

Designing for Freedom in a Technical World

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Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of freedom and relates this to the processes and outputs of systems design. It focuses on the ideas of Mary Parker Follett, an American administrator, who lectured and wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. Follett had revolutionary ideas on industrial democracy and on how employee involvement in problem solving and decision taking could be used to improve the efficiency and success of American industry. Follett's ideas are compared with those of the Human Relations Movement and with socio-technical design.

The author describes how she tries to apply the ideas of Mary Parker Follett and socio-technical design in her own work. She also discusses how Follett's philosophy compares with the management principles being put forward by modern management gurus such as Vickers and Handy.

1. THE LIFE OF MARY PARKER FOLLETT

Most academic papers have a theoretical basis which underlies the argument and provides hypotheses that can be critically examined and discussed. Many of the weightier theories have been derived from earlier academics, now dead, whose thoughts have become received wisdom. Almost all of these sources of wisdom are men. The author of this paper decided that she would base her writing on the theories of someone who has had a great influence on her thinking over the years. This person was not an academic nor a man. She was an American social worker who was born in Boston in 1868 and died in 1933. Her name is Mary Parker Follett.

Mary Parker Follett was a highly educated woman. In 1890, she spent a year at Newnham College, Cambridge, England where she read political science, history and law. She followed this with six years at Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, graduating in 1898 after studying philosophy, economics and government. This led to further graduate study in Paris.

She regarded herself as a political scientist and her first major interest was the study of American public life. She contributed to the improvement of this by pioneering a network of evening classes for the young people of Boston and, in 1909, she produced her first important publication. This was called *The Speaker of The House of Representatives*. Prior to this publication, she had become interested in vocational guidance as a result of a visit to Edinburgh in 1902 where she had seen some pioneer work on this subject and, in 1912, she became a member of the Boston Placement Committee, which later became the Boston Department of Vocational Guidance. This took her into industry and she began researching working conditions in different sectors while, at the same time, she became increasingly interested in the problems of management and industrial relations.

In 1920, she produced her main work. This was called *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government* (Follett 1920). In this book, she advocated the replacement of bureaucratic institutions by group networks in which the people themselves analyzed their problems and implemented their own solutions. This book was followed in 1924 by a second influential book called *The Creative Experience* (Follett 1924). In this work, she discussed the possibility of accepting and using conflict as a positive and enriching experience.

Follett was now famous as a political scientist. *The New State* was reviewed in journals throughout the world and brought her international recognition. It led to her becoming a friend of the British Lord Haldane and of many other distinguished philosophers and political scientists. But gradually, through her increasing contacts with industry, she moved away from political science and the problems of government to social administration and business management.

She gave many lectures to interested audiences. On visits to England, in 1926 and 1928, she spoke at the Rowntree Lecture Conferences in Oxford and to the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. In 1929, after the death of the friend with whom she lived in Boston, she moved to England and stayed there until 1933.

While living in England she continued her studies of management, explaining to an audience at the London School of Economics that she did this "because industry is the most important field of human activity and management is the fundamental element in industry." She died in December 1933, when on a brief return visit to the United States.

During her early studies in the United States Mary Parker Follett met Dr. H. Metcalf and he later published many of her lectures. It was he, together with a British management consultant, Colonel L. Urwick, who, in 1941, assembled her lectures in a book called *Dynamic Administration* (Metcalf and Urwick 1941). Many years ago, the author of this paper had the good fortune to secure a copy of this book. In the introduction the chocolate magnate and philanthropist B. S. Rowntree wrote:

The principles which she outlined are fundamental to all human progress. They should be widely known and acted upon, particularly at the present time, when good organization is of supreme importance to national survival. They will be found more necessary when the war is over and humanity is faced with the almost

superhuman task of fashioning a new and better world. [Metcalf and Urwick 1941]

Despite her international fame, Follett's writing and influence vanished from the American scene after her death. In a new book, *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management*, Peter Drucker in his introduction tries to find an explanation (Graham 1995). He describes how when, in 1941, he asked management experts to help him compile a reading list of important management books, no one mentioned her name. It was when he met Colonel Urwick in 1951 that he first heard of her. Drucker claims that there was no reference to her in any American management book until he published his *Practice of Management* (Drucker 1954). Even here, when this author checked, she found that the only reference there was the title *Dynamic Administration* in a selected bibliography. Follett did not appear in the index.

Drucker discounts the suggestion that she was neglected because she was a woman, claiming that there were many prestigious women around at the time, for example, Lilian Gilbreth, the time and motion study expert. He argues that she was pushed into obscurity because her ideas were regarded as subversive in the 1930s and 1940s. Running industry after the last war was seen as a battle between management and unions. Her ideas on communication, conflict resolution and joint problem solving had no legitimacy. Contemporary management believed that the route to success was control not consensus. And so Mary Parker Follett became a nonperson. She might never have existed. However, Rosabeth Moss Kantor, who provides a preface to the new book, does not agree with Drucker that there was no sexism in her rejection. She believes that Follett's gender did play an important part in her neglect.

Like many prophets who are neglected at home, her star continued to shine in other countries. The Japanese embraced many of her ideas and through Dr. Metcalf and Colonel Urwick her work was kept alive in Britain. In the 1970s and 1980s, many British books on organizational theory and management had chapters on Follett. All used the Metcalf and Urwick book as their information source.

2. THE IDEAS OF MARY PARKER FOLLETT

Mary Parker Follett had many highly innovative ideas and theories. As the subject of this paper is "freedom" the focus will be on those that contribute to this subject.

First, she believed that freedom required order. But order must be integral to the situation and must be recognized as such. Even though different groups with different interests would have different views, all should agree on the nature of the problems that had to be solved. Order should be the agreed "law of the situation," but order and orders must be the composite conclusion of those who give and those who receive them. In her view, freedom comes from efforts to achieve a consensus and it is the freedom of the individual and the group, not the individual alone.

Follett took a holistic view of business and business organizations. She believed in integration. She tells us:

The first test of good business organization is whether you have a business with all its parts so coordinated, so moving together in their closely knit and adjusted activities, so linking, interlocking, interrelating, that they make a working unit — that is not a congeries of separate pieces. [Follett 1926]

Successful integration leads to freedom because it encourages face-to face communication, personalization and self assertion. It is not remote and bureaucratic. It takes account of the fact that situations are always evolving and that discussions and decisions must be circular, not linear.

In her view, the undue influence of leaders is one of the main obstacles to integration. Orders and organization should not be a result of domination but come from a recognition by all parties of the problems that have to be tackled. Order and control then emerge from a common understanding and accepted “law of the situation.”

Follett recognized that freedom is often associated with power. The more power an individual has, the more he or she is likely to be free from constraints. She believed that what was required was not “power over” but “power with” or joint power. She says: “One of the tests of a conference or committee should be: are we developing joint power or is someone trying unduly to influence the others?” (Follett 1926).

In her view, attempts must be made to reduce “power over.” She asked:

How do we reduce power over? Individual freedom can lead to coercive exploitation. We want group freedom. Circular behavior is the basis of integration. You influence another while they influence you. If both sides obey the law of the situation no person has power over another. [Follett 1926]

She continued:

Our first approach should always be to discover the law of the situation. We should try to reduce power over even if we cannot get rid of it.

She believed that power over could be reduced through integration, through recognizing that all should submit to the law of the situation and through making the business more and more of a functional unity. Function should equal capacity and there should be the authority and responsibility to go with the function.

When differences of opinion arise, she suggested that there are three ways of dealing with these: domination, compromise and integration. With domination, only one side got what it wanted. With compromise, neither side got what it wanted. But through integration, it is possible to find a way in which both sides get what they want.

She pointed out that many think they are losing freedom and independence through joining with others but this is a false perception of freedom. Managers do not give up their freedom when they give their workers a share in management. On the contrary they are freeing themselves from strikes, sabotage and indifference. Employers are not free when these occur.

Follett translated these ideas from the individual firm to national and international level. She anticipated the Common Market by asking for the organization of markets: "Nations cannot be free while struggling for markets. We want the organization of markets."

She saw no conflict between planning and freedom. In her view good planning could provide more freedom by providing opportunities for personal initiative. "Individualism and collective control should equal collective self control."

Follett saw freedom in work as problem solving and decision taking in which all played a part. To achieve this she suggested four fundamental principles of organization (Pugh, Hickson and Hinings 1971). These were:

- **Coordination by direct contact.** All employees must be in direct contact regardless of their position in the organization. Horizontal communication is as important as vertical chains of command in achieving coordination.
- **Coordination in the early stages.** Employees should be involved in policy or decisions while these are being formed and not simply brought in afterwards. In this way, the benefits of participation will be obtained in increased motivation and morale.
- **Coordination as the "reciprocal relating" of all factors in a situation.** All factors should be related to one another, and these interrelationships must themselves be taken into account.
- **Coordinating is a continuous process.** "An executive decision is a moment in a process." So many people contribute to the making of a decision that the concept of final or ultimate responsibility is an illusion. Combined knowledge and joint responsibility take its place. Authority and responsibility should derive from the actual function to be performed, not from place in the hierarchy.

Follett accepted the traditional concepts of power, authority and leadership but redefined these as "power *with*," "joint responsibility" and "multiple leadership."

She did, however, recognize that achieving this kind of freedom would not be easy. Problems that would have to be solved included facilitating communication among all interested groups. At a later date, Jurgen Habermas makes the same plea. Planning, whether local or national has to be flexible enough to encourage initiative and experiment. Collective control and decentralized responsibility have to be made compatible. There is no place for regulation or coercion; every thing should emerge from discussion and agreement.

Follett presents us with an ideal to strive for even though it may be difficult to attain. She believed strongly in rational thinking so that problems are fully understood, in effective planning and organization of a kind that is generally agreed, and in working through discussion and consensus.

Her definition of freedom is “freedom for the individual and the group,” with the one supporting and enhancing the other. This kind of freedom comes from knowledge, discussion and integration. It requires continuous and close communication, a recognition of common interests and a willingness to participate in solving problems. All conflicts can be solved given an understanding of their nature and a desire for a solution. Goodwill and good relations are the routes to freedom for all.

3. RELATED THEORIES

This theoretical approach, although utopian, is not very different from Jurgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action. This too is a theory of social interaction with the objective of creating an “ideal speech situation.” This is a situation in which there is undistorted communication with participants who are free and equal in their dialogue roles and can arrive at a rational consensus. This is in contrast to distorted forms of communication which are characterized by social domination, authoritarianism etc. (Gould 1988). But, despite the similarity of their theories and despite living in the U.S. during the last war, like Drucker, Habermas appears not to have heard of Follett.

All ideas have a past as well as a future and Mary Parker Follett is no exception. She had studied political science and philosophy at Newnham and Radcliffe and in her early days she called herself a political scientist. It is most probable that her ideas were influenced by the thinking and writing of a number of classical philosophers although we can only guess at which. Like her, many have taken as their point of departure the premise of an underlying unity and symmetry that could be uncovered through reason. William James called the proponents of these ideas the “tender minded.” Some, including Aristotle, favored the decentralization of authority and the encouragement of pluralism with many different interest groups. The sixteenth century philosopher Althusius believed in a community of communities as did more recent thinkers such as Burke, Weber and Durkheim.

All of these saw freedom associated with function. Each group or community within the larger community should have the greatest possible autonomy consistent with the performance of its function and with the performance of other groups and communities it associated with. The emphasis of these philosophers was on the small and the local — the family, neighborhood, local association and work group.

Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century detested what he called “arbitrary power.” He saw society as a contract, or partnership founded on kinship, neighborhood or social group. Hegel, too, in the nineteenth century viewed society as plural with many centers of authority. These included the church, local community, profession and occupational association. He describes freedom as “being with oneself in another,” that is, actively relating to something other than oneself in such a way that this other becomes integrated into one’s projects, completing and fulfilling them so that it counts as belonging to one’s own action. This means that freedom is possible only to the extent that we act rationally and in circumstances where the objects of our action are in harmony with our reason (Wood 1991).

De Tocqueville, the nineteenth century French philosopher, carried on the intellectual pursuit of democratic communities in which all men are equal. Pluralism had now taken a number of different forms. There was "conservative" pluralism, which saw its mission as the reinforcement of traditional groups such as the family and the church. There was also "liberal" pluralism, which was concerned with the relationships between a democratic state and a structure of social organization that provided the highest degree of individual freedom. And there was "radical" pluralism, which was Marxist in inspiration and envisaged a totally new society.

Follett appears to fit in the tradition of "liberal" pluralism which aims to provide individual freedom within the context of group freedom. She restricted her philosophy to the business organization, although she thought the principles could also be applied to national and international trade. If she lived in Britain today, she would probably be a supporter of the Liberal Democrat party.

4. WHAT IS FREEDOM TODAY?

In the twentieth century, there have been many definitions of freedom, not all the same as Mary Parker Follett's. Liberal individualism has tended to see freedom as an absence of constraints. It has seen the welfare of society, and even the welfare of its most deprived members, as being served by the pursuit of individual self interest and by the efficiency of a free market. In England for ten years this was the dominant set of values of the Thatcher government.

Daniel Bell has argued for a recognition of the complexity and variety of modern society. He sees Western industrial society as divided into different sectors, each guided by its own principle. There is the techno-economy, whose guiding principle is efficiency; the political sphere, whose legitimacy is based on the concept of free and equal citizens; and the culture, increasingly dominated by the ideal of unlimited self expression. Bell (1974) suggests that these apparently incompatible realms of society are a source of many of today's conflicts. Can people who want self development and fulfilment achieve this in an industrial society where roles and specialization still rule to a high degree? Will today's movement toward flatter hierarchies, multi-skilling, total quality and reengineering bring the freedom and power sharing Follett desired or are these new names for old bureaucracies?

For most of us, freedom today means the capacity for choice and its exercise, the absence of constraining conditions and the availability of means. It means equal opportunity for self-development in association with one's fellows, enabling conditions and the encouragement and motivation to take this route (Galston 1991). Self-development involves the creation of new capacities and the enrichment of existing ones; in other words, a general enhancement in the quality of individual, group and organizational life (Gould 1988). Follett would be in agreement with all of these things.

However, individualism and diversity for all require some generally agreed values. For example, an acceptance of the work ethic which requires personal independence to be associated with the desire to do a job well, and a restriction on untrammelled self-indulgence so that the needs of the group are in harmony with the needs of the individual.

5. WHO HAS FOLLOWED FOLLETT?

How close have we come to achieving these things? Have there been any serious and successful moves toward the kind of freedom for which she strove? The answer to this question is “yes” although progress has been patchy, sporadic and, up to now, not greatly influenced by technology.

6. HUMAN RELATIONS

The American “human relations” movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had many ideas similar to those of Follett although there is no acknowledgment of her in their writings. Elton Mayo was the founding father of the human relations school of thought and his experiments in the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company made industry more aware of the fact that workers and managers must first be understood as human beings (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1949). Frederick Herzberg, Chris Argyris, Rensis Likert and Douglas McGregor all followed in his footsteps. Herzberg (1966) spoke for them all when he said: “The primary function of any organization, whether religious, political or industrial, should be to implement the needs of men to enjoy a meaningful existence.”

Mayo found that workers who were consulted, given responsibility for choosing their pace of work, and treated as partners rather than subordinates, responded with high motivation and high production. Mayo (1949) came to believe that an important task for management was to create situations where this spontaneous cooperation could develop and grow.

Argyris’ objective was to help people to attain freedom through developing their potential. He believed this kind of self-actualisation benefits not only the individual but also those around as well as the employing organization. Again, better communication is a means for achieving this. Managers must be prepared to show their real feelings to those above and below them (Argyris 1957). Herzberg, too, was interested in assisting the development of human potential. In his view, job satisfaction came, not from money alone, but from achievement, recognition and responsibility. Jobs must be “enriched” to provide these motivating factors (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman 1959).

Rensis Likert and Douglas McGregor had similar philosophies. Supervisors must be “employee centered” and able to build effective work groups which have high achievement goals. They must regard their jobs as dealing with human beings rather than with work. Their role is to “help” people to work efficiently, to exercise general but not detailed supervision, and to allow maximum participation in decision taking. Likert’s System 4 participative group management approach would also have delighted Follett. Communication now flows downwards, upwards and sideways; workers and bosses are psychologically close, decision taking is through group processes with each group linking to the next through a “linking pin” individual who is a member of more than one group.

Likert was an admirer of Follett and her notion of “the law of the situation.” He believed that the greater amount of objective information available to modern management enabled problems to be depersonalized and dealt with rationally and participatively (Likert 1961).

McGregor followed on from these ideas with his Theory X and Theory Y management. Theory X is control and coercion, Theory Y is the development of “supportive” relationships that enable employees to have self-actualisation, responsibility, self direction and self control (McGregor 1966).

A considerable amount of American industry responded to these ideas and they were increasingly accepted as good management practice. They were seen as enabling the needs and objectives of the individual and of the company to come together in a harmonious relationship. This was exactly what Follett wanted to achieve.

7. SOCIO-TECHNICAL SYSTEMS

Europe did not have a human relations movement. In England, for example, management and workers looked at each other across a big divide with each side regarding the other as “the enemy.” The workers were usually backed by strong trade unions and the climate was more like a war game than a series of supportive relationships. But there were some new groups with ideas similar to those of Mary Parker Follett. One of the strongest of these was the socio-technical movement which emerged from the ideas of Eric Trist and the Tavistock Institute from the 1950s onward (Trist and Murray 1991, 1993).

Interestingly, although the Tavistock group came together soon after *Dynamic Administration* was published and from its inception the ideas of the group have been close to those of Follett, there is no reference to her in the socio-technical literature. (See, for example, the two historical works edited by Trist and Murray.)

Whereas the Americans focused on changing attitudes, the British and later European groups believed the answer to organizational health was in the new forms of work structure that would improve efficiency but also create a good quality work environment and high job satisfaction. These new work structures were based on logically connected groups of tasks that enabled employees to acquire a number of skills, to do a whole job, to take decisions and to solve problems. They would also offer opportunities for working as members of integrated teams, for supportive relationships and personal development. Many of these ideas came from biology and the notion of “open” systems (von Bertalanffy 1968).

Early experiments with these semi-autonomous group structures were first carried out in the British Coal Industry and then moved to India, Scandinavia and the United States. Socio-technical design is still flourishing, although its scope and influence seem not to be known to the new proponents of Business Process Reengineering. It has a sound theoretical basis and a well-tested methodology. It takes a process and open system perspective, recognizing the dependencies between different parts of the work situation and between the work situation and the external environment.

The author is now a Council member of the Tavistock Institute and so closely in touch with its philosophy and approach. She first came into contact with it when she was asked to join the International Quality of Working Life Committee which consisted of STS practitioners from different parts of the world. Powerful figures at the time were Lou Davis in the United States,

Hans Van Beinum in Canada, Federico Buttero in Italy, Einar Thorsrud in Norway, Fred Emery in Australia and, of course, the person who started it all, Eric Trist, who later moved to the United States and became a professor at the Wharton School. Although the STS pioneers were interested in both theory and practice, Mary Parker Follett was never a subject for discussion. One reason for this may have been that the early interest in STS came principally from Scandinavia. With the exception of Professor Lou Davis at the University of California, Los Angeles, and one or two others, socio-technical design in the U.S. was slow to start.

8. THE AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE

The author became interested in, and aware of, the ideas of Mary Parker Follett in the 1960s when she was fortunate enough to acquire a copy of *Dynamic Administration*. In the 1970s, she became a member of the International Committee for the Quality of Working Life. Since then, she has tried to apply the philosophies and principles of both Follett and socio-technical systems design. One of her objectives has always been to increase the user group's freedom to choose the organizational and technical system that they preferred. She has done this by using participative approaches that, whenever possible, involved all affected users in the design process.

She began to do this in the early 1970s when she was asked by different companies to help groups of staff design and implement new computer systems. These groups were not computer specialists. They were often clerks who participated in the systems design task by identifying their information needs, choosing the best system to fit these needs and designing an effective organization of work around the new technology. Usually the selected new form of work organization included important socio-technical design principles (Mumford and Weil 1979).

This early work in firms such as ICI, Rolls Royce and many banks tried to achieve the socio-technical objective of optimal use of both technology and people, with employees being given the Follett freedom to analyze their own problems and agree and implement acceptable and viable solutions and, in this way, exerting some influence on their future working conditions (Mumford and Henshall 1979). Humanistic technology was a desired output but technology was not used to assist the design process.

This changed in the 1980s, when the author undertook a large project with the Digital Equipment Corporation in Boston to assist the design of XSEL, one of Digital's first expert systems (Mumford and MacDonald 1989). XSEL was a configuring aid directed at helping the Digital sales force to make fewer errors when they prepared financial estimates for customers and sent orders to the manufacturing plants. These errors were expensive and cost Digital a great deal of money through lawsuits and compensation payments.

Because XSEL was intended for all sales offices throughout the world and the sales force was a powerful group, it was decided that the expert system must be designed participatively with the active involvement of the sales force. Digital believed that if the sales force were not given the freedom to do this, they would respond by refusing to use the system. Freedom now was a necessity rather than an ideal.

The problem was how to do this when the sales force was so large. The answer was a representative design group of sales people together with the use of electronic mail. An iterative design approach was used with the sales force specifying their needs, the knowledge engineers building a prototype to this specification, and the sales force testing this out and commenting on their experience. This specify, build, and test process continued until a system good enough to release for general use was produced. This took about three years.

During this period, there were regular meetings of the design group and after each meeting an account of what had taken place was sent to each U.S. sales office for discussion and comments. If questions were raised at the meeting that could not be easily answered, or decisions were difficult to make, the sales office staff were asked to send their views to the design group by e-mail. In this way a continuing dialogue concerning the design and implementation of XSEL took place. Through the use of e-mail, all sales staff could participate in this until the system became operational. Here then was a real world attempt at Follett's integrated communication using a new electronic aid.

Discussion of the technical quality of XSEL was also assisted by building a comments facility into the machine. Salespeople could use this to express their approval or dismay as they tested the system.

XSEL was implemented throughout the United States and worked fairly successfully for a number of years. The design group and the use of e-mail for communication continued during this period. This assisted the solution of technical problems and guided further development of the system.

9. DESIGNING TO ASSIST FREEDOM

If we accept that Mary Parker Follett's ideas are ethically and practically of value, what can we do about it? One thing we can do is to try and implement her ideas in the groups with which we work closely. If we are systems designers or other kinds of computer specialists, we will be in constant touch with users. Here is the opportunity for a new approach with a humanistic and moral content.

The author explained earlier that she tried to use the philosophy of Follett and the objectives of the socio-technical school when helping users to design new systems. This is true whether these users are clerks, specialist groups or senior managers.

Following are some of principles she finds most useful and relevant in her areas of activity.

Principles Derived Mainly from Mary Parker Follett

- **Participation.** Users are always given a major role in the design process so that they can play an important part in the selection and design of systems that will improve their own efficiency, effectiveness, job satisfaction and quality of working life.

Giving users the freedom to take on this role enables them to have some control over the degree of freedom they can exercise in their new work situations.

- **Representation.** All user interests need to be represented in a design group, irrespective of status, age or gender. Direct users of the new system should play a major role in systems design; indirect users should be consulted whenever factors that affect them are discussed.
- **Joint problem solving.** Once the design group is operational, the first step is to get agreement on the problems and needs that have to be addressed through change. This is coming to a consensus on the Law of the Situation. The group must agree that during meetings everyone is regarded as of equal status. The views of a junior clerk must be given as much weight as those of a senior manager. No single individual must be allowed to dominate the meeting. This point is particularly applicable to the technical specialists who may have favorite technical solutions they want to press on the participants.
- **Freedom of speech.** There must be face-to-face communication, honest exchange of views and freedom of speech. Following Follett's advice, differences of opinion should be dealt with through integration rather than domination or compromise. Integration means striving to achieve a "win, win" solution. This is a solution from which all parties with a major interest in the new system feel that they have gained something.
- **Gaining power.** The design group must recognize that by working together to ensure agreement on needs and solutions they can gain considerable power. They may need this power to ensure that their preferred solution is accepted by other powerful groups in the company. There needs to be a recognition that power is being increased, not lost, through the participation process. The technologists must believe that they are not losing power by sharing design with users. Senior management also must feel that they are not losing power by allowing lower level groups to take decisions. The accepted view should be that all are gaining power as good, well conceived systems are introduced that users want, understand and own.
- **Integrating all factors.** The design group must also take account of all relevant factors in the situation they want to change. It is not unusual for design groups to identify benefits and forget about costs. For example, a system that reduces staff numbers can greatly reduce costs but this reduction may be offset by the costs of overworked and over stressed staff who take time off from work because they cannot manage the additional work load.
- **Staying together.** The design group may wish to continue working together over a considerable period of time and this can have advantages. The XSEL design group met over many years, handling first the design process, next implementation and evaluation and, finally, planning for the future development of XSEL.

Principles Derived Mainly from Socio-Technical Design

- **Quality of working life.** The most important principle is that an improvement in user quality of working life should be given as much importance as an improvement in efficiency.

- **Multi-skilling.** Every effort should be made to design interesting, challenging and significant jobs for individuals and groups. However, challenge should not create high levels of stress.
- **Boundary Management.** All new designs, whether associated with hierarchies or processes, will include the movement across boundaries. As most serious problems occur on the boundary between one group or activity and another, careful attention must be paid to designing for good boundary management.
- **Information flow.** Information systems should be designed so that information goes directly to the place where action is to be taken or to the source that originated it.
- **Continuing design.** It must be recognized that the design task is never completed. It is a continuous, ongoing process.

10. ARE FOLLETT'S IDEAS RELEVANT TODAY?

Today's management gurus are arguing forcibly that hierarchical and functional organizations are no longer working and will not work in the fiercely competitive world of the future (Hammer and Champy 1993). They emphasize the need for change to improve efficiency and recommend panaceas such as business process reengineering, total quality, performance related pay and short term contracts. They also stress the importance of information technology as a means for stimulating and ensuring the success of this kind of change.

This is still an engineering view of the world. In 1903, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1947) was recommending a not too dissimilar kind of approach. He wanted the optimum use of machines, a narrow division of labor, tight work standards and individual pay incentives. Yet people are the most important input to business success and few of these new and old remedies pay much attention to their needs for participation, motivation, job satisfaction and creativity.

Follett saw the achievement of business success coming as much from enabling the individual and the group to contribute their skills and knowledge freely and without constraints. This kind of freedom came from motivated individuals working together in small group situations within a close and integrated work environment. We now have to ask the question, "How relevant are her ideas today?" Can we still apply them in work situations where face-to-face communication is replaced or enhanced by video-conferencing, voice mail and telework and where electronic networks are expanding to engulf every type of industrial and commercial activity.

First let us remind ourselves of the ideas of Mary Parker Follett. She wanted freedom and responsibility for the individual and the group. This required group membership, communication, participation, joint problem solving and joint decision making. All of these have to take place both within groups and between groups. She believed in power and control but it was "power with" not "power over." Power sharing of this kind requires common values and agreement on the cause and nature of problems. This she called "the Law of the Situation." She also believed in multiple leadership so that no single individual or group was able to dominate the others. Similar ideas are still being propagated. In England, a distinguished social scientist, Geoffrey Vickers has written:

We must abandon the idea that political and economic life is primarily the interaction of individuals, each pursuing their own self-interest....We shall have to conceive ourselves as maintaining a number of institutional systems which are essential to our significance and survival but which depend completely on our capacity to resolve or contain the conflicts which they engender....This requires intelligence, tolerance, wisdom, acceptance of common constraints and assurances of membership. [Vickers 1973]

Vickers believed that organizations can only survive if they are able to contain and resolve their conflicts and that communication and debate make a major contribution to this resolution. These provide a shared view of the problem and an understanding of the special interests of each party.

Handy, another influential British writer on management supports this view, saying:

If we want to reconcile our humanity with our economics, we have to find a way to give more influence to what is personal and local, so that we each can feel that we have a chance to make a difference, that we matter, along with those around us....A formal democracy will not be enough. We have to find another way, by changing the structure of our institutions to give more power to the small and to the local. [Handy 1994]

Handy sees the answer in what he calls "federalism." Federalism is an old idea which had as one of its objectives the creation of a balance of power within an institution. Federal organizations are both small and large. They aim to be small and local in their appearance and in many of their decisions, but national, even global, in their scope. Like the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang, they are built on contradictions. They endeavor to maximize independence while maintaining a degree of interdependence. Also, like Yin and Yang, the secret of doing this successfully is achieving the right balance for the organization and the situation between things big and small. Individuals recognize and accept that they are members of both groups and that control is a shared activity.

Handy associates federalism with what he calls "subsidiarity": the individual parts retain as much independence as they can handle but give some power to the center because they know the center can do some things better. The center is not necessarily large; it may be quite small but it has a view of the whole. Today this view is assisted by communications technology which provides it with the information it needs to survey the whole. Handy points out that subsidiarity is not empowerment. Empowerment implies that someone is giving away power. Subsidiarity means that power belongs lower down where most of the action takes place.

This form of organization requires small units with real power. The members of each unit are constantly in touch with other units, recognize and accept common rights and duties and work together in a climate of mutual trust. Handy points out that "organizations are nothing if they are not communities of people....A community has members, not employees, and it belongs to its members."

11. PROBLEMS WITH THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

One problem is that freedom is very hard to achieve. Handy admits that the “federal organization” is messy, untidy and always a little out of control. Nevertheless, he says, “there is no real alternative in a complicated world.”

An important factor that can be an enhancer or reducer of freedom is current attitudes. Handy believes that human progress, as defined by Follett, is at present inhibited by our pursuit of efficiency and economic growth in the conviction that these are the necessary ingredients of progress. He believes that efficiency, like technology, should be a means not an end in itself.

Technology is, of course, another factor that can reduce or increase freedom. The history of technology is that its consequences have always been mixed. The more powerful have usually gained from its use, while the weaker have lost. One early group of sufferers were women clerks who found that they had lost what was often quite interesting manual work and become data input operators. This new job required concentration, was deadly boring and, to add insult to injury, the speed at which the women worked could be monitored by the computer and reported to management (Baker 1964).

A group that constantly comes under attack for causing technology to dehumanize work and remove freedom are the engineers. They are seen to be disciples of Taylor and, by writers such as David Noble, to be tools of the capitalist system using technology to reduce the human being to a machine component (Noble 1979).

Hopefully, we have now passed this stage and the versatile computer is being used to enhance, not degrade, skills. Vickers points out that technology always makes ethical demands in what it requires people to expect of each other and therefore of themselves. In many fields today, the effect of technology is very positive for the computer is an instrument of great variety that can be used in many different ways.

Let us hope this is true in its communication role where it may help us to realize the democratic organization sought by Follett. Computers and networks can help us to communicate with people located far away, to take decisions based on accurate knowledge, to plan strategies with the alternatives clarified, to write joint papers and reports, and to pass around innovative ideas.

In theory this is splendid. The question is, will it work in the desired and desirable way? We are only just learning how to handle this new telefreedom and beginning to realize that the desired results are not so easy to achieve.

Mary Parker Follett’s ideas give us something to aim for and provide a vision that many see as relevant to today’s and tomorrow’s urgent problems.

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