

United Consultation

A fresh look at participative management

by Don Plunkett



ebbf mindful people meaningful work }

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing talk in management circles about empowering employees and developing participative models of management. These models stem from the need to view employees as a valuable resource in coping with today's knowledge-based economy. So far, little in the way of a consensus has emerged from the many competing ways to access this rich base of knowledge. But most accept the prevailing structure of management which tends to be autocratic and hierarchical. No matter how non-hierarchical, or "horizontal," we try to make this structure, its very nature frustrates all efforts to achieve truly democratic decision-making. Part of the problem lies in disregarding the integral inner reality of human nature – call it "enlightenment" or "spirituality" – which theologian Paul Tillich has described as a person's "ultimate concern." United consultation seeks to tap this source of competitive advantage.

Current literature on participative management offers many insights on ways to improve organizational performance, but fails to challenge prevailing authoritarian management structures, which themselves undermine participative management. An authentic, lasting solution must integrate and unify the many dimensions of our lives – from business which focuses on the material, to the spiritual, which focuses on inner life. One such integrative approach to leadership remains little noticed

by business professionals: it is what we will call “united consultation”. The essential principles have been developed over the past century and a half, notably within the Bahá’í community, but also within such cross-sector organisations as the European Bahá’í Business Forum (EBBF), the International Environment Forum and Health for Humanity.

The problem with top-down management, whether in its more traditional forms or in today’s various participative variations, is that employee acceptance, or “buying in”, ultimately determines the effectiveness of decisions. American management guru Peter Drucker maintains that, for a decision to be effective, employees “must make it their own.” That may be true. Still, how can a decision be truly one’s own for everyone in a group? After all, differences of opinion arise naturally even between two people, let alone within an entire organization.

United consultation addresses this “Achilles’ heel” of participative management by integrating human nature into decision-making methodologies. True consultation is regarded as “spiritual conference” in an atmosphere of fellowship.¹ Before dismissing such fellowship as irrelevant to the workplace, consider that human resource managers with some of the world’s largest and most successful corporations seek to ensure that employees share common values to help promote an atmosphere of cooperation toward company goals. United consultation simply takes this a step further in asking that members

1 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1982

strive for “unanimity” in their decisions. To achieve this goal, information is first gathered from the widest and most diverse segment of personnel that is practical. The members of this broad and diverse segment are then encouraged to speak out without attaching their own egos to the views they express. Mature consultation of this sort takes place when participants can freely change their original opinions in front of their peers without feeling compelled to defend them as their “own” views.

But the truly distinguishing features of united consultation lie not so much in its inclusiveness or in its non-adversarial decision-making processes but rather in a sincere search for truth and unanimity by its members. Where there is not unanimity, a majority vote must carry; no dissenting voices are registered in this process of united consultation. Finally, even those who may have not have been in full agreement with the decision have a moral obligation to accept it and to support its implementation.

This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.²

2 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1996

United consultation exemplifies how the inner human dimension adds zest to the participative methodologies advocated in today's management literature. As employees strive toward fellowship and feel that management truly listens to their concerns, they can submit more willingly to the majority position as an act approaching selflessness. Practitioners say that letting go of one's self for the benefit of the group increases participants' desire and ability to join a functional team. They say it helps them overcome even the subtlest Western tendencies toward individualism. And, ironically, these same participants often find themselves more in control of their own destinies as they operate in a new environment that seriously considers their individual contributions.

1

CONSENSUS VS A MAJORITY

United consultation grows naturally from widely accepted principles of unity and justice. As such, successful consultation (“unity”) makes it imperative that the views and perspectives of everyone are heard (“justice”). Ideally, decisions are achieved as one group and not merely as a majority position. “Be united in counsel, be one in thought”,¹ is the principle underlying and guiding united consultation. To underscore the distinction between the ideal of unanimity and a mere majority, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed: *“If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail”* (1996). In united consultation, the group convenes in an attitude of unity and ultimately reaches its decisions as one united group. My own experience in group consultations and decision-making, as well as that of other managers whose experiences we will share, suggests that this assumption of maturity is not unreasonable. Consensus is not always achievable, of course, but with perseverance and competent leadership, the benefits of the consensual process become remarkable. Let’s not fool ourselves, however; united consultation is challenging. It is, and it will require trial and error. If

1 Bahá’u’lláh, 1994

we are to succeed, we must reconsider the notion that majority rule is an absolute condition of democracy. On the contrary, deciding as a group demonstrates a higher level of democracy, as long as all members deliberate as individuals and from their own unique perspectives before seeking consensus. Actively encouraging a diversity of views before making decisions safeguards the essence of democracy. When the same individuals can maturely agree to support the majority voice, and to act as one group once the decision is taken, even if they may not agree fully, the result combines the best of democracy with the most mature and advanced stage of human group dynamics. At this mature level, the group ceases to be an abstraction and becomes an extension of each individual.

Most of us can probably agree that many perspectives are better than one if we wish to understand almost anything. When a group of employees joins in brainstorming sessions conducive to openness and honesty, the decisions that result often improve upon what occurs when one individual imposes a decision on everyone else. Too often, a manager may call a staff meeting, solicit views of those present, and then adjourn without having adequate discussion or achieving a consensus. The managers might feel frustrated because their staffs seemed to pay only lip service, while the employees felt constrained by their feelings relating to job security. Too often such meetings leave the staff frustrated by what they felt was another empty attempt by management to pick their brains while vaunting the idea that they were

“working as a team.” As long as such a hierarchy remains, participative management, however horizontal the levels may become, sounds better in theory than in practice.

Organizations require leadership, and good leadership works in the family and at work. One can imagine the result at home of taking a vote with your children on whether or not they should finish their homework. On the other hand, employees are not children; they are contemporaries of their managers and often wiser than their managers in some ways (not to imply children are not wise!). Authoritarian leadership is no longer widely regarded as good or effective leadership, except perhaps in time of crisis. The days of barking out orders have yielded to leadership that tries to tap the unique talents and skills of the workforce. If most of us are aware of this, why does the notion persist that workplace democracy works in theory but not in practice? We can answer that question by using the analogy of the computer. Let's say you have bought a software program whose requirements exceed the capability of your computer. That's analogous to what happens in practice with most participative management theories: they work on paper, but fail in the workplace. Underlying this failure is an outmoded workplace hierarchy unable to realize fully the benefits of the participative management software. The system, like an outmoded computer, crashes in the face of the new challenges.

Improving your workplace to fit the new democratic practices we are discussing requires recognition that democracy fails in the workplace when management

looms over everyone like “Big Brother,” in George Orwell’s famous novel, *1984*. That’s not democratic at all! In the workplace today, many of us may have become managers in part through our “connections”: being friends of friends or sons and daughters of other friends. As a result, some of the best workplace talent will never occupy a managerial seat because he or she was born in the “wrong” hospital or attended the “wrong” school. We wind up with democratic theories that try to function in outmoded, undemocratic workplaces. The traditional workplace hierarchy rarely will sacrifice itself for what too often is regarded as an “expendable” workforce. Even when a more progressive leader tries to practice participative management, he may choose a handpicked supervisor to “facilitate” his “democratic workgroup.” Or if the workgroup elects its own facilitator, decisions may still be made by the will of a majority rather than through a spirit of unity achieved by united consultation. Yet few current theories even hint at making final decisions on this basis. They mostly defer to majority rule. Those theories closest to a consensual approach fail to regard the group as an essential extension of its individual members. Such consensus resembles compromise, not oneness. The mechanics of democracy may be followed, but the spiritual principle of the oneness of the group is left out.

Because of the lack of discussion about united decision-making in present business literature, I sought out successful leaders who practice at least some elements. After more than a decade, this search culminated

in formal research based on interviews with leaders and managers in the commercial construction and building products supply industry, a sector with which I am directly familiar. These leaders, or exemplars, of united consultation, have something valuable to share with others interested in this approach to management. But let's first look at what underlies the process of united consultation.

2

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

To practice united consultation as a style of participative management, start with a manageable unit. Begin by giving real authority and control to this unit or workgroup. At first, proven leaders can still maintain their overall influence while deferring some authority to members of the workforce. Managers at a French supermarket chain, for example, experienced difficulty coordinating cashiers' work schedules. But when the cashiers themselves were handed the task of scheduling they were able to accomplish it more easily, due to their direct understanding of each cashier's constraints and challenges. Similarly, nurses have proven their ability to self-manage their schedules, using general principles of consultation. In these cases, leadership and management remain important, but it is also important to know when to push and when to pull. If you keep pushing, or commanding, you soon lose the ability to pull, or inspire, in short, to be an effective leader. Some managers may fail because they try to institute democracy at work in the way they might build a model airplane, by following the directions step by step. But the workplace is a human social organization, not a model airplane.

United consultation integrates the best of democratic management theories in being based on participative principles of workplace administration and decision making. It also resembles the various theories concerning spirituality in the workplace by valuing the contributions of the whole person and considering the employee as a complex individual with a spiritual as well as a material dimension. Yet it differs notably in that the ideal and the operating principle is not majority vote, per se, but united decision making and action. Even the literature on spirituality in the workplace underplays the individual as part of one organic entity, particularly with respect to decision making. United consultation likewise focuses on the individual, of course, but it regards the group's will as an expression of the combined wisdom of all individuals involved. So united consultation is distinct, not because it integrates the material and the spiritual dimensions of human nature, but because, in doing so, it regards the workforce as not merely a collection of individuals but as members of a team. It assumes that individuals are served best when they belong to a functioning group that values diversity of views, feelings, insights and creativity. Only after all employees come together as distinct individuals with diverse viewpoints can they learn to make real group decisions.

In united consultation, employees and managers meet and brainstorm in the manner recommended by many theories of participative management. But in doing so, the creative talents and spiritual insights of these individuals are embraced, and not rejected as "unimportant

for our business,” as the literature on spirituality at work warns against. When it is time to make a decision, united consultation draws on the synergies of the group as an entity comprising the participating individuals. This is not unlike a family that agrees to support each member, even though all might not agree. As they say, “blood is thicker than water.” A clear consensus may not exist on many issues, but within a well-functioning family there is often little or no dissention when it is time to act. Those members who may not entirely agree support the family’s decision for the sake of unity and because they feel an integral part of their family. This comes close to the distinguishing feature of united consultation: individuals gather and all are heard, but in the end each regards the group as his or hers and not as an abstract assemblage. Consensus remains the goal, but if unanimity is not possible a vote is taken, just as called for in the theories on a democratic workplace.

Herein lies the key distinction between united consultation and theories of workplace democracy: in united consultation, those who may not personally agree with a decision that emerges as a clear majority nonetheless agree to support it. There is no dissenting voice; the decision is made as one group. Ideally, once the majority’s will becomes evident, even those who did not initially agree will align their own vote with that of the majority, creating true consensus. The ideal of united consultation is to arrive at a unanimous decision. This differs radically from what we know in democracy,

but in practice it actually “ups the ante” of a democratic majority. Add the spiritual maturity of the individuals to think beyond their personal perspectives and interests, and you combine the best of democratic practices with the noblest dynamics of the human group.

Like individuals, group decisions may prove to be wrong. But if the work group unites to carry out decisions, a wrong decision will become apparent and can be reconsidered in the same spirit in which it was originally made. In other words, united consultation is a **process**, and it works best when previous decisions are reviewed periodically in light of new developments and evidence. The essential is to allow decisions to run their course with the full support of the entire group. The process continues: first, all participants express their individual points of view on the subject under discussion. If discussion leads to consensus, decision-making becomes obvious and is unanimously supported. If not, a vote is taken, and the choice of the majority is adopted. At this point, those who did not vote for the motion are encouraged to support and execute the majority decision as if it were their own. Should the chosen course prove to be wrong, it will then fail on its own and not through lack of wholehearted support. Unity is maintained.

3

UNITED CONSULTATION IN PRACTICE

United consultation is already used successfully around the world and among the most diverse of peoples, although rarely by businesses. One might feel reluctant to develop strategic business decisions by using principles tested mostly in the nonprofit arena. But some business leaders have successfully incorporated them into their management and leadership practices. Over the years I have interviewed many such leaders, a few of whose experiences are worth considering.

THE CASE OF JOHN

BEYOND TEAM UNITY

John's company makes commercial lighting fixtures. Under his guidance, it became an industry leader in sales volume worldwide. That was far from the case when John took over as vice president of sales and marketing eight years earlier. John attributes the success to the company's employees, with whom he strove to develop respect, an attitude which underlies what he thinks of as "the best form of management." John is not just another

“nice boss”, however, but an embodiment of leadership characteristics that helped ensure good will and unity in the workplace. Not only does he treat employees with respect; he also does what he can to forge unity of purpose among them. Beyond bestowing pats on the back for good performance, John uses consultative decision making to engage individual creativity in his team’s approach to sales.

John emphasizes the “golden rule” of treating his staff members as he would like to be treated himself, even, he said, “when negative issues are involved.” Like the other business leaders I interviewed, John stands out from many other good business leaders by the way he handles those negative issues. First, he values unity over individual performance, the team over the star. John in fact had inherited just such a “star”, but he quickly learned that this stellar performer, despite his obvious talents, often claimed the work and ideas of others as his own, to the detriment of staff morale. After confirming such complaints, John approached the “star” privately and found him unwilling or unable to change his self-serving behavior. So during these early months, John decided to let him go, an example of valuing team unity over an individual performer. This contrasts with the emphasis many human-resource textbooks place on praising individuals in the presence of their colleagues as a motivational tool. John does that, too, but apart from the context of the work team to which the individuals belonged.

In my interviews I found that the best team managers don't just treat individual employees with respect and encourage them to work together. Also, they create an environment, or structure, that nurtures the teamwork they seek. All speak of a work structure based on clear rules, company policy and job descriptions, specific goals and plans for achieving them. These leaders find good will and management skills to be, by themselves, insufficient. Those elements must be supported by a structure conducive to participative management. For workers at any level, knowing their areas of responsibility and how to channel their thoughts and talents in a coordinated way are preconditions for achieving consensual decision making.

John said it took him half a year to win over his team to united consultation. Once they realized, he said, "that I was for real with this decision making methodology... the consultations became fun. We all knew that we were not only working as a team; we were deciding as a team." The fact that everyone was clear on his or her roles and responsibilities allowed for efficiency in deliberations and helped sustain a united workplace environment that propelled John's company to the top in its field. "This teamwork is impossible if you don't let everyone consult, be heard fully, and then decide as one team and not as a majority of disunited individuals", John told me. "Once you can teach everyone to really act in the interests of the one team, it becomes fun, and they really begin to think of their team as an extension of themselves."

John agreed that united consultation may be difficult to ingrain, but he added that, once mastered, it is crucial to keeping a team united and a company successful. This is not to say that such staff participation is appropriate for every decision, however. Some decisions remain the sole responsibility of John and other executives at his firm.

THE CASE OF MEHR

— CREATING COMMON VISION —

Mehr recently retired as the owner of a New York-based multinational architectural firm whose staff included more than 60 architects. One of Mehr's challenges, she said, was to unify this crew of leading architects, whom she described as "very independent-minded" artists whom she nonetheless needed to have work as teams. It took her nearly a decade, she said, to realize that she should "stop trying to fix this alone." She began to schedule meetings regularly at which employees would consult as individuals but decide as a group with no dissenting voice. What emerged, she said, was a "team outlook."

To achieve that outlook, Mehr said, she had somehow to unite architects who functioned more like free-lance artists than salaried employees. As with John, she found the answer by sharing the challenge with her staff. Together, they came up with a profit-sharing program. Mehr at first balked at this but eventually realized, she

said, “that I must put my money where my mouth is and be willing to spread the wealth that was generated from their talent, not only my own.” Profit sharing, she said, “helped unite the staff as one team,” since the plan had been their idea and not her imposition. Moreover, all would share in the firm’s success.

In forming and carrying out the plan, Mehr ensured that unity in the workplace was real and not theoretical. As owner, she said she tried to help the staff view “work as a service to humanity”, a concept central to her personal convictions and her motivation as owner. While many architects regard their work as art, not a service, she said, over many years she and her architects built a corporate culture with service at its core. She even priced the firm’s services to put them within the reach of people who might not otherwise seek the services of architects. To achieve such a corporate culture she, like John, found it necessary to let some of her best architects go. “It was important that these ‘artists’ knew just what their roles were, so they didn’t step on the toes of others”, Mehr said. “This was a challenge to me, as owner, but as an architect myself I feel I understood where to draw the lines without stamping out their creative energies.”

This unity required a different style of leadership, Mehr found. “I went from trying to control everything and everyone, in my first decade as owner, to being more of a coach”, she said. “Rather than being your typical boss, I would now draw the lines so that all employees had a nice, comfortable place to work with little confusion over their roles and to help create a place where people got

along and respected one another...” To Mehr, a common vision of service helped unite the staff, and consultation was the “glue” that held them together:

When they came together regularly to discuss business, to plan, to set goals, and even to decide which projects to accept or refuse as a company, I witnessed my company grow into a truly professional and united place – a place I was proud of! And this was all made possible by following the principles of consultation. Setting the goals of the group before your individual goals and treating each individual as one of the spokes allows the whole wheel to spin fast and easily!

THE CASE OF RAY

———— EMPLOYEES AS FAMILY ————

Ray owns a contracting firm in the state of New Jersey. His first challenge was to deal with competitors who paid bribes to obtain business. To survive in spite of such a corrupt system, Ray said, he treated his workforce as family, and each member approached work as a team. Within that team, Ray has clearly defined the role of each employee, which he says keeps everyone within the proper boundaries and able to work well together.

Achieving such unity did not come easily, however. When Ray moved to New Jersey a few years ago to set up a business similar to the one he had run in Spain, his

new employees were unaware that their new boss had no intention of paying kickbacks. In Spain, Ray said, he had always been able to make a good living by fostering a team spirit among his employees, who reciprocated by producing excellent work. This was the work culture he tried to duplicate in New Jersey, and it cost him the services of some good workers who were, in his opinion, too focused on quick money and unattracted to team spirit or work quality. He said he realized that “people are very independent thinkers in America”, but he refused to let such independent thinking get in the way of fostering teamwork. Ray said he “would rather sacrifice one or two good employees than team morale.” Eventually, Ray developed a solid team of employees who rallied around work quality and service, and who valued job security and a healthy and united workplace over quick money. Ray also found that his employees really liked the fact that he paid attention to what they said:

Their own ideas helped to make our company. We would think like one company and then decide like one company. But all the while, I listened to each opinion. This was what helped us stay in business all these years. And people are asking to work for us because they know it's a great place to work, although we aren't rolling in the money.

THE CASE OF EBBF

POOLING INSIGHTS

A Governing Board of seven members, elected by all eligible members of the General Assembly, oversees the affairs of the European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF). Even the election process is unique in its absence of declared candidates. Decision making takes place through united consultation, both in the deliberations of the board and in those of its three-member Secretariat, six steering groups and branch secretariats.

During the quarterly meetings, and through periodic telephone conference calls, a chairperson presides and facilitates consultation without exercising any more authority than the other members. Most members have practiced consultation in their professional work and other organizations, so they bring to the forum a feeling of responsibility for the group as a whole (as indicated by the organization's designation as a "forum").

EBBF members know how to listen closely to the views of others, to offer their own views and suggestions in a disinterested way, and to seek a harmonious solution. Rarely do votes have to be taken, since a consensus usually emerges after all viewpoints are considered. Rarely do members disagree with a given decision, so unity and harmony prevail in its execution. Newly elected members often remark how different, and efficient, is this decision making process. They note the effort to try

to build on, rather than oppose, the views of others. They are encouraged to offer their own opinions, to integrate their views into support of decisions made, and to avoid taking adversarial positions.

United consultation, as practiced by the EBBF, permits the members to pool their insights, both reasoned and intuitive, in arriving at decisions. The power of consultation, in the EBBF experience, lies in the ability of people to suspend their individual assumptions, refrain from imposing their views on others, and freely offer their thoughts to the group. Such consultation encourages curiosity. Underlying it is a search for truth and what is right. Doing so involves interacting and connecting with colleagues. It also requires humility, love, faith and hope, not to mention a degree of selflessness.

4

SEVEN 'BEST PRACTICES' OF UNITED CONSULTATION

Like John and Mehr, Ray survived despite the challenges he faced. He and his team were able to devise strategies that sustained themselves in business by creating a workplace environment through use of the principles of united consultation. Such an approach is far from common, according to the hundreds of interviews and conversations I have had over the years with business owners, managers and employees. But if practice of united consultation remains more the exception than the rule, the fact of its success in these cases warrants serious consideration. Despite the absence of the topic in management literature, practices that foster united consultation merit consideration and further research by all who are interested in participative management. Drawing from the experience of John, Mehr and Ray, as well as that of EBBF, let us now identify some practices that we may wish integrate into our own proven leadership styles.

- 1. ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY OF VIEWPOINTS:**
These exemplary leaders value and respect the ideas offered by their employees, encourage their expression, and nurture a diversity of viewpoints.

Another contractor, Luigi, said he makes a particular point of listening to the women on his staff, explaining: “The men often dominate discussions, but if we don’t hear what **everyone** has to say, we miss out on important insights. In contracting, it’s easy for the women to be drowned out by the macho men around here!” In *Disappearing Acts*, Joyce Fletcher discusses how women employees are “made invisible” in the workplace, their insights and even their existence overlooked, while male personality traits are recognized and rewarded with promotions, money and often, employment itself. Fletcher finds that the cohesive and nurturing feminine personality traits, which she considers essential for the survival of most firms, are not integrated into corporate systems of reward and compensation. Often, they are neither recognized nor understood. Luigi not only recognized the importance of listening to women at work, but created a consultative atmosphere conducive to everyone being heard.

An African-American woman whom I interviewed, a manager at a large public-service organization, often leads discussions involving hundreds of employees. During one of these “town meetings”, as her organization calls them, she noticed that staff members who were racial minorities were being “drowned out” by the white majority – and not for the first time. Upset by this, she challenged the white majority to let the African-Americans and Hispanics among the staff to be heard, too. At her words, the room grew still. She then asked, “Why can’t we all speak and listen with

respect to one another? Why does the input from the African-Americans and Mexicans not count the same as the voices from the whites?" The continued silence seemed to indicate agreement that at least a communication problem existed. After the meeting, she said, "everyone came up to me, black and white and brown, and thanked me. Now, we all have our say at the meetings and we get along better than ever."

In other words, extreme efforts are called for sometimes to bring about true diversity of viewpoint. Tapping into the full knowledge base that exists among employees creates a major asset that can pay off in better performance within the company and, in turn, in the marketplace.

2. **FOSTER TEAM DECISIONS:** What sets united consultation most clearly apart from other forms of participative management is the emphasis on team decision making. One reason is that the prevailing theories are often rooted in a Western understanding of democracy. Western understanding of democracy which is much more individual oriented than in the East and in the Southern Hemisphere. Individual rights often are favored over group rights, and individual dissent must be overcome by majority rule. In contrast, united consultation takes the general principles of democracy a step further in actively seeking out the voice of minorities. Unlike Western democracy, united consultation regards dissent, once consensus is reached, as harmful.

Western democracy brings civil rights into community deliberations and governmental proceedings. But in keeping matters of religion and state separate, as called for under the United States Constitution, moral principles too often get sidelined during what otherwise might be a healthy debate. Not hindered by such concerns, united consultation brings spirituality (not religion, *per se*) directly into the workplace by valuing the unity of the staff over the self-oriented desires of dissenting employees. Only spiritual values and feelings can sustain a culture of unity in the workplace, since democracy in that setting is more than merely a mechanical human function, but involves the whole human – body, mind, and soul. An effective consultative leader is able to impress upon the staff the importance of thinking and acting as one team. This is no easy task in a society rife with old habits of Western personal independence. It may not be easy to convince the staunchest democratic-minded American or European businessperson of the benefits of uniting the staff as one group. But once principles of united consultation and its benefits can be impressed upon the staff, individual agendas will more easily give way to a healthier group spirit. As John proudly proclaimed, “People really act like they belong to one company around here.” My interviews demonstrated that leaders able to sustain a unified workplace environment had first to teach participants to think like a team during the consultations and decision-making processes. As John put it:

I would tell them to just throw out the ideas to the group and that the ideas then belonged to the group, not to them personally. They didn't believe me at first; it took about six months for them to realize that I was for real with this. Then they really got into consultation during our staff meetings. The meetings became fun!

3. **RALLY BEHIND A COMMON VISION AND PURPOSE:** Remember that Mehr rallied her architects behind the common vision and purpose of architecture as a service to humanity. She was far from alone in thus stressing this concept. The other exemplary leaders likewise referred to common vision, directly or indirectly. Most every successful corporation in the world today understands the value of a corporate culture. Management literature abounds in theories and case studies to support their cohesive benefits. Walk into any corporate office and you will likely see posters displaying a “Mission Statement”, “Vision” or similar inspirational themes devised by management for the guidance of their employees. In their job interviewing, human resource managers seek employees with philosophies and values compatible with those of the firm. I list it here as a best practice because it is an integral element of united consultation. To inspire the staff to consult effectively, the skilled leader strives to articulate and to instill a common vision and purpose.
4. **REGARD WORK AS A SERVICE TO OTHERS:** The concept of work as a service closely relates to creating a “common vision”. But it warrants emphasis

for its specific, yet consistent, focus by those leaders who practice united consultation. While “common vision” can include such less altruistic elements as a desire for profit, only a selfless vision, such as work as a “service”, seemed able to sustain the staffs of those using a united approach. Ray instilled a common vision among his employees through his high regard for quality. This helped to define and sustain his company in spite of the bribes that corrupt competitors paid to obtain contracts. Mehr considered her architecture more broadly as a service to humanity, even as a form of worship.

5. **SHOW CONCERN FOR EMPLOYEES:** More than merely good management during the workday will be required to achieve team spirit and unity and maintain a common vision and purpose. All of the exemplary leaders showed their concern for their staffs in social activities outside of work. Doing so seemed particularly valuable in cases of conflict between employees, but it was important also to prevent future conflicts. Such an activity can be discussing a problem over coffee or a meal away from the job, something Ray said “almost always works.” Tensions of the workplace can be the source of friction, he explained, and going out “to a neutral place like a restaurant” encourages them to “sort through things.” Most also invited their employees into their own personal lives, including them at weddings and picnics, displaying an inclusiveness that went beyond the usual relationship of employer and employee. Concern for employees also empowered the business

owners/managers with the necessary assent from the staff to make authoritative decisions based on their group consultations.

6. **VIEW THE WHOLE BUSINESS:** These leaders regarded decision making as a group function and not just that of a mere majority. Only by thinking as a group were these leaders and their employees able to devise strategic business and marketing plans that sustained themselves successfully in their industry. When the staff thought as a team and was united in the deliberations and consultations, the full value of their individual insights and synergies was realized. Unity became critical in coming together to identify problems and devising plans to overcome them. United in counsel, individual players could look at an issue from various perspectives. This recalls the fable of the blind men and the elephant. One man touched the elephant's trunk and said it was a snake. Another touched the elephant's knee and said it was a tree. Another touched its ear and thought it was a fan. And he who touched the tail thought it was a rope. But only by coming together and pooling their perspectives could they begin to grasp what they had before them.

Likewise, only by coming together from our diverse viewpoints can we approach a better understanding of what we are up against in business. When these leaders and their employees gathered to discuss ways to succeed, they shared their knowledge. And from a variety of viewpoints they viewed the entire business

system and created strategic business and marketing plans that no one of them could have devised alone. These leaders recognized the strategic advantage of thinking in terms of processes and of looking at the whole business system. They facilitated consultations with this holistic vision in mind.

7. **PROVIDE STRUCTURE AND CLEAR RULES AND ROLES:** Providing structure and clarity proved to be the most difficult of the best practices of united consultation. One might think that most leaders who stress unity and democracy at work would manage with a hands-off, laissez-faire style. What I found, however, was the complete opposite! Those managers most attuned to participative management were *also* meticulous about structure, policy, guidelines, and clearly defined job descriptions. They strove to maintain clear boundaries, so employees were not confused and did not infringe on the domains of their colleagues. Nonetheless, they were careful to be flexible.

A review of management literature demonstrates that a number of theorists and management thinkers concerned with team leadership are aware of the benefits that structure and clarity offer a team. Hackman & Walton (1986) include “clear and engaging direction” in their description of effective team leadership. Larson & LaFasto (1989) have clear goals and results-driven structure among the characteristics of team excellence. Hughes, Ginnett & Curphey (1993, cited in Northouse, 2001, p. 171) present “A Model for Team Leadership” that includes

“clarifying goals” and “establishing structure” as important internal team-leadership functions. My own interviews confirm this relevance. For example Dom, a developer and general contractor, told me that he lets “employees know about policies so there is no confusion”. Dom meets with his staff two or three times a week to ensure that they are “all on the same track”, and he emphasized that “everything is planned, and most things are put in writing to avoid confusion later.” Paul, also a general contractor, told me that he and his staff “start every job with an agreement after careful planning. Mostly”, he said, “we agree orally, but if we are tackling something new, we put it in writing to be clear on it.”

5

CONCLUSION: BRINGING SPIRIT INTO THE WORKPLACE

The seven best practices of united consultation developed above will contribute importantly to better decision making and thus to strengthened competitiveness and improved financial, social and environmental results. These benefits derived from tapping into the diverse experience, talent, and perspectives of employees are clear to leaders and practitioners of such consultative practices. They will also make work more meaningful for all employees and help to build unity and spirit in the workplace as well as to enhance loyalty and motivation.

This concept that united consultation in decision making builds spirit in the workplace is relatively new in management literature and practice. Practices of this kind derive from a spiritual awareness on the part of leaders that the collective spirit and wisdom of a group is greater than the sum of the individual members.

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