

Edward M. Davis and Russell D. Lansbury (eds), **Managing Together: Consultation and Participation in the Workplace**, Addison Wesley Longman, Sydney, 1996, xvi + 270pp.

Reviewed by Chris Nyland*

This volume examines an important inconsistency in contemporary human resource analysis. Over the last decade the HR literature has been awash with applause for and celebration of teamwork, employee empowerment and consultative and cooperative approaches to management. These are practices that it is widely claimed enhance the personal well-being of employees and the competitiveness and the profitability of firms. Yet, despite the wide vocal support these ideas appear to enjoy, most empirical studies of management practice find that firms do not allow their staff any serious involvement in managerial decision making. While there has been an increase in the extent to which employers, both in Australia and overseas, involve workers in decision making in most cases involvement is decidedly ad hoc. Indeed, as far as employers are concerned by far the most popular form of communication between themselves and workers remains the daily 'walk around' by management.

Seeking to explain the divergence between the applause for worker participation in the management process and shop floor practice Davis and Lansbury have brought together fourteen contributions that analyse specific aspects of the recent Australian and overseas experience. As with most collections of this nature, the contributors have elected to confront a diverse range of related issues. These are collected into three groupings: four thematic papers that respectively examine health and safety, language, productivity and government employment; four case studies; and six national overviews. Unifying this diversity is a problem that editors of collections of this nature normally address by providing the reader with a substantial introduction and/or conclusion which melds the various contributions. Unfortunately, Davis and Lansbury do not give any such assistance. Instead we are merely provided with a brief preface of three pages which does little more than list the names of the contributors and the subject each has elected to analyse. In their opening chapter the editors acknowledge the need for a general framework of analysis but, having done so, skip lightly and quickly across this difficult task. This leaves the reader with little insight as to the overall goals sought or the nature of the broad debate into which the editors hoped to inject the work collected in the volume, a failing that undermines the value of the book as a whole.

* University of Wollongong

Despite this general weakness the volume nevertheless has significant worth. A number of the chapters provide useful contributions to the industrial democracy debate. The paper by Vaughan cannot be said to fall into this category. This is the first of the thematic papers and deals with the separation that exists between employer rhetoric and the reality that generally exists in the workplace. Unlike most of the contributors, Vaughan does not lament this gulf. Rather, his concern is that managers are very often unsuccessful in creating a facade adequate to hide its existence and, as a consequence, induce cynicism and a lack of commitment in the workforce. His solution for this difficulty is to urge managers to better appreciate and develop the *theatrical* tools needed to convince employees that there is some reality in the claims they make as regards the need to 'manage together'. By so doing, he suggests, managers will both enhance their capacity to enthuse their employee 'audience' and infuse in them an acceptance of the need to make the greater efforts desired by the firm.

Quinlan's contribution, which focuses on the participatory approach to occupational health and safety in the workplace, has none of Vaughan's opportunism. Again the story told is of government and private sector avowing support for participation while failing to match this talk with action in the workplace. Quinlan's message, however, is that greater effort needs to be undertaken to inject life into worker involvement in the decision making process. He warns that many of the steps that have been taken to enhance worker involvement in safety assumed the existence of strong trade unions and a sympathetic state. However, these assumptions have and are being undermined by the shift to enterprise bargaining, the continuing decline in union density, and the growing hostility of state and federal governments to unionism. He further notes that women are particularly disadvantaged by this development but fails to mention that those who warned against the cavalier abolition of health and safety laws that protected women, at a time of mass unemployment, appear to have been vindicated by these developments.

Alexander and Green's chapter on workplace productivity and joint consultation is one of the more substantial papers in the volume. Their aim is to examine the role of workers and unions in the process of productivity improvement. They do so, first by evaluating the theoretical analysis and empirical studies undertaken in this area and then by looking at the effect on performance of the establishment and the operation of joint consultation arrangements in a representative example of Australian firms. Subjecting the AWIRS data to regression analysis, they find that the objectives of successful consultative schemes tend to be consistent and self-reinforcing; that their success is also dependent on their internal structure and operation;

and that the impact of consultative schemes in improving work-place performance is directly related to the 'intensity' of collaboration between management and workers. Intensity for this last purpose was measured by such characteristics as the composition of the consultative committee; who initiated the scheme; and whether consultation took place at the primary stage with employees and unions.

The final thematic paper by Julian Teicher draws on Pateman's taxonomy of participation to develop a critical review of developments in Australian Government Employment. Teicher argues that during their time in office the Labor Governments of 1983-1995 accorded employee participation a higher priority than any of their predecessors. The chapter gives a crisp outline of the difficulties experienced by those charged with operationalising this priority. It is concluded that formally constituted bodies in which the parties have well-defined obligations, and the modes of decision making are clearly specified, are vital for guaranteeing the legitimacy of union input. Wisely, he also warns that the favourable portents manifested through the period examined have an insecure existence given the wholesale shift to corporatisation, privatisation, and management's embrace of forms of human resource management that seek to marginalise the union movement.

Having highlighted the mismatch between the rhetoric regarding worker involvement in decision making and industrial practice, the book turns to a number of case studies where firms have attempted to 'democratise' the workplace. The studies by Mathews and by Baird and Lansbury are necessarily of marginal significance because, as the authors concede, the reforms introduced are in an early stage of development. Given that longevity must be considered a critical factor when judging the worth of experiments with participation these studies cannot, at this stage, offer any insights of significance. This point is stressed by Simons and Lansbury in their study of worker involvement in the Ford Motor Company, a chapter that is a useful example of the caution that needs to be embraced when assessing the use-value of participation schemes. However, the best chapter prize in the case study section must go to Tony Meador for his paper on ICI Botany. While this work has some terminological problems, mistakenly equating Taylorism with autocracy and deskilled work, it is a sophisticated study which carefully identifies the origins and traces the development of the democratisation program introduced at the Sydney plant of ICI. Compared to the other case studies, the chapter also has substance in that it provides some quantification of the productivity gains achieved and the material benefits that have accrued to the workforce. The evidence thus presented

by Mealor justifies the balanced and cautious optimism offered in his concluding paragraph where he observes:

We live in a capitalist society where some sell their labour power to others to survive. To have some control over how that labour is purchased and used, to be in some measure the master of one's own destiny at work and after work – that is what industrial democracy is all about, and that is what has become known as the 'Botany Experience'.

The final section of the paper looks at worker-management cooperation in Australia, Britain, Germany, Japan, Sweden, and the USA. Five of the six papers are overviews of how schemes for consultation and participation in the workplace have developed in the individual countries over the last decade. The one exception is Michio Nitta who has contributed a useful paper that analyses the concepts which underlie the Japanese system of Joint Labour-Management Committees. Nitta examines their modes of operation, the impact they have on industrial relations at the enterprise level, compares the Japanese and Western approaches to joint consultation from both an historical and contemporary perspective and offers three case studies.

In their joint chapter Davis and Lansbury explore developments in consultation and employee participation in the Australian workplace over the decade 1986-1995. There is little of substance in this chapter that would enlighten an Australian audience. The authors provide a concise sketch of union, employer and state activities through the period studied but offer little that has not already been well documented elsewhere. Particular attention is given to the role of the Accord, the shift to enterprise bargaining and the fact that Australian industrial practice has been slow to transform vocal support for participatory management into practice.

The chapters by Peter Auer [Germany] and Christian Berggren [Sweden], on the other hand, are both substantial overviews of the consultation and participation structures of these two nations and examinations of recent developments. Both are concerned primarily with whether the models of worker involvement developed in their countries can survive the pressures engendered by the continuing high unemployment and low profitability that have come to characterise contemporary capitalism. Their guarded optimism is well supported and consequently both papers would make valuable additions to the reading list of a comparative industrial relations course. Their optimism contrasts markedly with Marchington's [Britain] contribution. The latter is less informative than the contributions of his Continental counterparts and reflects the stagnation if not decay of the minimal level of participation that formerly existed in the United Kingdom. In the end,

Marchington appears to pin all hope on the election of a Labour Government.

This brings us to the contribution by George Strauss on progress and barriers to participation in the United States. This is clearly the best of the papers in the collection and is so because Strauss consciously strives to derive some useful general insights from recent experience. By so doing he moves beyond the tendency to compile mountains of facts that sadly continues to characterise so much industrial relations literature. Strauss begins his paper by noting that the last two decades have seen substantially increased interest in workplace participation in the United States. Indeed, he notes, various forms of employee 'involvement' or 'empowerment', such as quality circles, work teams, and total quality management have become almost a fad. Reviewing this development he provides a context of change and then proceeds to examine direct workplace participation, quality circles and employment involvement programs, and job redesign. He then goes on to identify the problems and lessons that have been learned from the recent experience of the USA. Following this tour de force Strauss concludes by asserting that participation *can* work in the United States but often it does not for the barriers to participative success are many. Research, he suggests, has thrown up six important lessons that are possibly of general application:

1. Work changes need to be *introduced* participatively and to involve *continuous* participation.
2. Participation should not be confined to the shop floor but needs to be extended to the organisation as a whole through representative participation.
3. Major changes are required in union and management attitudes and behaviour.
4. Though poor union-management relations may destroy direct workplace participation, quality circles in unionised firms have a higher survival rate (compared to their non-union counterparts) and joint labour-management committees are likely to have a favourable impact on productivity.
5. Participation is unlikely to be institutionalised unless employees gain financially, in terms of both compensation and job security.
6. Establishment of an effective and durable participative system requires substantial investment in human resources and there may be a long period of adjustment.

In short, Strauss concludes that no single form of participation *alone* is likely to have a lasting impact. Rather, for participation to work (irrespective of the criterion of success) direct participation has to be melded with changes to job design, representative participation, continuing senior management support, substantial training and (in most cases) job security and increased income. 'Without these fundamental changes in employment relations, participation may be only a passing fad.'