atmosphere of distrust. They say there is little opportunity for anyone to verify management intent; indeed, past experience points toward either managerial indifference or outright duplicity. Workers do not expect their opinions to carry any weight or lead to any action. They say the rules and policies governing their work are “set in concrete” and not amenable to either review or modification. Regardless of what management says, work decisions flow from the top down and expertise is just another word for authority. Managers enjoy little personal credibility.

American workers say that they are ready to join with management and one another in collaborative problem solving. More to the point, they say they need to collaborate as partners in the production process if they are to do their best work. Management, however, is portrayed as requiring a non-collaborative system of controls and unilateral decision making which, in turn, conveys a lack of respect for either worker know-how or desire to contribute.

With these findings in hand, it would not be surprising to find the conditions in support of worker commitment to be in disarray as well. To be productive, American workers say they need a sense of community-the conditions for that widespread commitment which allows a sense of ownership and energizes work. But management either does not believe commitment is important or is ignorant of how it comes about. Consider these survey results:

- Workers say they need a strong sense of personal impact. To do their best work, they need direct influence on events in their workplace. They need to control their own operating procedures and guidelines; if they are charged with doing the organization’s work, they need encouragement and freedom to determine the best way to do it. They need direct influence in the decisions affecting their work; that is, the right to use their personal judgement when problems arise. They need to feel they are trusted and empowered to cause things to happen.

But...

Workers report that, in general, they have virtually no influence on events in the workplace. They say their local operating procedures are controlled and imposed by outside forces. Management considers employee agreement less a criterion for productive effort than compliance with its authority. Management expects its decisions to be acted upon whether or not others agree. Because management sets all work designs and priorities often in error-workers report a lack of personal impact and little sense of personal control over the work they do.

- Workers say they need recognition of their motivation to do good work. They need to be focused on core activities-defining goals and planning for goal attainment. They need a major emphasis from management on bringing their potentials to bear on organizational tasks, especially those which challenge and stretch people. They need encouragement and latitude to create more interesting and meaningful tasks for themselves. They need freedom to plan for job accomplishment and the challenge of high standards to keep them emotionally involved in their work. Most of all, they need to see-and be assured of-the relevance of their efforts to overall organizational objectives.

But...

Management requires them to spend much of their time and effort on irrelevant activities. Managers gear production demands, work emphases, job incentives, and the scope of individual decision making to tasks which have little realistic relationship to either workers’ personal goals, reasons for working, or expertise. Organizational “priorities” seem to exist separate and apart from the people who populate the workplace and do the organization's work. Workers report they are mired down in “busy” work. What is “important,” they say, is determined more in terms of the manager's needs than those of the work force. Most of all, workers say management withholds or distracts them from the kinds of work that would allow them to feel good about themselves because of a job well done.

- Workers need a sense of shared purpose and commitment among themselves. They need a sense of community, a workplace where people are encouraged, like good neighbors, to rely upon and help one another as needed and feasible in their work. They need management to promote a sense of interdependence among people and encourage candor and mutual trust between both individual workers and teams. To do their best, they need both the work they do and the people who do it to be valued as essential to the health of the organization. They need a management that is strongly concerned with widespread employee commitment and encourages teamwork and mutual respect.

But...

Management promotes a divisive state. Management encourages workers to be self-sufficient and independent in their working relationships; management promotes and rewards a prescribed form of rugged individualism. Management encourages workers to be loners, and to feel that they must compete with one another for the incentives offered. Management does little to make workers feel that what they do is important and looks must favorably on those who follow orders and call minimal attention to themselves. Management distrusts teamwork and seems to fear any sense of community among workers.

Workers say they need the energy and purpose which flow from commitment, but management has failed to supply the conditions necessary for commitment. Workers perceive that their need for “ego involvement” in their work is viewed by management as largely irrelevant. They need to be empowered but feel what they do has little, if any, impact. Management's failure to support a true team effort serves only to further the alienation and ennui which seems to characterize today's American workplace.

With so little sense of ownership possible, we would expect workers to have little of the energy necessary for truly creative effort. When workers are truly involved and committed to their work, this unleashes the energy needed for people to be problem solvers and innovators in their daily activities. Creativity is the area where human

competence-if nurtured and supported-becomes manifest. Creative effort is the foundation of productivity. Conditions in support of creativity allow and encourage workers to get things accomplished in the best way possible. So, what do American workers say about opportunities for creativity?

- Workers say they need a free-flow work environment if they are to do their best work. They need a supervision that places major emphasis on getting the job done in the best possible way rather than on slavish conformity to standard operating procedures. Workers need to exercise a good deal of control over the kinds of work they do and organize themselves however they feel will most effectively accomplish the organization's objectives. They need ready access to the resources they need to do their jobs and to try out new ideas. They need less emphasis on time-consciousness and more on quality of products. In short, workers say they need a more dynamic job structure that allows them adaptive flexibility in responding to the problems and demands of their work.

But...

Management provides a rigid work environment. Management requires that work procedures be standardized and people held accountable for staying within specified tolerances. Management requires that the tools, information, etc., workers need for doing their work are available only through a laborious procedure of formal requests; management is extremely concerned about production/work-time ratios. Through such a task environment, management encourages workers to be more preoccupied with conforming to management's production schedule than with the quality of their product. There is little tolerance for worker creativity or attempts to find a better way to reach production goals.

- Workers say they need a social climate which is spontaneous, fun, and collaborative. They need a management which recognizes the importance of social dynamics for effective task accomplishment and personally works to provide a proper social context; one where innovativeness is recognized and those making such contributions can expect to share ideas and

opinions and seek out feedback from one another. They need managers to take an active role in promoting an ethic of candor and mutual responsibility. Workers say such a social context would afford them the kind of spontaneity and social stimulation necessary to think creatively in their work.

But...

Management provides a context of social deprivation. Managers are inaccessible . . . if not physically, certainly emotionally. They expect workers to do their work by themselves, thus nullifying the facilitating potentials of social stimulation and collaboration. Management designs workplaces to insulate workers from one another, expects them to keep their thoughts to themselves, requires conformity to established procedures and may even punish spontaneity and innovativeness. Information flow is tightly controlled by management and performance feedback is the private concern of managers and the worker involved. Management does not tolerate fun in the workplace.

- Workers say that, to do their best, they need a dynamic problem-solving process where the goal is to achieve high quality applicable solutions which enhance rather than simply perpetuate work processes. Workers favor consensus on common problems and need a management that expects people to be challenged by novel situations. They need encouragement from management to think and recommend freely. Workers feel conflict should be valued both as a validity check on the flow of ideas and as a vehicle for stimulating new perspectives. They need a problem-solving philosophy that frees them from the constraints of precedent or accommodating their solutions to outdated policy concerns. In short, workers say they need to be partners in a creative problem-solving process.

But...

- Management favors a ritualistic process, where the goal is to accommodate problem solving to pre-existing management guidelines. Managers require that decisions be based in precedent and remain consistent with past practices. Management discourages collective

problem-solving discussions among workers on common problems, and they seem to think that workers will be uneasy with novel situations. Therefore, management spells out approved decision-making guidelines. Management mistrusts differences of opinion, preferring to suppress or ignore conflict rather than risk loss of time or control in its resolution. By and large, management requires a sterile, rote, and precedent-bound approach to problem solving which effectively rules out any opportunity for creativity on the part of workers.

Again, the conditions of creativity which workers feel are necessary for their productivity are lacking. Workers report that what they need is a free, more socially sensitive workplace where they can express their creativity and ingenuity. What management gives them are work conditions hampered by rule-bound, rigid, and ritualistic thinking and methods.

SUMMARY: A SYSTEM AT ODDS WITH ITSELF

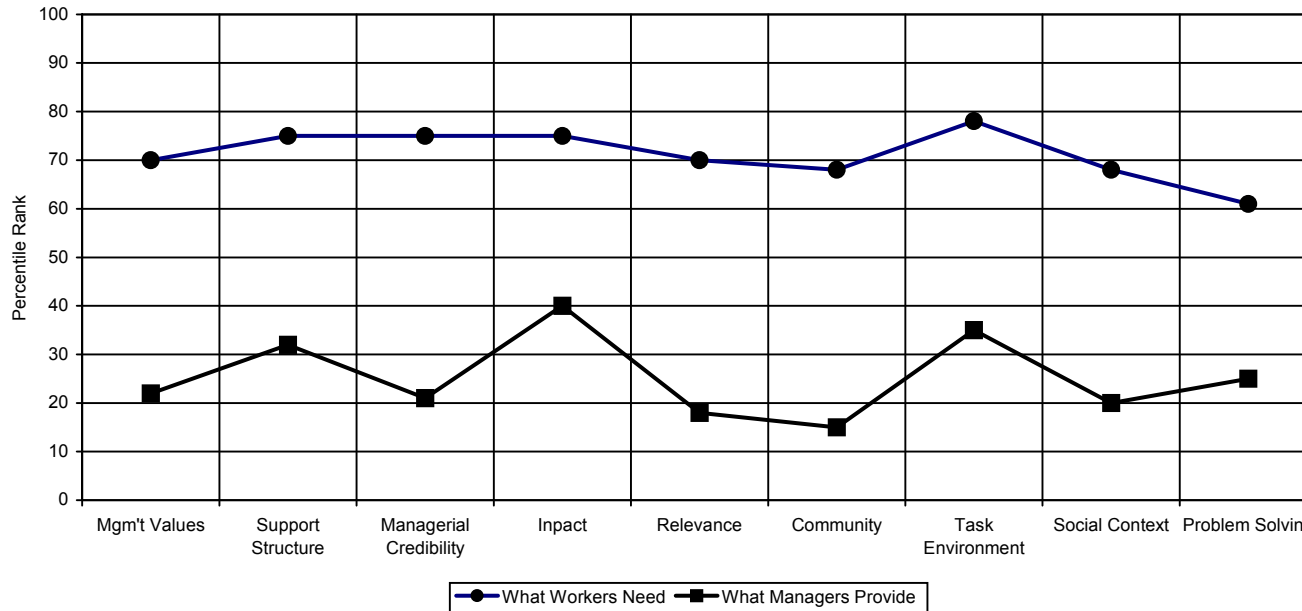
As we compare the descriptions of what American workers say they need to be productive with what their managers are giving them, it becomes rather obvious that there are some serious discrepancies. To present a capsule review, consider the following summary of survey results.

THE SITUATION AS AMERICAN WORKERS SEE IT.

An authority-obedience relation between managers and workers appears to be the norm. There is a real issue of trust which results in managers being concerned primarily with directing and controlling the activities of workers rather than trying to involve them in the accomplishment of organizational objectives. Virtually all important decisions are made at the “top” and workers are expected simply to “obey.”

These activities result in an oppressive climate that encourages feelings of vulnerability and security-seeking on the part of workers. Motivationally, workers have come to expect

Figure 4. Discrepancies between what workers need to be productive and what their managers provide..



little intrinsic reward from their jobs and, reluctantly, have adapted accordingly. Worker needs for achievement, recognition, and accomplishment must be satisfied elsewhere - or go unfulfilled. Work procedures are overly standardized and any deviation or variation from "standard" is not tolerated; attempts at innovation may result in punitive action being taken. Workers are expected to "do their jobs" as directed and are not supposed to look for better or more efficient ways to do the work - that is the province of the "experts" (*i.e.*, management). Work is, by necessity, a lonely and solitary activity that must be endured in order for the organization to realize its objectives. There is ample evidence of the productivity record associated with such a work system.

THE SITUATION AS WORKERS NEED IT TO BE:

Workers need a chance to get actively involved with their work. They want to feel that what they do is important and that they are important. They want to make a difference. They are not content with simply going through the motions of work-they want to do meaningful work. American workers want to exercise their minds and imaginations-not just their muscles. They are not asking for any special favors,

treatment, or consideration; they just want an opportunity to do what comes naturally-to demonstrate their competence; to show their "bosses," their friends and co-workers-and the world-that they can do what needs to be done. Workers want to be challenged, to have a chance to stretch themselves. While workers appreciate the need for structure and organizational parameters, they need some freedom to experiment and innovate in order to perform more effectively. They not only want to do their jobs, they want to do them well. They value and welcome the opportunity of being a member of their work group, but they need to find the social milieu rewarding and stimulating. American workers realize that work is a major and critical part of their lives; they want to identify with the organization because, as the place they work, it is a part of their identity. They know that, by putting forth their best effort, both they and their organization prosper.

While 97% of the workers surveyed agree regarding the conditions they need to be productive, there were some differences among groups in terms of how they evaluated current conditions. Those with authority (managers), for example, gave more positive reports than those without such power. Some organizations – for example, insurance and financial types – did a better job than others in providing supports for

productivity. But, in all cases, there were large and highly significant gaps between “what is” and “what is needed.” Portrayed is an American system of work that is at odds with itself.

THE PROBLEM AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Our survey of 10,000 American workers leaves us with another interesting anomaly: While virtually everyone is agonizing over our declining productivity, the very people who do the work report that they are not only ready to work more productively but know what it would take for them to do so. While it appears that American workers are not the problem, they do seem to hold the seeds of solution. Survey results, as it turns out, suggest a redefinition of our productivity problem and, at the same time, point to a realistic opportunity to solve it.

THE PROBLEM: MANAGERIAL INTERFERENCE

We are a performance-oriented people. We judge both others and ourselves by what is produced. No wonder our times have become so interesting!

Author Timothy Gallwey has suggested that performance of any kind is equal to potential minus interference. Therefore, if performance is our concern, we might take another look—not at performance, but at those things which so interfere with peoples’ potential that it cannot be fully expressed in their performance.

Ten thousand American workers have reported that they must work in organizational environments – in workplaces created by management – so characterized by logistical, procedural, and psychological barriers that it is virtually impossible for them to do the quality and quantity of work they are capable of doing. In short, management is interfering with its work force to such an extent that little of their potential is allowed to show through in performance.

Workers are quite clear about the managerial policies, practices, and priorities which interfere with their desire and efforts to do their best work. They are even more clear about the conditions needed for them to be truly productive. As Figure 4 reveals graphically, there is a huge and statistically significant gap between what American workers need to be productive and what their managers are giving them.

The gap is the problem—not labor, not a lack of new technology or enough capital investment. Management has simply created an organizational environment that is hostile to productivity. And this is something that managers can fix.

THE OPPORTUNITY: GAP MANAGEMENT

Harold (“Red”) Poling, Chairman of the Board of Ford Motor Company, described Ford's 1982-1987 multi-billion dollar turnaround like this: “We improved the quality of our management and we improved the quality of our product.” On the basis of my own experiences at Ford during that turnaround time, I am convinced that they would never have achieved the latter improvement without first achieving the former.²

Ford's management committed itself to closing the gap between what its workers needed to do their best work and what managers had traditionally provided. This meant that managers had to manage differently than they had in the past. Ray Jensen, Supervisor of Advanced Concepts at Ford, caught the spirit of the new “gap” management. Commenting on a *Quality Potential Analysis*TM of his division, he said, “We learned that we had a great deal of unused potential. That was a problem we'd never really considered before. We learned that most of us were trying to manage people, when we should have been managing the environment.”³

The environmental gap between what American workers need and what they have is the true productivity problem... and closing the gap is

² Maskal, Brian S. “Glasnost in Detroit,” *Industry Week*, September 21, 1987.

³ Hall, Op.cit., p. 315.

the opportunity facing those who aspire to greater productivity. It is quite an impressive opportunity. For one thing, it is virtually free. Closing the gap will require no re-tooling or additional capital. The only new technology required will be a social technology-many managers will have to learn a new way of managing. They will first have to employ policies and practices, adopt personal priorities, which are geared to encouraging and facilitating a full release of the human competence at their disposal. Then, they must connect that competence to the work that needs to be done. Their workers can tell them how to do this.

And what will the pay-off be for embracing such an opportunity? Our research shows that if American managers would close the gap-convert

the current organizational environment to what American workers say they need to do their best work – they could expect a 54% increase in productivity, over current levels, in less than two years time.

The key to both the problem and the solution, it seems, is management. In yet another interesting twist on current events, we have named our most prestigious and coveted quality award after the late Malcolm Baldrige. But, perhaps a more sincere way to honor his memory would be to heed his advice to us as Secretary of Commerce. “This country doesn't need more productive labor,” he told us. “What it needs is more productive managers.”