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ABSTRACT

This booklet synthesizes symposium discussions exploring how to transform organizations to compete in the rapidly changing world economy. First, the new cooperative organization is defined. Next, practical advice on making partnership organizations a reality is summarized. Suggestions include appealing to people's self-interest; coming up with new, shared values; "walking and talking" the values every day; changing the structure of the organization to reinforce new values; developing a specific vocabulary; slowing down and retraining, if necessary; enforcing values; trusting and caring; and not expecting overnight change. The next section outlines barriers to change: noninvolement of employees; natural tendency toward inertia; persistence of organizations that support the old systems; public policy; suspicions of Wall Street investors; time; unwillingness, or inability, to trust; no understanding of the value a union adds to a partnership; and fear of failure. Barriers to sustaining cooperative programs are then discussed: failure to build a solid foundation for change; literacy problems; management arrogance; missed opportunities; and loss of momentum from turnover and changes in corporate structure. The next section summarizes suggestions for success: clear the air; consider the plan for the new system carefully and in detail; support an atmosphere that promotes reasonable risk taking; and continue to deal up front with the job security issue. A list of symposium participants is appended. (YLB)

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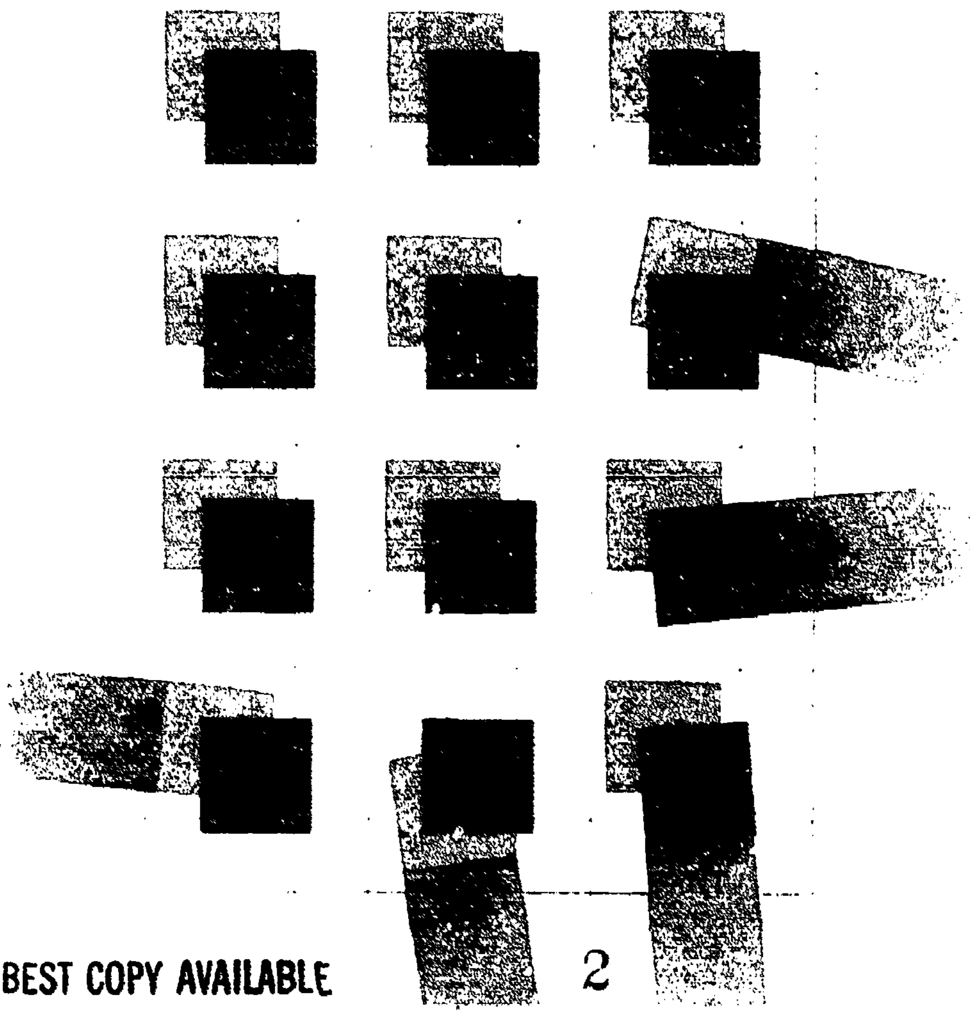

Labor–Management Cooperation: 1990 State-of-the-Art Symposium

U.S. Department of Labor
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and Cooperative Programs
H. Charles Spring,
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Preface

Since 1982, the Bureau of Labor–Management Relations and Cooperative Programs has sponsored a series of symposia to focus on the state of the art in labor relations. The 1990 symposium, held in cooperation with the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, explored how to transform organizations to compete in the rapidly changing world economy. Whether an organization is union or nonunion, its economic future hinges on its ability to overcome the barriers to becoming a high-performance workplace.

Participants found much to debate, but on one point they all agreed: The latest technology, the most enlightened human resource policies, and the most sophisticated training won't do any good without a foundation that incorporates full participation and a joint commitment by labor and management.

By publishing this synthesis of the discussions, the Bureau hopes to carry these ideas from the conference table to practitioners for their further debate. I commend the efforts of this year's symposium participants and their contributions to the field of labor–management relations.

H. Charles Spring
Acting Deputy Under Secretary
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Introduction

Recent military victories have shored up America's confidence in its strength as a nation. But an even tougher war is being fought on the economic battlefield. Faced with increasingly formidable competition from Europe and Asia, the United States is struggling as never before to maintain its position in the global marketplace. One thing is certain: The old ways of doing business don't work anymore. Only those companies and unions willing and able to transform the way they operate will be around to compete in the changing world economy of the 21st century.

Admittedly, there are some daunting barriers to converting a unionized workplace—where both labor and management have invested years and careers in maintaining an adversarial relationship—to a cooperative venture in which both sides have an equal stake and an equal say in the success of the organization. The good news is that, through a strong commitment to change, the barriers that once seemed insurmountable shrink to temporary obstacles. But before labor and management can start down the long road together, they have to clear the first hurdle—understanding just what it is they are trying to move toward.

Defining the New Organization

A number of different terms—value-based, high-commitment, high-performance—are used to describe the organization of the future. Just what do these words mean? After all, every company has values of some kind. And aren't all companies committed in their own way to performing their best? What *is* new about the new organizations is that labor and management *together* define the core values and operating principles that will be nurtured and acted upon throughout the company with a consistency not found in the typical organization.

These core values, which are basically the same in all high-commitment organizations, include trust and integrity, respect for the dignity of individuals, quality production and service, flexibility, openness, recognition of effort and achievement, opportunities for personal growth and development, and a dedication to the continuous improvement of every aspect of the business. Such values stem from two basic premises: the people who do the work can and should understand the business well enough to perform their jobs with a maximum of empowerment; and people will be motivated to work this way only if they are committed to the success of the business. In a work system built on this foundation, jobs enhance everyone's ability to participate in decisionmaking and problem solving, the organization is productive and competitive, and everyone shares in the benefits of success.

In such organizations, layers of authority give way to a flat organizational structure. Teamwork is the way to do things. Training and education help people learn to make decisions. Basic job classifications are few in number; compensation is based on the variety of skills employees acquire and is tied more directly to the success of the business. Managers concentrate on coaching and long-range planning instead of ironfisted oversight. And labor and management work together in continuous negotiations and problem-solving sessions for the overall good of the company.

Getting Started

Creating the terms to describe partnership organizations is the easy part. Making them reality on the shop floor is another matter. Some companies, such as Preston Trucking and Corning, Inc., have come a long way toward that reality. Others, such as Harley Davidson, are struggling in the early stages. Those with experience in the process offer some practical advice.

Start from where people are, and help them to see what's in it for them.

It's important first to remember that both labor and management are burdened with a lot of old baggage. "We've built labor relations in the United States on total mistrust," said mediator and former Secretary of Labor W. J. Usery, Jr. "An organizing campaign, if you've ever been through one, is vicious. You hate each other. So while we are serious about change, in the nation we're not yet perceived as being serious because we're still fighting the battles that we once fought between labor and management."

The way to capture people's attention is not by talking about "value based" organizations but by "appealing to their own self-interest," advised John Butler, vice president for personnel at Nabisco Biscuit Company. "Management responds to the idea that companies who are involved with this are going to outperform companies who are not. It's a selfish economic interest. From the union standpoint, the message is that the union will have better jobs, more interesting and more fulfilling jobs, and a bigger say in the action."

"We need to bear in mind that both parties have to get more out of this than either one of them could by playing the adversarial role," added William Cooke, associate dean of the College of Urban, Labor, and Metropolitan Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit. Those benefits, of course, are different for different people. William Potter, chairman of Preston Trucking, notes that it's the decrease in grievances that catches people's attention at his company. "When I go into classes and say, 'One of our benefits is that grievances per 100 associates decrease 34 percent,' all of a sudden heads begin to go up. I've learned over the years that the heads are the union stewards, because they don't like nitpicking grievances—they're a waste of time."

Remember that labor's and management's values are not necessarily the same.

"Business organizations tend to be autocratic; unions tend to be democratic, a very different set of values," said John Stepp, former deputy under secretary of labor for the Bureau of Labor–Management Relations and Cooperative Programs at the Department of Labor and now president of Bill Usery and Associates, Inc. "Business organizations tend to value meritocracies; unions tend to place great emphasis on egalitarianism. Businesses tend to think of efficiency and effectiveness, and unions tend to think of fairness. So whose values determine the new organization?"

The answer is both. To work, the new values must be shared values, jointly reached. Restructuring Associates President Thomas Schneider, who has helped labor and management create numerous cooperative programs, noted that he had "yet to find a case in the United States" where people couldn't come up with "some very meaningful shared values" if they took the time and made the effort.

The process isn't easy and often requires some outside help. Jan Abbott of the Ross Consulting Group in California described the experience of labor and management in one effort to achieve greater cooperation. "What they found out was that they were almost like two icebergs," she said. "As long as they were apart, they were O.K., but when they started moving closer together, something underneath the surface would start to grind. What was beneath the surface was the fact that union and management did have some completely different values. For example, the management people for the most part thought that seniority was a technicality that unions invented to frustrate management, and unions thought that 'performance' was something invented by management to do the same to labor." Neither understood the other's underlying and deep-seated values related to the issue.

The consultants called in to help tried an interesting technique—getting groups of union and management people into the same room to come up with separate guides on how to survive in the "country of labor" and in the "country of management." Abbott recalled, "We did this about 50 times with different groups. People would look at those lists, and they would suddenly understand why they didn't trust each other. Then they would start working to see if they could find some shared values. For example, most bargaining unit people felt that they had always been more interested in quality than management had been. So when you talked about 'quality' rather than 'productivity' (the 'P' word that managers like to talk about), there was an emotional shift." It was, Abbott concluded, "a process of getting people to admit their differences, agree to respect them, then find and integrate some common values and common goals."

Dan Kosanovich, an attorney who represented Utility Workers Local 175 in its effort to develop a cooperative program with Dayton Power and Light Company, pointed out that unions are too often judged by what they get from the company. In defining the organization of the future, he said, it's important to "find room to help unions define themselves to their members in terms of their values." Unions need to look inward and start to articulate those values and educate their members as to what those "values truly mean."

Bernard DeLury, director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, stressed that in any consideration of the values that drive labor and management, "we shouldn't forget that our system of collective bargaining is also a value." Though constantly challenged and certainly not without fault, "it's an honored institution, and we shouldn't forget it."

Walk and talk your values every day.

Simply, practice what you preach. Conceptually, management may seem to accept the idea of partnership, said Jim Dowdall, corporate director of industrial relations for NYNEX. "But when you scrape away the surface, often their idea of partnership is of the union as a very minor partner. It isn't quite involvement; it's more information passing." If management actions and systems don't match the words, even on seemingly frivolous matters, the result is further employee confusion and distrust. Abbott cited a situation in which management talked about equity but failed to extend that equity to something as minor as the use of company-provided baseball tickets. Because of pay system differences, managers still got paid when they used the tickets to attend day games. But if bargaining unit employees went to day games, they got docked. Employees understandably saw this as a lack of commitment to partnership.

To close the gap between talk and practice, Potter said, "it's important that we as managers internalize our values, so that they keep us honest. We have to live up to these values day in and day out, and they direct everything we do." Only by consistently demonstrating that they mean what they say can managers convince employees of their commitment to change. Russell Maier, president and CEO of Republic Engineered Steels (a company created out of the ashes of LTV Steel by LTV employees and the United Steelworkers), remembered a union member's kneejerk reaction to his news that fourth-quarter operations would have to be rescheduled. "The guy said, 'You're gonna make people take vacations, aren't you?' I said, 'We can't do that. We have an agreement, and we're not gonna do that.' He said, 'Yes, but the business . . . .' And I said 'We're *not* gonna do that!' It's a consistency that management has to develop."

Practitioners also provided hints on how to "live" the new values.

Change the structure of the organization to reinforce new values.

"Values alone, partnership alone, won't make it happen," maintained Tom Schneider. "If you don't break down those job classifications, if you don't break down the decisionmaking process, then you're not going to be able to practice what you're preaching. I actually believe that behavior is heavily influenced by structure." Structural change is also "ultimately what's going to keep these value-based organizations in place" over the years, Schneider said. "If you create a flat organization that is so decentralized in decisionmaking, where people are so trained, so knowledgeable about the business, it's going to take a revolution or a major earthquake to turn that back into a centralized, hierarchical system."

Will Potter, the spirit behind the high-commitment system at Preston Trucking for the past 10 years, confirmed the importance of structural change. When asked what would keep the process from collapsing if he were to leave, he responded that "this thing is so institutionalized that it's academic whether I'm there or not. People below are driving it, and, were it ever to cease, the people in the organization would absolutely revolt."

Develop a very specific vocabulary.

Make sure everyone is "singing off the same prayer sheet," advised Joel D. Smith, a former United Auto Workers official at New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI), the General Motors–Toyota joint venture in Fremont, California, a former vice president of Douglas Aircraft, and now a consultant. Assuring that everyone means the same thing by what he says is crucial to building trust within an organization, Smith said. "At NUMMI, it got to the point where I could stand up on a platform all day and answer questions about how the process worked. But what really made me feel comfortable was knowing that the answers I was giving to questions were the same as the president of the company would give if he got up on that platform."

Sometimes, the *choice* of words can make all the difference. "If you talk to people today about productivity, you can turn them off immediately," commented Potter. "But when we started to say that the one thing we were going to focus on was quality, everybody said 'Hallelujah.' I haven't talked to a driver or dockworker yet who doesn't want to provide the customer with quality service."

Thomas Manley, a Raleigh, North Carolina, attorney who specializes in helping to develop cooperative programs, observed that Potter, even in talking with his peers, "at no time spoke of the employment relationship in terms of power. Everything he said describes it as an opportunity relationship." Nor, Manley noted, did Potter ever talk about problems or barriers. "He is always talking about what it is they are becoming. As part of his leadership style, he imagines the company and his colleagues right past the problems. Sort of like the Nike commercial, they just *do* it."

Slow down, and retrain, if necessary.

"Don't be afraid to slow down and take the time to retrain," advised James Lewandowski, former vice president of human resources for Saturn Corporation, the car company specifically designed by General Motors and the United Auto Workers as a high-performance organization. "At Saturn, we had a big problem with behavior in the first 18 months," he said. "So we stopped everything and put everyone back through an awareness program to help them shove aside the old baggage."

Enforce your values.

Make it clear that people will adapt to the new system if they wish to remain with the company. "When we started out, our first mistake was that we did not mandate that this was the way we were going to manage forever, so people thought it was a choice," said Potter. "Some people said, 'We don't have time for this performance management in our job.' So we stopped talking about performance management and said, 'This is the Preston management process, and this *is* our job.'"

On the labor side, the process often takes care of itself. Russ Maier cited the case of a union president at one of Republic Steels' eight plants who was very much against the new work system. "After we bought the company and change started to occur and he didn't change, his constituents came to him in such numbers that he actually resigned voluntarily. They elected a different leadership, because this president admitted to his constituents and to us that he couldn't change."

Trust and care.

Two keys to success are trust and caring. "Without mutual trust, you can't get anyplace," Joel Smith emphasized. "As we go forward, we have to look at all our actions and our conversations in terms of how they impact the trust relationship with the other party." Jerry Knackert, president of Local 209 of the Allied Industrial Workers at Harley Davidson in Milwaukee, affirmed the importance of building trust through actions. "I've never asked anyone to trust me," he noted, "and yet a lot of people trust me. Words aren't going to do it."

Some CEOs stress that sharing financial data with employees is one of the most important steps toward building trust. "When I first started in the steel business as a division manager, they locked up the profitability statements, and only senior managers knew what lines of business you made money on," said Russ Maier. "When we started this company in 1986, after the LTV bankruptcy, we were out telling our hourly guys and our salaried people what we were making money on and what we were losing money on. I put up a tent in front of one of the plants every quarter and made a presentation to anybody who wanted to listen to it. I think the turning point was 2½ years later when we were finally making money. After one of our meetings, a labor gal, a machine operator, came up to me and said, 'I gotta tell you, I'm now starting to believe you. You people always came out here when you were losing money and told us about all the problems because you expected our help. But you're the first guy who came out now to tell us we're making money and things are better.' That consistency paid off in long-term trust."

Preston Trucking also decided early in the change process to open its books to employees. "We said, 'There isn't anything in this company that you should not know, except what so-and-so's exact salary is,'" Potter noted. "That means that a union steward could go to the terminal manager's office and pull out the profit report and know exactly how that terminal is doing. We want our people to know that."

But when it comes to trust, Potter cautioned, management can't rest on its laurels. "If we send out questionnaires to our people, once we get the information back, we have to act on it quickly. People only loan you their trust; you have to earn it day in and day out."

Besides trust, it's important to build the concept of caring into a corporate value statement, said Brent Adair, director of Process of Continuous Improvement for Beatrice/Hunt–Wesson, Inc. "In a work setting, 'love' is a four-letter word we're very uncomfortable in using, so we tend to talk about caring and supporting and collaborative relationships. But however we express it, the concept of caring is something we need to build into value-based organizations." If an organization establishes the concept that the people in it care about each other, then a disagreement is more likely to be an open, honest exploration of differences with a view to achieving understanding than an effort to destroy an opponent, Adair noted. And people are not likely to let down someone they care about by not doing a good job. The notion of love or caring may seem Pollyanna-ish or threatening to a male-oriented business culture, Adair added, but "we really do need to value people for the humanness and individuality they bring to the organization, because if they know they're important, they're much more likely to give the level of commitment it takes to achieve the goals of the organization."

Don't expect change overnight.

Preston Trucking, one of the biggest success stories among high-performance organizations, is by its own estimate only about 75 percent of where it wants to be after a decade of change. Ten years is the time frame often cited for converting completely to a new work system, partly because, as Tom Manley noted, "maybe it takes 10 years to get enough new people in or to get people to integrate a new set of habits." Union politics also slow the process, because union officers are unwilling to get behind a new concept while running for election.

Certainly, there is no magical timeline that works for every organization. But most that start down the road of change can expect to see some dramatic results well before 10 years. "We've been at this about 3 or 4 years, and I think we're at a point now where our credibility with the union at the international level and at some local-business-agent levels is such that they believe we're walking as we're talking," said Milt Minter, director of employee relations for Nabisco Biscuit Company. "I look back at where we were in 1987 and the relationship we had at that time, and I would never have believed we'd be as far as we are right now."

Expect people to seek employers who make it possible for them to do their best.

"We're in very difficult times now, but if I look at what the work force is going to be like in the year 2000, it's going to get a lot tougher," declared Potter. "People come to work today expecting things that are different than in days past. They want freedom on the job, they want to be able to learn, and they want to have an opportunity to do their very best. People are going to select organizations that give them meaning, and if we don't have an organization that provides our people with meaning, we're not going to be able to attract the people who will enable us to compete successfully in the world market."

Barriers to Change

Unlike the first generation of employee involvement efforts, such as quality circles, true partnerships profoundly change the nature of an organization. It's not surprising, then, that the barriers to such total change are more numerous and difficult to overcome, particularly in traditional unionized workplaces.

Often the decision to change is made by a few top company and union people. Lower level managers and hourly employees not involved in the decision process may not understand why they are being asked to behave so differently. Few of the skills needed in an adversarial relationship are transferable to a partnership. It's tough for the traditional, dogmatic first-line supervisor to become a coach and resource person or for the "ambulance chasing" union steward to become involved in creating a partnership instead of just fixing problems. Most unions also take the traditional view that it's management's job to run the business and labor's role to serve its members. The problem is aggravated because a company looking for change often seeks union support only after it is satisfied it is on the right track. The union is left in the position of reacting to management's offer.

For many people within an organization—hourly employees and midlevel managers alike—change represents a very real threat. They fear for their jobs, they fear they will fail to meet the demands of the new system, and they fear putting their trust in long-time adversaries.

Top management may give lip service to change but be unwilling to invest the considerable time and money necessary to achieve a real conversion. And for some corporate leaders, truly sharing responsibility and power with their employees is a major sticking point. Even in the most committed organization, all necessary changes cannot take place at once. Some lack of coordination and breakdown within the process are inevitable.

Finally, there is a natural tendency toward inertia. Many companies and unions see employee involvement as a fad rather than a fundamental change in the organization of work and thus are content to sit back and wait for better times rather than to accept the challenge of changing.

The conferees outlined additional barriers that often get in the way. **External barriers** include:

Persistence of institutions that support the old systems

"Probably the worst part about organizations as far as labor relations is concerned is that we have established human resources and labor relations in most instances as a staff function," observed Tom Manley. This was done "for the very good reason that 30, 40 years ago we wished for these staff people to issue forth rules and to be prepared to handle grievances and disputes that were not important enough to encumber the operations people. So one of the toughest things—especially for most of us who have spent our whole lives in the profession—is to accept the fact that the goal here is to move ourselves out of business, that labor relations and human relations in a high-performance organization are done by the people who are operating the machines and running the business."

Public policy

Laws such as the National Labor Relations Act and the Railway Labor Act have created "workplaces comprising two very distinct groups, employers and employees, with nothing in common," noted John Stepp. "By matter of public policy, we pit one against the other in a kind of constant struggle. Those companies that have been able to achieve partnerships have been successful in spite of public policy."

William Cooke cited research showing that about one-third of the large manufacturing companies that were highly unionized in the late 1970s have decided they'd rather compete as nonunion organizations. Another third, he said, "appear to be making a fairly aggressive cooperative effort" with a union. "And then there are about a third in the middle that are partially unionized and partially nonunion. In the unionized facilities, they say they're cooperating, but they're also opening and acquiring nonunion facilities and working diligently to keep the union out. Public policy allows those corporations who want to de-unionize or to aggressively avoid unionization to do it with very little cost. That, I believe, makes a lot of union leaders extremely skeptical of employers who say, 'We're going to change and we need this close working relationship.'"

An even more fundamental issue in terms of public policy is "whether or not America really wants to compete in the world marketplace and is ready to take the steps necessary to enable us to compete," observed Mike Bennett, president of United Auto Workers Local 1853 at Saturn Corporation.

Suspicions of Wall Street investors

A very real barrier, said Russ Maier, is "a mindset among the investment advisors of this country that is very, very negative on unionized operations. There is an expectation on Wall Street that the successful long-term companies are going to be the nonunion ones or, at least, those companies that have 'dealt with their unions.'"

The conferees also listed some **internal barriers** that keep an organization spinning its wheels. These include:

Time

Time is the biggest bugaboo. "I think it's clear today that all managements want some kind of partnership with their employees," said Robert McKersie, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management. "The issue is the timetable for change and whether they're willing to take the time to engage in a dialogue that may lead to a partnership with a union. There are many companies that are on the spot to make the choice of whether to take the high road—what some people would call the gradual approach—or whether to take a hard line and put the offer on the table, reach impasse, implement the agreement, hire replacements, and then get into a new ballgame."

"People seem to have the idea that you can go fast with an adversarial approach," noted Brent Adair of Beatrice/Hunt–Wesson. "While you can create a facade of change, getting to where we want to be in the long run—having trust and commitment—takes a collaborative effort. In our organization, we have a saying, 'Go slow to go fast.' Get involvement, get commitment, get understanding—and then you can implement very quickly."

Unfortunately, a partnership effort that takes considerable time, energy, and resources runs counter to a culture that is always looking for the quick fix, added Jim Lewandowski. "You're fighting a culture where the CEOs are dependent on stock prices and on the judgment of stockholders and the board of directors, based on short-term results, and where union leaders are dependent on the election process every 2 or 3 years."

Once you get intellectual agreement that the company is going to change, the tough work is getting people to recognize that it's a long road with many steps along the way, said Richard Teerlink, president and CEO of Harley Davidson. "While we're trying to control expectations, how do we manage on both sides not to have small failures become generalized to the point where people are saying, 'This is just like in the past.'?"

Tempting as it may be to press for speedy results, moving too fast can easily backfire, Teerlink has found. Having benefitted from labor–management cooperation when things were tough, Harley Davidson decided to press for long-term change and to attempt the change while times were good. Knowing that his managers were "action oriented" and worked best under deadlines, Teerlink made what he calls "a serious mistake" in pressing for a 1-year contract instead of the normal 3-year contract.

Though time is a major issue in the movement toward new work systems, Tom Schneider argued that, for many companies, it is more an excuse not to change than a real barrier. "Everybody has been throwing out the number of 10 years to produce a cultural change, but it's certainly not 10 years before you start receiving significant benefits."

Part of the time excuse, Schneider added, is the argument that it's much faster to create a partnership in a greenfield site than in an existing plant. There's no question that it's easier, he said, but it is *not* faster. "My own experience is that the time it takes to convert a traditional plant to these new work systems is about the same as it takes to build a greenfield site from conception to construction to the point where you have it totally debugged and operating smoothly."

"It really comes down to how important it is," Schneider concluded. "Because most companies don't view a change of this sort as a life and death decision, they spread it out over 10 years, instead of saying, 'If we don't have this done by January 1, 1993, we're going to be out of business.'" Those that really *will* be out of business if they haven't totally changed make that change the central element of their operation and do it much faster, he noted.

Tom Manley cautioned that American industry may no longer have the luxury of time. "I remember back in the '80s when we talked about how important it was to get these systems in place because competition was only going to accelerate. Now, 5 or 10 years later, most corporations and unions have only arrived at the starting line." The main question becomes, he added, "whether or not American corporations can inculcate these values fast enough to simply survive in some markets. I think some companies have a limited time to radically improve their productivity or quality or whatever you want to call it before we end up involuntarily becoming a service economy."

Unwillingness, or inability, to trust

The old ways are perpetuated by the fact that both labor and management continue to get a lot of benefit—as well as "a fair amount of amusement and interest"—out of adversarial relationships, Jan Abbott pointed out. "You're asking people to give up some important things. If I'm a union leader, I know one way I can hold the membership together is to occasionally bash management. If I'm a manager, I have a hierarchy of excuses that I can use when things go wrong, and the union has been very convenient at some point in that hierarchy. The real question to ask people is what advantages they have found in operating in an adversarial system, because if you want them to give that up, you've got to provide them with something better."

Joseph Corcoran, executive assistant to the president of the United Mine Workers, stressed that the skills that have traditionally helped union and management leaders get ahead are at direct odds with the notion of trust. "To be a local leader in the Mine Workers, you've got to be kicking ass and taking names. Then somebody starts talking about cooperative efforts, and all the things that have made you successful become anathema to the process. It's the same with a foreman. The kinds of social skills and management skills that make you successful in a coal company don't work here. So we're running against a selection process that has to do with personalities and a kind of behavioral training that we have to undo."

The concept of trust also runs counter to the labor environment in this country in which "companies generally put up with us," remarked Wendell Young, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 in the Philadelphia area. "I have yet to see a company open its arms to say, 'Hey, I'm coming to town, Wendell. I want to open up 50 stores. Why don't you come on over and we'll sign you up?'"

Thomas Brown, representative for the Eastern Conference of Teamsters, commented that it's also very difficult to foster a trust relationship with a company that works both sides of the aisle, maintaining good labor–management relations at a plant in Massachusetts or North Carolina but fighting hard to keep the union from organizing its plant in Arizona. Worse yet, Mike Bennett pointed out, the "schizophrenic nature of management in relationship to the work force" is such that companies can and do establish cooperative programs specifically designed "to remove unions from the organization."

Given the many instances of one side co-opting the other and the widespread fear of being sold out, Bill Cooke suggested that "it would be helpful if parties trying to develop a partnership could ne specifically what would constitute a violation rust or a violation of commitment."

No understanding of the value a union adds to a partnership

One hurdle that labor faces is the history of innovation in this country, noted Bob McKersie. During the '40s, '50s, and '60s, it was the unionized sector that did most of the innovating in labor relations. But in the '70s and '80s, the lead passed to the nonunion sector. "A lot of the things we're talking about in terms of communication and participation were really in a sense pioneered by some of the large nonunion companies. The challenging question is whether we're going to see the pendulum swing back."

What is just beginning to be appreciated is that unions can bring some important values to the partnership process. For instance, McKersie said, the union can tell management, like the emperor, when it has no clothes on. "There is a tendency in the art of management to put a spin on reports, to have estimates be slightly more optimistic than they should be. But if you bring in a worker voice, then there is a way to tell management what management should be hearing. Often, it is the people who don't have the same sort of vested interest as the management hierarchy who are prepared to tell it like it is. I think we're on the edge in a number of industries of beginning to see that having a worker voice will produce better economic performance."

Seeing organized labor make this kind of constructive contribution may also give nonunion workers a different view of unions, McKersie added. Some 78 percent of unorganized workers say they like the idea of a union generally, he noted, but only 35 to 40 percent now say they would vote for a union in their own workplace, primarily because they fear bringing in the union would jeopardize the financial stability of the company.

An extremely important role the union plays is full-time advocate for the workers. On one level, advocacy involves translating what management says. "Our work force is highly skilled, but I know we have some people in there who aren't used to the kind of language that management speaks," said Jerry Knackert. "They sure want me to be in every important meeting, so I can interpret management's words. I can use the verbiage that is more comfortable for the people I'm talking to." On another level, Bill Cooke observed, it is union advocacy that makes the workers real stakeholders in a company. "We have to believe that the participation, the input, the commitment of employees, as channeled through the union, will make a competitive difference."

Joel Smith pointed out that the union's value is not limited to the internal work environment. It is in the external environment—lobbying the government on tariffs and other issues vital to an entire industry—where "the union can have a tremendous impact that management by itself cannot have."

In order to perform these roles properly, union leaders are going to have to acquire expertise in business decisionmaking, marketing, and finance that few now have, Cooke noted. In some cases, that means hiring consultants to look over the company's business plan when important decisions must be made. In other cases, it means education programs, like those at General Motors and Ford, where UAW leaders go with plant managers for several days of simulated decisionmaking so that when they go to the bargaining table or deal with management in a cooperative setting they have some knowledge beyond what the company gives them and some experience in thinking through alternatives.

Fear of failure

Fear of failure is what Jan Abbott termed "the sheer embarrassment factor." She noted that over the past 10 years or so, there has been a kind of "management by bestseller. You get 'passion for excellence,' 'one minute,' 'search for excellence,' 'thriving on chaos,' you name it. And every time one of those things comes out, some managers get all enthusiastic, and it falls flat on its face. Then when something new comes along, they don't want to end up looking like idiots again, so they stand back and adopt a wait-and-see posture."

Barriers to Sustaining Cooperative Programs

The conferees agreed that there are still other barriers to sustaining partnership programs once they have been launched. These include:

Failure to build a solid foundation for change

Often the weakness is in the communication system, Joel Smith contended. "When you start this process, you can have senior management and the labor leadership understand where you're going, but unless you can translate that into real information for the entire enterprise, you can get in trouble very, very quickly, with people saying, 'Here we go again, these guys have thought up something else they want us to do.'" In the normal management communication apparatus from president to superintendent and so on down the line, information typically "runs into that quagmire called 'middle management,'" Smith noted. "Or you end up with the CEO or local union president communicating directly with the bottom and bypassing the middle. So before we charge off down the road to try to make these dramatic changes, we really need to understand how we're going to communicate as we go through the process so that everyone knows what's going on."

Without true understanding throughout the organization, Jim Dowdall observed, the partnership can quickly become a hostage in labor–management disputes. Conflict degenerates to an ultimatum: "We drop out unless you move on this." When that happens, he said, "you're really on a downward slide, and you may become history in a hurry." Rich Teerlink told how lack of a solid foundation almost derailed partnership efforts at Harley Davidson. Anxious to complete change in a year, "we got enamored with training," he said. "Rather than just training the leaders, we said we were going to train everybody. But then we didn't have enough going on for people to apply their training, so we lost credibility. Also, we are having difficulties today because we attempted to set up a parallel structure to what we had already established in our formal bargaining agreement and in our informal relationship with the union. As I look back, I can see that it could easily be misinterpreted as an attempt to divide and conquer the bargaining committee, because we had them off doing so many different things that they might not be able to do what they were supposed to do. We have negotiations coming up soon, and we have to sit down now and decide where we're going to go with them. Can we make partnership a value-added relationship for both parties?

"I will be very honest. We have greater problems with the management side than we have with the labor side and for a very good reason. We promoted foremen because they could kick ass and take names and they had technical capability. Now all of a sudden without any training, we're saying 'Be understanding, try and work through problems.' We haven't done an adequate job yet in working with our supervisors to bring them along. That's management's fault, and it starts with me. I believe so much in the process. How could anyone not want this? How could anyone not say this is wonderful? But we didn't focus enough on the real foundation of skills that everybody needs to make this work. We're tussling with that right now.

"I think it's wonderful that we all had the courage to try it," he concluded. "I think it's even better that we're willing to say we have a crisis, because we could create a monster and forever damage the long-term relationship between labor and management. When this approach was accepted, labor gave more trust than management, and if it doesn't work, it could be very, very difficult to get full trust in our organization ever again."

Literacy problems

"One of the basic premises of these new partnerships is that you will broaden job skills," said Gary Emmick, a plant manager at Corning, Inc. "My plant has about 47 different job descriptions on the books, and when we complete our redesign we hope to have somewhere in the range of 12 to 15. But to get from where we are today to the much broader job scales is going to take tremendous amounts of education and training. One thing we're finding is that there is a much higher deficiency in basic reading and writing skills and the ability of our work force to accept training than we thought. Two years ago we felt there were some deficiencies in as much as 10 percent of our work force. Now we're starting to think there may be some level of deficiency that will make it more difficult to absorb this training in up to 30 percent of our workers."

Management arrogance

"That's probably seen most often when management fails to get up and say, 'Gee, I made a mistake,'" noted Potter. "But it also shows up in management's reluctance to give up certain prerogatives, even though they are of little real benefit to the company."

Missed opportunities

Abbott cited the case of one very large, profitable, and stable company. "They have refused to have a guaranteed employment security agreement. Some of the reason seems to be ideological: they want to treat labor as a variable cost, because it doesn't quite square with notions of capitalism and free enterprise to have an employment guarantee. Occasionally they lay off 20 or 30 people. There is no possible way that it makes any difference to their bottom line. They have all the costs of effectively running an employment guarantee, but they get none of the benefits. Every time they lay off 10 people here and 10 people there, panic hits the system. Today, minds are changing on this issue, but it has been a classic case of not knowing an opportunity when you've got one."

Loss of momentum from turnover and changes in corporate structure

The success of a partnership, at least in the early stages, is somewhat dependent on the stability of union and management leadership, John Butler of Nabisco pointed out. "If the plant manager leaves after a year and a new one comes on board, there is a difference in focus, a loss of momentum, and a need to get back on track. If one of the key players in headquarters goes to another position or leaves the company, again there is loss of momentum." Such interruptions, he added, are why it takes many companies such a long time to develop a successful partnership program.

Diversification also can pose a threat, noted Les Bowman, director of industrial relations for Philip Morris USA, because when a corporation purchases another major company, "you bring in different philosophies, different attitudes." In such cases, he added, it's important that the union understand that the parent company's philosophy is not going to change and that "we strive to maintain that obligation to our people that has made us the successful company we are."

Overcoming the Barriers

Obviously there are powerful forces working against conversion of traditional unionized workplaces to partnerships. Not every organization encounters all these barriers; many encounter barriers unique to their own cultures. But a number of companies have proved that it is possible to overcome the obstacles through perseverance, commitment, and reliance on certain key strategies.

Experience has shown that in almost all successful organizations, both management and union leaders are clear about why and how they need to change the organization, and they devise a system to communicate that information to employees. Both sides have an opportunity to air their own interests and resolve past issues. There is a recognition that neither partner has all the experience, skills, and resources and that each side can bring some perspective on the workings of the organization. Company and union leaders act as role models, seizing opportunities to say and do the unexpected. Employees are recognized and rewarded for taking risks.

Successful companies view converting to a new work system as a capital investment in people instead of hardware. They recognize that while the process can easily take 5 years at a cost of $10,000 per employee, the changes can pay off in a 30- to 40-percent improvement in performance. A crucial part of the investment is intensive training in a variety of skills to inspire self-confidence and encourage risk taking among workers.

The successful company takes special pains to design a smooth transition during which people have freedom to practice new values and behaviors. The leadership recognizes and accepts the fact that the traditional style of management cannot exist within a partnership organization. Specialized training for managers and union stewards helps turn resistance into support. Hourly employees get security from specific contract language that prohibits elimination of jobs as a result of employee involvement activities.

The conferees expanded on these strategies with some practical suggestions for getting off on the right foot and increasing the chances of long-term success.

Clear the air.

The way to help people to understand the need for change and to want a partnership is to help them see why the old ways don't work. In short, they have to see why they disagree before they can learn to agree.

Jan Abbott cited the experience of the California public school system to illustrate some of the techniques for getting adversaries together. About 2 years ago, the state Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) surveyed the school districts, asking some basic questions: Do you think you have good or bad labor–management relations? Why? Union and management people responding to the survey identified four main causes of bad relationships: the influence of a single person on the relationship; actual lack of skill—simply not knowing how to foster good relations, how to conduct negotiations, or how to handle grievances; lack of information that could be counted on; and a general sense of lack of trust.

On the basis of these results, Abbott said, PERB "took a leap and called together a meeting of representatives of all the major unions and all the major employer associations that are associated with schools in California and just formed a committee. That committee has now become a nonprofit foundation to work on issues affecting school district labor–management relationships." But the committee's major accomplishment, she added, was to design a 5-day training program focusing on the attitudes and skills needed to relate to the other side. A key session starts "with what we call the 'flash point,' which sometimes lasts all night, where the parties simply tell what they think about each other and about what's happened in the past. Then the following morning, we have a session in which we try to make some disposition of these feelings. That's followed by a relationship-improvement planning session." Participants then benefit from followup facilitation to help implement and institutionalize the training.

As a result of this program, she noted, several major urban school districts that had been plagued by strikes and labor problems successfully negotiated contracts—"a major accomplishment"—and many smaller districts, with more freedom to innovate, have also gotten contracts and started to implement their own shared decisionmaking process.

A number of individual organizations, sometimes with the help of consultants, have taken a similar approach to clearing the air when facing new contract negotiations. Wendell Young recalled how his union and a major employer rescued a deteriorating labor–management relationship by bringing together "representatives from a broad section of our membership and a broad section of supervision and just putting up on the walls everything that everybody didn't like, no matter how ridiculous. We came up with 80 different problems we had with the company, and they came up with 80 things they didn't like about us. We whittled away, and believe it or not, within a month to 2 months prior to the expiration date, we had a contract settlement. We took those changes and promulgated them into a new quality-of-work-life system, which was just a continuation of collective bargaining, except we were dealing now with business problems."

Change doesn't necessarily have to start at the top.

In some cases, top management sees the need for change and sets the process in motion throughout the corporation. Milt Minter noted that "at Nabisco, we had to start at the top for the simple reason that we have a master agreement with the Bakery and Confectionery Workers at nine plants across the country, as well as individual contracts with craft unions in most of these locations. Our top management felt that the only way we could be successful competing in the 21st century was if we insisted that our rank-and-file employees become an integral part of the process. Our credibility was not extremely high when we first went into it, but our commitment was there, and we've slowly chipped away with the international to the point where we've got commitment from them to work with this process. We have steering committees at all of our locations and a headquarters steering committee with both union and management executives attending."

At some companies, it is the CEO personally who is the driving force behind the partnership. Will Potter, for example, strongly believes that he must exemplify the company's commitment to quality and service through his personal behavior. "We say that part of our mission is to provide superior service, that we have to be responsive, easy to use," Potter explained. "That means I have to answer my telephone in no more than two rings. And if we say one of our long-term goals is to be recognized as a leader in terms of quality and customer service, then we want to have the cleanest looking work areas of any company in the United States. Also, we say that our most important asset is our people, and our people deserve to work in the cleanest looking work areas of any company in the United States. If I want that to happen, it means that I need to pick up little pieces of paper when I walk across the parking lot."

But the Will Potters are the exception, not the rule, Tom Schneider asserted. "In most organizations, you don't have CEO support; you don't even have CEO understanding. What I see in these organizations is that it's, in effect, midlevel management—from plant general management up to maybe the vice president of a division or vice president of operations—where the risk taking really takes place." At Kraft Foods, he noted, "they are undergoing major changes that were driven by a director-level person who, on his own, went out and talked about change with his plant managers. They started instituting the change, and then when they started getting results, they went back to senior corporate management and said, 'Look, this is what we want to do, and we want budget approval so we can do more of it.'"

"One of the most important messages I try to get across," he concluded, "is don't wait for the CEO to drive the change. If you really believe something's right, then you ought to be pushing for it yourself. We can't allow corporations and unions to say, 'Oh, we can't change until we get the CEO or the international president on board supporting us.' By the time that happens, you've lost the battle."

Brent Adair pointed out that most "top-level executives have no frame of reference for understanding the kind of organization we're talking about because they've never experienced one. Our hope is not so much to have them really understand it as to be willing to give us the freedom to make it work. It's going to be probably two or three generations before we have a lot of top-level management with firsthand experience in actually living with one of these value-based, high-performance organizations."

Consider the plan for the new system carefully and in detail.

The place to start, the conferees agreed, is to put in writing your philosophy, your statement of values, and your expectations of how people will behave, even though not everyone will adhere to them right away. Preston Trucking's commitment to excellence, for example, pledges every employee to "do everything possible to provide our customers with superior service through innovative thinking and efficient operations." The statement of partnership between Corning, Inc., and the American Flint Glass Workers announces the "joint purpose" of "greater employee involvement in the identification and solution of product and process quality problems and in improving the quality of work life and job security of the work force." It goes on to list such "essential values" as the right of all individuals to be treated with dignity and respect, the importance of an atmosphere of trust and openness, encouragement of individual creativity, and provision for individual growth and development.

It is just as important, Jim Lewandowski maintained, to define clearly the elements—and limits—of the partnership. At Saturn, he noted, labor and management sat down and talked nuts and bolts—training, firing, reward systems, product design, marketing. "You had a lot of managers squirming in that room because they were seeing their power being released through some process they weren't able to control. But you have to go through that. You have to define the partnership. Are there certain fiduciary responsibilities where the union cannot participate in joint decisions, for example? Or are there certain things, in terms of the bylaws of the union, where management cannot get involved? If you really want to have a true partnership, the exclusions must be fairly small and very well defined."

Bill Cooke concurred that it is crucial to spell out exactly "what labor's stake is in these decisions, how much input labor is going to have, and what they get out of it with respect to sharing gains."

He cited an example where plant management made some capital investments that resulted in substantial gains in productivity. But since the decision to make the investments was not part of the joint process, the company saw no reason to share the gains with workers. The union leadership argued that even though it didn't participate in that decision, management probably would not have made the capital investments if they had not benefitted from the union's involvement in cooperative efforts over the past 4 or 5 years. Such situations, said Cooke, contribute to the union's sense that management is not really committed and cannot be trusted. "That's one of the reasons I like the idea of profit sharing or stock ownership, because it allows you to agree on how you're going to share these gains," he concluded.

Frank Coccho, president of the American Flint Glass Workers Local 1000, reported that among the specific "signs of partnership" outlined in the union's agreement with Corning are an employee stock purchase plan, under which the worker pays 85 percent and the company 15 percent, and a program that ensures that "the rank and file will participate in the same type of bonus program in which the vice presidents of this company are participating."

Support an atmosphere that promotes reasonable risk taking.

Ideally, "the role of the CEO and top management is to give us the vision of where the company wants to go and what our values should be," said Emmick. "Then, give us the freedom, the resources, and the support at the lower levels to build our own plan so that the people who are closest to the business goals in the various units can determine what really is needed for success."

Tom Manley cautioned against presuming there is a known "it" or magical revelation that can be transferred throughout the company. "People at Preston Trucking or Corning don't perform at high levels of market responsiveness because the CEO has said so but because the CEO has arranged an organization where they can see it themselves." Preston, for example, lives up to its philosophy that the person doing the job knows more about it than anybody else by allowing drivers or dockworkers to open up more than half its terminals in the morning and get operations moving well before any supervisory personnel arrive.

At Corning, the same philosophy is evident through self-managed work teams. "We negotiated a supervisory assistant position whereby one of the rank-and-file people off the floor, for a 10-percent pay bonus, would assume the duties of a supervisor in everything but discipline," Coccho reported. Emmick noted that in his plant the number of supervisors has dropped from five or six per shift 3 years ago to just one—a person who deals with issues jurisdictionally off limits to supervisory assistants. There are departments in several Corning plants that work without any supervision at all. "They don't need it," Emmick said. "The people know their jobs, and they're very responsible. If they need something beyond their scope of competence, they call and we come in." As further tangible signs of trust in the rank and file, Corning has eliminated time cards and unpaid lunch for many of its hourly employees.

McKersie cautioned that besides creating the right style and the right support, top management must "give people a chance to make mistakes. Organizations sometimes start to make changes too rapidly. They assume that people who are there are not going to be able to cope with the new style, and they move them out. But we need continuity if what we're really trying to achieve in an organization is trust. Trust happens between individuals who have had a chance to make themselves vulnerable in a sense and to have others respect that vulnerability."

Continue to deal up front with the job security issue.

For hourly employees, job security usually means a job protection clause in the partnership agreement. At Corning, employees are "guaranteed that anything done as a result of partnership will not cost them their jobs," Coccho stated. The agreement further specifies a 4-week notice if layoffs are necessary and training for new jobs as an alternative to layoffs.

McKersie stressed that middle management people need as much assurance and sense of job security as the rank and file, particularly when they are so threatened by reduction in supervisory personnel. "You've got to have programs that deal with this insecurity, whether it's transfer out to another position or some chance to see if they can pick up some new skills." Over the long term, he added, "we've got to change the way in which people think their careers are going to be managed. Business schools pour out MBAs who expect to be on a fast track, who want to be moved every 2 or 3 years, because that's the way you get to the top. But that career progression system is out of whack with what's required to develop continuity and trust in a partnership."

The Ultimate Goal

In concluding the conference, H. Charles Spring, acting deputy under secretary for the Bureau of Labor–Management Relations and Cooperative Programs at the Department of Labor, told a story that illustrated the ultimate goal of partnership. He recalled how Jim Lewandowski and Mike Bennett of Saturn Corporation had come to Washington to make a presentation to the Secretary of Labor and her executive staff on the partnership at Saturn Corporation. During the question and answer period, Bennett's discussion of the business aspects of Saturn brought puzzled looks to the faces of some of the executive staff. Confused, one person raised a hand. "You sound like a manager," he said. "I am," Bennett answered. "I think that sums up what we're striving for," Spring concluded, "that there isn't a difference, that we are all managers in a partnership."

The conferees agreed that getting to that point is neither easy nor quick. But in the current global economy, it is definitely a necessity, not a luxury. Lewandowski summed it up well: "It really takes courage and leadership on the part of people who are willing to stick their necks out and not necessarily look at judgments based on short-term results, but are willing to put the seeds in the ground for the long-term benefit of both labor and management as well as for America."

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