

# ENCOURAGING UPWARD INFLUENCE THROUGH EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

An upward influence process was designed and facilitated in the largest 3M plant in the United States. This plant, striving to improve involvement of employees in critical areas, embarked on a visioning process with a high degree of employee participation. The approaches used are described, with focus on a variety of involvement strategies that went beyond traditional top-down methods and incorporated critical dimensions of upward influence. The relationship to organization development practice perspectives provides a useful model for action.

### **Encouraging Upward Influence through Employee Involvement**

In a large-scale organizational change process, organization development methods were used to enhance the creation of a vision through high levels of employee participation and upward influence. This innovative process provides an alternative model for vision generation that surpasses traditional, top-down approaches.

According to Jick (1989), the value of an organizational vision is to guide behavior. Kouzes & Posner (1988) illustrated numerous anecdotes that exemplify the importance and application of an organizational vision. It appears that communicating the vision throughout the organization may serve to guide behavior and performance. Vision statements should clearly set the organization apart

from others, challenge the organization to new pursuits, and align the organization's commitment to these challenges.

The literature has further corroborated the need for top management support in a number of organizational pursuits. For example, top management support has been a critical variable in strategic planning efforts (Hennecke, 1984), with respect to the vision generation process Beckhard & Pritchard (1992) have noted.

An effective vision will have a consensus among top management over the end state toward which management is moving the organization, and it will need processes for building commitment to it among key managers in the organization (p. 25). While top management support is a critical variable for effective visioning,

it alone may not effectively ensure the success of the vision process in guiding employee behavior and organizational performance. A significant dimension for consideration is the building of commitment to the process at all organizational levels (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992). To create a more effective organizational vision, the organization development practice of gaining top management commitment and soliciting employee involvement, as well as feedback, was conducted as a prelude to establishing greater organizational commitment to the vision.

The integration of organization development with other strategic processes has been documented in the literature (Buller, 1988; Lentz & Rampenthal, 1991). Just as in the action research model of organization development where employee involvement and feedback have been critical dimensions of assessment and intervention (Burke, 1987; French & Bell, Jr., 1990; Harvey & Brown, 1988; Cummings & Huse, 1989), this same model of employee participation and upward influence was used in the visioning process of this study. It appears that where visioning processes often fail has been in the garnering of employee commitment to the vision. Dyer (1987) has noted a positive relationship between involvement and commitment. The method of employee participation is a realistic way to gain employee commitment to this process and thus, establish more successful applications of the vision throughout the organization.

### **3M Tape Manufacturing Plant: A Visionary Organization**

The 3M Tape Manufacturing Plant, more commonly known as 3M Hutch Tape because of its location in Hutchinson, Minnesota, is the largest 3M plant in the United States and the site of this visioning process. The plant consisted of five focus factories organized to produce a certain family of products. In this sys-

tem, raw materials to finished goods are organized under one management group. Focus factories allow even a large plant to focus on their customer's expectations. 3M Hutch Tape manufactures pressure sensitive adhesive tapes and related products. Within this manufacturing plant are approximately 1100 employees divided into the following employee groups: managers, supervisors, and staff.

While many organizations have engaged in vision generation processes, the extensiveness of 3M Hutch Tape's process in soliciting management, supervisory, and staff involvement defines an alternative benchmark for visioning. Because the organization has utilized participative management processes for several years, the vision involvement process was aligned with the culture of the organization. Despite the participative environment at 3M Hutch Tape, there had never been an attempt to solicit this degree of involvement in the visioning process with all three employee groups.

### **Preliminaries to the Process**

Management at 3M Hutch Tape invited the organizational consultant (the primary author) to identify how to bring about an organizational vision that would elicit commitment to the vision and direct future behaviors among all employees, particularly staff. Previous to consultant entry, the plant had embarked on a vision process driven from plant management. This process did not demonstrate the organization's commitment to greater staff involvement in helping the organization make better decisions and products. The consultant suggested a process that was not only top-driven, but one that solicited tremendous staff involvement in, and commitment to, the process. The plant manager with selected members of his management team decided to proceed with the process described in this article.

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### The Upward Influence Change Process

The upward influence change process included the following steps:

1. Management interviews
2. Development and dissemination of a survey
3. Survey data given to the first set of focus groups for feedback
4. Review of data and creation of vision statement by an interdisciplinary team
5. Feedback of rough draft of vision with follow-up focus groups
6. Review of follow-up focus group responses with interdisciplinary vision team
7. Action Planning.

### Management Interviews

The process began with management interviews, the purposes of which were to gain both plant and corporate perspectives of the significance of an organizational vision and to identify critical benchmarks for its success. The consultant conducted interviews with each of the managers in the plant and with the three corporate executives who worked directly with the 3M Hutch Tape plant. The interviews focused on their opinion of the vision process used to date, barriers to an effective vision process at 3M Hutch, support needed, and suggestions for its success.

Executives corroborated the fact that the vision needed to be future-directed and meaningful to everyone. The following common themes emerged from the middle management groups focus on plant ownership, future plant direction, and vehicles for continuous reinforcement. For each of the groups, the consultant documented barriers (e.g. feeling that this is just another program, that there would be a lack of follow-up strategies, and that the process would be too lengthy) and support factors (e.g. operating in a relatively high participative environment and needing a relevant vision). These responses were considered in the design of the survey and focus group questions.

### The Survey

The consultant designed a survey that incorporated critical information from the interviews. The purpose of the survey was to improve understanding of employees' perceptions of work at 3M Hutch Tape from two dimensions, importance, and satisfaction with each survey item. All 1100 employees received the 4-page survey, that began with an introductory letter from the plant manager, instructions, and a request for demographic information. One set of questions related to the importance of the item on a scale incorporating the following benchmarks: of no importance, of moderate importance, of great importance, and not applicable; another set of questions related to the satisfaction with the item on a scale incorporating the following. Response rate was 73%. The common theme that emerged throughout items on the survey was the need for employee involvement processes in creating a visionary organization. Data were analyzed for each of three employee groups: staff, supervisors, and managers. In general, results indicated that the majority in all three employee groups perceived that being involved in improving product quality and learning new knowledge/skills was of great importance (staff: 63% for improving product quality and 76% for learning new knowledge/skills; supervisors: 89% for improving product quality and 84% for learning new knowledge/skills; and managers: 90% for improving product quality and 80% for learning new knowledge/skills).

Some of the hallmark themes among staff, supervisors, and managers included: the need for a more participative environment, strong support for action associated with the vision, and the need to benchmark with others outside their own areas. One primary difference among staff, supervisors, and managers was that managers were not as satisfied as employees and supervisors with their knowledge of the customer. These and other

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similarities and differences were opened to discussion in a focus group format, producing rich discussions that helped participants better understand their organization and each other.

### **Dissemination of Survey Responses to Focus Groups**

To corroborate the data from the survey and to understand potential item misinterpretations, as well as the previously mentioned differing views, the consultant conducted focus groups, some homogeneous and other heterogeneous, in which members from all three groups participated. One survey question asked for respondents to note if they would like to participate in the focus groups; the plant manager invited all who requested participation to become a focus group member. Almost equal numbers of respondents (15% from each employee group) volunteered to participate in the focus groups. Each focus group met for 75 minutes. The overwhelming response from these focus groups was that they were amazed that the organization had solicited their participation in what they saw as a typically top-down process of vision generation. Through this involvement process, they became more committed to vision generation and saw themselves as effective conduits of it. In essence, they saw themselves as creating greater organizational commitment by personally "spreading the word" to others (a true leadership perspective). The consultant noted no differences in responses between the homogeneous and heterogeneous focus groups.

### **Interdisciplinary Vision Team Actions**

Following these focus groups, an interdisciplinary team was assembled to generate 3M Hutch Tape's vision. The purpose of the vision team was to actually review all the data from the previous interviews, surveys, and focus groups, as well as create a vision statement for 3M Hutch Tape. The vision team consisted of

six staff, six managers, and three supervisors. Selection of this vision team occurred through the survey in which participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in the vision session. Fourteen percent of staff stated they would like to participate; from this percentage, six staff were randomly selected. Due to the small number of supervisors in the organization, all supervisors who volunteered to participate were part of this vision team. Selection of the managers for the vision team occurred voluntarily and was driven by their work schedules.

The critical component of the vision generation process was the integration of the data from the previous data collection methods. This strategy provided ample opportunities for employee participation in the process; these opportunities included both the survey and focus groups, as well as employee participation in the vision generation process. The initial rough draft of the vision that the team created was "I am Hutch Tape's future." While this may appear as more of a slogan than a vision, it is important to note that the vision team also created and defined a set of core benchmark dimensions associated with the vision: leadership, continuous improvement, people, employee involvement, and customer satisfaction. The team defined these dimensions, which reflected many of the vision criteria referenced previously in this study.

### **Follow-up Focus Groups**

An additional way of soliciting employee participation was through follow-up focus groups, which were formed through the same process as the first set of focus groups. The same individuals from the first set of focus groups participated, but did not remain in the same groups due to scheduling logistics. Each focus group was 75 minutes in duration. The consultant had shared with this sec-

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ond set of focus groups the rough draft of the vision "I am Hutch Tape's future" developed during the vision generation session, along with the benchmark dimensions. To utilize their participation in helping create a relevant vision statement, the consultant asked the follow-up focus group participants to respond to the following questions:

- What does this vision statement mean to you?
- What do you like about it? Dislike?
- How does it provide an environment where employees may take risks?
- Do you see your responses from the survey and original focus groups in this vision? If so, where?
- How do you see yourselves in this vision?
- How do you see your work areas represented in this vision?

The overall responses from these focus groups indicated that they really believed that management meant what they said—employee participation is critical to the vision of the organization and to the success of 3M Hutch Tape. They further believed that for the vision to be successful, they needed to consider appropriate action strategies. Consistently, the focus group participants were positively impressed with the vision the vision team had created; however, some of the participants made suggestions for some changes that would incorporate a more team orientation. Subsequently, the interdisciplinary vision team reviewed these responses and suggestions.

#### **Interdisciplinary Review of Follow-up Focus Group Responses**

Upon review of the follow-up focus group responses, the vision team created a new vision statement "You and I are creating Hutch Tape's future" that reflected more of a team orientation than did the first. Benchmark dimensions remained the same.

#### **Action Planning**

The interdisciplinary vision team developed the following action plan:

- Supervisors at the Quarterly Supervisors' Meeting reviewed the process and vision. The purposes of this phase were to inform the supervisors about the entire process and results, as well as to identify new champions of the vision.
- Members of the vision team asked supervisors for their implementation suggestions. Their overwhelming response was to have each department take responsibility for their own implementation plan.
- Each department designed a different implementation plan. The common theme, however, was the integration of the vision and values with what their department does today and will need to do in the future.
- Many areas have begun initiating area guidance teams. These consist of volunteers of managers, supervisors, and staff. The purpose of these teams is to establish the direction for implementing the vision in their department. This implementation includes education, special projects, and evaluation of area results.

#### **Perspectives within the Organization**

It is quite interesting that the overwhelming response from the focus group participants was that managers saw staff and supervisors as critical to the success of the organization. Rather than top management dictating a vision, staff and supervisors saw their participation as instrumental to the success of the vision process. In particular, they began seeing themselves as champions of the new vision, not just recipients of a vision generated by management. Subsequently, rather than just management "selling" the vision, staff and supervisors saw themselves as effective communicators of this vision because of their strong involvement in the process.

The fact that attendance remained between 80% and 90% in the focus groups is positively impressive, in consideration of staff schedules and the fact that some staff had to come to work outside of their shift time.

Most critical in this process will be the dissemination of the vision. The organization will use many of the suggestions made by both sets of focus groups and the interdisciplinary vision team to bring about greater commitment to the vision process. One excellent suggestion made by the focus groups was that the vision should be actually introduced and led by staff, not supervisors and managers - true upward influence in action. With staff introduction and management reinforcement, the vision is destined to be one that will gather further organizational commitment. Through the eyes of participants in this process, there is the consistent belief that the vision will be a statement that is relevant and realistic to the future needs of 3M Hutch "You and I are creating Hutch Tape's future". It is a response driven from all the employees - the key to the success of this vision.

It is important to note that this study has reviewed the upward influence process used; it has not documented its impact. A longitudinal study will be conducted to assess its effectiveness over the next two years.

It appears that this vision process has every potential of being successful at 3M Hutch Tape, in consideration of Block's (1987, p. 115) benchmarks for a great vision "It comes from the heart... We, alone, can make this statement." And from every expression from staff, supervisors, and managers, the 3M Hutch Tape vision fulfills these prerequisites. It is truly a vision of greatness and one that promotes a never-ending process of continuous improvement and upward influence.

**Figure 1. Survey questions related to importance and satisfaction.**

**How important is it for you to...**

1. Suggest changes in the way you perform your job?
2. Discuss with others how to improve the product your unit is making?
3. Be involved in improving product quality?
4. Discuss with your boss areas for improvement?
5. Discuss with your co-workers mistakes you have made?
6. Work without constant supervision?
7. Learn new knowledge and/or skills?
8. Have enthusiasm for your work?
9. Talk with others outside your immediate area about your work?
10. Have your boss recognize when you do something well?
11. Understand how you contribute to the overall production in the plant?
12. Know who your customer is?
13. Be able to discuss ideas with your boss?
14. Be able to discuss ideas with your boss' boss?
15. Understand the plant's vision for the future?
16. Understand how a focus factory works?
17. Understand the difference between the internal and external customer?
18. Have some involvement in a 3 to 5 year vision for the plant?

### How satisfied are you with...

19. The way you have been involved in suggesting changes in the way you perform your job?
20. The opportunity to discuss with others how to improve the product your unit is making?
21. The amount of independent work you are involved in?
22. The amount of opportunities available to learn a new knowledge and/or skill?
23. The amount of opportunities available to talk with others outside your immediate area?
24. The recognition you receive when you do something well?
25. Your understanding of how you contribute to the overall production in the plant?
26. Your knowledge of the customer?
27. The amount of opportunities made available to talk about ideas with your boss?
28. The amount of opportunities made available to talk about ideas with your boss' boss?
29. Your understanding of how a vision for the plant relates to you?
30. Your understanding of how a focus factory works?
31. Your understanding of the difference between the internal and external customer?

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