

HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION

CASE STUDY

Atlas Aluminium



Irish Productivity Centre

1998

Abstract

The case demonstrates the benefits and limitations associated with attempting to cope with change using participation in an externally generated network as a vehicle particularly where participation may have a fixed time horizon. The demands on time generated by a busy organisation can at times restrict the wider development of participation in change processes promoted by external agents as can initial apathy from within a workforce. Perceptions on management commitment may have an adverse effect on progress, as can limitations imposed by communication deficits, real or imagined. Individual members on a Steering Group active in participating in externally generated Programmes can however enjoy very fruitful personal learning experience and become well placed to act as catalysts to future initiatives

HI-RES Case Study: ATLAS ALUMINIUM

Sector

Aluminium

Key Words

External networks - their role in change; Steering Groups; Communication deficits; individual learning; time horizons.

'Good Practice' Case Study:Atlas Aluminium

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Abstract

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1. Background Information

Atlas Aluminium started business in Ireland in 1981 and is situated on a single site at Limerick in the South - West of the country. The company is a European leader in the field of aluminium and zinc pressure dies; it has its own engineering developmental facility including a tool room where purpose built machines for trimming, machining and assembly are designed and tested. As far back as 1990 the firm achieved the ISO 9000 Quality Standard; it has an excellent record in quality control and customer service and is committed to Total Quality through continuous improvement.

2. Drivers for Change

The company is constantly aware of the need to change and adapt in view of the increasing competitive forces in its industry and decided in the late '90s to participate in a European supported Programme on work organisation - NWO - which was being championed at the time in Ireland by the Irish Productivity Centre (IPC). Participation in this Programme facilitated a degree of networking with other organisations and allowed comparisons to be made with systems and structures in other organisations for whom coping with change was also a key necessity.

The National backdrop in Ireland during the '90s, which saw Government, Employer Groups, and Trade unions, all advocating partnership driven initiatives at enterprise level helped stimulate company interest as did the potential cost effectiveness of participation in a funded Programme.

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

This case only describes the attempt by the company to cope with change through participation in the externally facilitated project. The key elements were actual participation in the Programme activities, carrying out of agree projects at enterprise level co-ordinated by an internal Steering Group and sharing of progress results with other members of the network at the externally generated workshops which were a key element of the overall NWO Programme. The company also had the advice and assistance of two external facilitators for the duration of the programme. The project continued at Atlas through until 1999 when in effect the company then became free to continue activities as it best saw fit and it continues to do so albeit on a scaled down basis

While both management and unions jointly embraced the concept of change that might be facilitated through a partnership process, translating this idea in to practice proved difficult initially as a degree of apathy existed in the wider body of the workforce around the actual process. In effect the work continued through a series of phases with an early incubation type period, in which little progress was visible, was gradually replaced by a more pro-active phase in which off-site training figured prominently. The latter stages of the project also saw the Steering Group agreeing projects to be tackled but they also tended to take one project at a time so as to generate possible additional support for the overall process. Since communication was deemed to be the key issue and a lack of communication a possible obstacle to sustained progress. The Steering Group commissioned a survey on communication practice, which was carried out with the advice of IPC; the feedback was analysed externally and a detailed report presented to

members of the Steering Committee. A document listing the most significant findings was then prepared and circulated to all employees. As a result of this overall effort recommendations on communication were then included in the Company's Policies and Procedures Manual

Because of internal movement and work pressures the need did arise for replacements to the Steering Group and it was found difficult at times to generate nominations for these positions. In some ways it could be said that much of the benefits of participation in NWO were indirectly bestowed on individuals who actively participated in the external events as these provided a very positive learning environment as did reciprocal visiting to other companies participating in the NWO Programme.

4. Obstacles to Change

At the early stages of participation in NWO considerable time was necessary to allow the participants on the Steering Group and those involved in related activities to become familiar and comfortable with the concept of partnership and indeed with the notion that participation could actually assist the organisation to move forward.

Given the constant pressures of day-to-day production demands, it was not always possible for all relevant personnel to attend meetings and even the Steering Group had irregular meetings.

Early progress was hampered by disagreement on the best way to present the whole project to the workforce, in order to gain full acceptance and backing and two facilitators appointed to assist the project were replaced.

A degree of scepticism existed among the workforce about the degree of management commitment but this in part may have reflected a certain perceived comfort, at the time, with the established 'adversarial' nature of conventional collective bargaining.

Given the perceived deficit in communication practices there was a need to establish enhanced communication before other activities could effectively proceed.

5. Risk Analysis

On reflection the company may have needed to underpin its change processes with a more dedicated internal commitment; the external stimulus provided through participation in the NWO Programme was a useful catalyst but perhaps not itself enough to sustain a longer term strategy, although it may have provided a platform for future action. Where internal pressures on production existed, allied to possible deficits in employee commitment and communication, a preparatory phase may have been needed to be introduced before committing to participation in an external exercise; the demands of which may place uncomfortable pressures on those involved. It is further possible that some unrealistic aspirations may have arisen around participation in the NWO Programme in the sense that it may have been perceived as a panacea to certain challenges which it was not designed to deal with.

6. Benefits of Change

Despite some perceived shortcomings, there is little doubt that the individuals involved in the NWO process at Atlas benefited considerably from enhanced personal learning which in turn should have provided a base for future initiatives at organisational level. The participation in networking, the contacts generated and the reciprocal visiting involved, drew attention to an enhanced framework for tackling change. It also exposed the organisation to a range of experiences and expertise not previously available. The involvement of Atlas personnel in off-site meetings on company issues may also have demonstrated that a reflective problem solving process can complement the established procedures for company operation.

Conclusions

It is clear that considerable thought and planning is required before a company can embark on a major change initiative that will place a drain on resources, such as individual and group time. A delicate question can arise around the balance needed between daily work demands and the resources necessary to facilitate change particularly where a partnership process may be inherent.

Where some members of a workforce may be apathetic and combined with a perceived lack of commitment by management, to a particular strategy, change may be difficult and intermittent.

However, participation in an externally generated Programmes based on networking may prove to be an important catalyst for future change as considerable individual learning can occur which better equips the individuals involved to be future catalysts and innovators.

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