

The
Journal
for

June
1992
Reprint

Quality and Participation

Special Reprint Edition

From Workteams to Learning Communities

Buying In Without Selling Out

By Harry Hutson, Ph.D. — Avery Dennison Corporation
and Barbara Perry, Ph.D. — Barbara Perry Associates

Creating the New Workplace

Strategic Quality and Work Redesign

From Workteams to Learning Communities

Buying In Without Selling Out

Harry Hutson — Avery Dennison and Barbara Perry — Barbara Perry Associates

As you read this, imagine yourself seated in a circle of colleagues having a dialogue about change. None of us has the answer. We are all learning, evolving, making things up, and drawing from many sources as we go along. Our challenge in this article is to convey a spirit in a way that can add value to your work. We want to introduce a model for thinking about the approaches you are using in your organization to improve things, and a helpful technique that you can apply now.

Our purpose is to understand why and how teamwork and individual contribution can be more effective and efficient when balanced with a spirit of community. Our hypothesis is that team is an essential concept, but not enough. There is something bigger, something that holds more of who we are than a team.

We want to talk about that bigger container. To do so, we need to explore the three realms of community, team and individual, and how they all fit together. As an outcome, we hope to leave you with a different way of thinking about work.

Community

We'll begin with the fundamental principle of community, which is the notion of inclusion. Inclusion is absolutely at the heart of what makes a community.

Think about all the words you use in your organization to describe the territory of involvement, empowerment, and participation. When you take all of those words together, what are

they about? They're about how to include people in what you are doing. Inclusion is welcoming people and all the ways they are different — their different backgrounds, their different feelings, their different ideas.

Are you better at inclusion or exclusion? One of the things we're learning about inclusion is that when a group can include different people, it can also allow more of each person to come inside. If a group is truly inclusive and welcoming of differences, then people feel they can bring more of themselves to the party.

The flip side is that if we define ourselves by being exclusive, by who's in and who's out, then there is some piece of us that feels unsafe, and we won't come all the way in. It's an experience we've all had.

Think of the times in your life when you've felt excluded from something — you weren't invited to a party, you didn't get a valentine in second grade, you didn't get to play on the team.

Our organizations are good at exclusion, deciding who doesn't get asked to the meeting or who doesn't get certain information. Yet it's a fundamental human need to be included. Inclusion is at the heart of building community.

Rites of inclusion — Think also about communities that you've been a part of, whether a club, your neighborhood, your organization, your church, military, or town. Think about how it included you — what was the ceremony or the ritual that marked your coming into that community?

The environment of inclusion — What are the key elements of including somebody? When asked, people tell us about these: equality, opening the door, affiliation, contribution, spending time with them, recognizing how they are different and what they need, sharing information and background. It's as simple as that.

When you start with the premise of inclusion it leads you to create processes in your organization that include others. Incidentally, the origin

of the handshake is showing you don't have any weapons in your hand. Shaking hands is a simple ritual to include people.

Teams aren't enough

We come to this work from many years of working at this thing called teambuilding, and we share a puzzle. Typically, what we want when we build teams is flexibility, self-management and continuous improvement.

Yet despite our very best efforts, look at what we sometimes get:

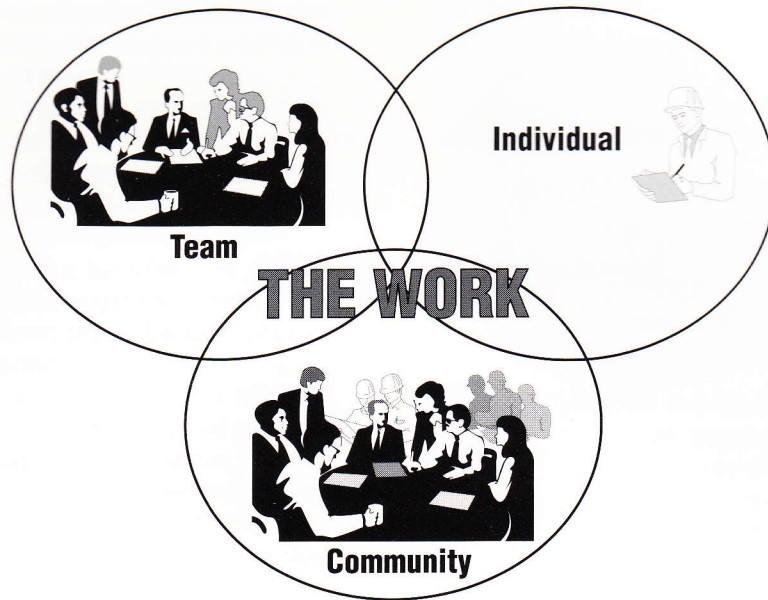
- We encourage teamwork system-wide, but we get internal competition.
- We really want personal dignity, but something happens in the process that causes people to fear getting lost in the crowd.
- There is an anonymous quality associated with identity in a team, and so team members hold on to old ways or resist the change.
- There is also something about team work that feels forced: "You're now going to be a team." What does that mean? What do I have to give up?
- We hope to get resilient social structures that are going to take on a life of their own and go do what needs to be done. More often, however, we get structures that are fragile. One person leaves and the team destabilizes, or the team takes a very long time to get going, or the team can't incorporate a new member without going back to ground zero.

We want one thing but we often get something else. Why? We think the concept of community provides some clues.

A different way to think about work in organizations

Words create our reality, and so we begin at the most basic level of language. What words do we use and what do they mean to us?

A new paradigm for work in organizations



What's a team? When we ask people what comes to mind when they hear the word *team*, they say these things:

Together... Fun... Win... Sharing...
Support... Uniform... Agreement...
Openness... Synergy... Sports...

We believe that the team is where important things get done with other people — where there is focus and a task that is often measurable.

What's one person? When we ask about the word *individual*, people often have these associations:

Me ... One... Reflective... Alone...
Hero... Strength... Different... Other...
Unique... Limited...

The individual *doing* part of ourselves finds its expression in the team, but it turns out we are not human doings. We are human beings.

It is the *being* part of our nature, the authentic human dimension of who we are, that is left out when we think only in terms of teams.

What's a community? When we ask what comes up with the word *community*, we hear this:

Spirit... Active... Large... Common
Interests... Teams... Warm...
Supportive... Family... Network...
Caring...

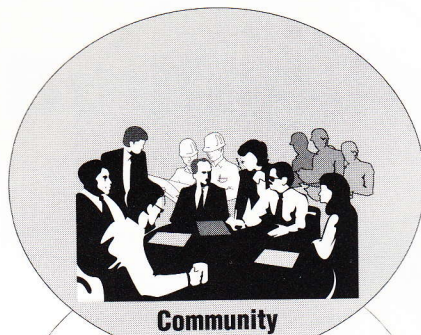
Giving life to these aspects of who we are is the function of community. To be clear, the community we are talking about is not just the organization itself, it is the sense in which the organization can enhance, develop, and recognize us as human beings.

In one phrase, what we're working on is this:

...to understand the relationships among these three clusters of ideas we name *team*, *individual* and *community*.

We know what it's like when the community spirit isn't there and we have lots of teams working away. We know something important is missing. We also know what it's like when we have a community with no teams. We know we're not doing our best.

Community Concepts



Inclusion: welcoming openly
Dialogue: relating to one another
Difference: being wholly ourselves
Learning: expanding our abilities
Spirit: being willingly involved

And we know what it's like when the individual part of ourselves is not recognized or accepted, and how that feels. We feel disconnected.

Reconciling uniform, unique and unity... The word that often comes up to describe team is uniform. A word that often is used to describe the individual is unique. At the heart of community is the word unity.

Our challenge is to learn how organizations can balance these three *U* words and nurture human beings who do things for the greater good.

Elements of community

We have learned there are a few key elements that are necessary and present in community:

1. The first is inclusion, which is to welcome openly and warmly all the differences that exist.
2. The second is dialogue, a very special way of creating meaning that is at the heart of community.

3. Difference is about being wholly ourselves. There is a lot of work being done in the workplace in the area of valuing and managing differences. The kind of difference we're talking about is down into the different ways each of us thinks and learns and sees the world as a product of our own personal experience and uniqueness.
4. Learning, for an individual or an organization, involves capitalizing on every experience and resource as a means for developing capability and realizing potential.
5. And finally this word spirit, which always comes up in relationship to community. It has to do with the human spirit and the choice each of us can make to be willingly involved.

Creating community

There is a set of principles that we use when we design work to bring people together in community (*please see the figure to the right*).

Public work — Community work is public work. Public goes back to inclusion — if it's not public then it's about excluding people. To use Marvin Weisbord's concept, the goal of public work is to get everybody in the room to talk openly and begin to improve the whole system.

Slowing down — Slowing down so more can happen is counter-cultural for most organizations. As we all know, many organizations are moving very fast and trying to move even faster. Nobody has the time to get together and slow down for anybody or anything.

The slow is faster paradox... Yet something magic and mysterious occurs when you design a process that brings people together and slows things down. People start to listen to each other and, once they do, amazing things happen quickly.

Reality — Reality means speaking the truth of one's experience. People tend to be kind of cynical about this

because, they say: "there are norms in this organization, and we are not open with each other," or "it would be crazy to speak the truth, and furthermore I'm not suicidal."

Isn't this just another corporate encounter group? No, it's really just inviting people to say what's true for them and to give voice to their convictions. People will take as much risk as they feel comfortable taking. As risks are taken, the community becomes more firmly rooted in reality.

Simple language — Community language means keeping it simple — no extra stuff, no fancy language that takes people away from the way they really talk and understand each other.

Seven design principals for creating learning communities

1. **Public** (getting the system in the room)
2. **Slow** (slowing down so more can happen)
3. **Reality** (speaking the truth of one's experience)
4. **Language** (keeping it simple)
5. **Ceremony** (honoring the event)
6. **Play** (encouraging creativity)
7. **Choice** (leaving the door open)

Many expert models or specialized ways of looking at things have special languages of their own. Anytime you have a special language you're already excluding people, so it's just plain American English when you come together to build community.

Ceremony — Ceremony is an important part of community whether it's a handshake, eating some food together, or recognizing a coming or going. In our haste, we tend to lose sight of how important ceremony is for a

community to mark special places and events and give honor to itself and its people.

Play, creativity and learning —

There are many ways of encouraging play and creativity. This is also about valuing difference because some of us learn with our heads, some of us learn by making things, some learn by drawing. So designing processes where people can explore in many ways enriches the whole.

Choice — And finally, there must be freedom of choice. We're all adults, and we're all trying to learn and change. We've got to be given a lot of control over what we're doing. This means participative design and readiness to welcome the unexpected.

Council and dialogue in creating community

Calling or convening a council is an ancient form of coming together practiced by elders of a tribe, a religious community or town. In council people come together and speak the truth of their experience. As these individual voices are expressed, the community gets stronger, wiser, and more caring. We've been using the council model at work and begun to define the distinctive way of talking and listening in council as dialogue.

What dialogue is and isn't — To clarify what dialogue is and isn't, let's contrast it with another way we have of talking and listening called discussion.

It turns out that the root words of dialogue and discussion are quite different. Discussion is more like concussion and percussion — like a ping-pong game.

Dialogue is like a river of meaning flowing beneath the words. Now this is not to say that discussion is bad and dialogue is good; they're just different.

But we are saying that dialogue is about understanding complexity, grasping meaning and getting a shared sense of things.

Discussion is about win/lose, point/counterpoint and closure; it's about converging on a set of facts, setting a target, getting an action plan.

Clearly, discussion works best if it has been preceded by dialogue. If we understand the larger picture, discussion can be much more effective.

A model council for dialogue... In our work now we often practice dialogue in a circular council format. The circle is vital, both for eye contact and because it shifts power from individuals to the group. It's also important to have a guide or facilitator who holds onto the context, the whole for the council. This person minds the community, makes sure the microphone works, models the guidelines, and keeps the group in the spirit of dialogue.

Guidelines for dialogue — This brings us to three simple guidelines for dialogue:

- Speak the truth of your experience.
- Listen from the heart.
- Slow down so that more can happen.

This third guideline, slowing down, is often the point of intense curiosity, as you can imagine. We're finding it to be true.

Creating room for positive silence... We also have found that silence is not simply a matter of drift or absence; it is often a matter of intense presence. In dialogue, there are often periods of silence, and for many of us that can be uncomfortable. In our experience, when silence is accepted, each time the silence has been broken there has been a breakthrough. Something has shifted, something has changed.

A tool to help you slow down... Many communities have *talking sticks*. The rule is you can talk if you have the stick and you can't talk if you don't have it. Anything works: a felt tip marker, polished stone, or umbrella.

An experience in dialogue

The following things were said by a room full of professionals in dialogue at an AQP conference session. The dialogue reveals both the possibilities inherent in this way of working and the roadblocks people anticipate.

Participant #1: "When I think about my organization, I think about the people I'm trying to work with on a management level, and what I've been asked to do in terms of changing their heads about quality, productivity and people. I think that this really has to happen, and I don't have a clue of where to begin."

If I start talking to people about slowing down they're going to see me as a roadblock and they're just going to push me aside, and that's real scary for me."

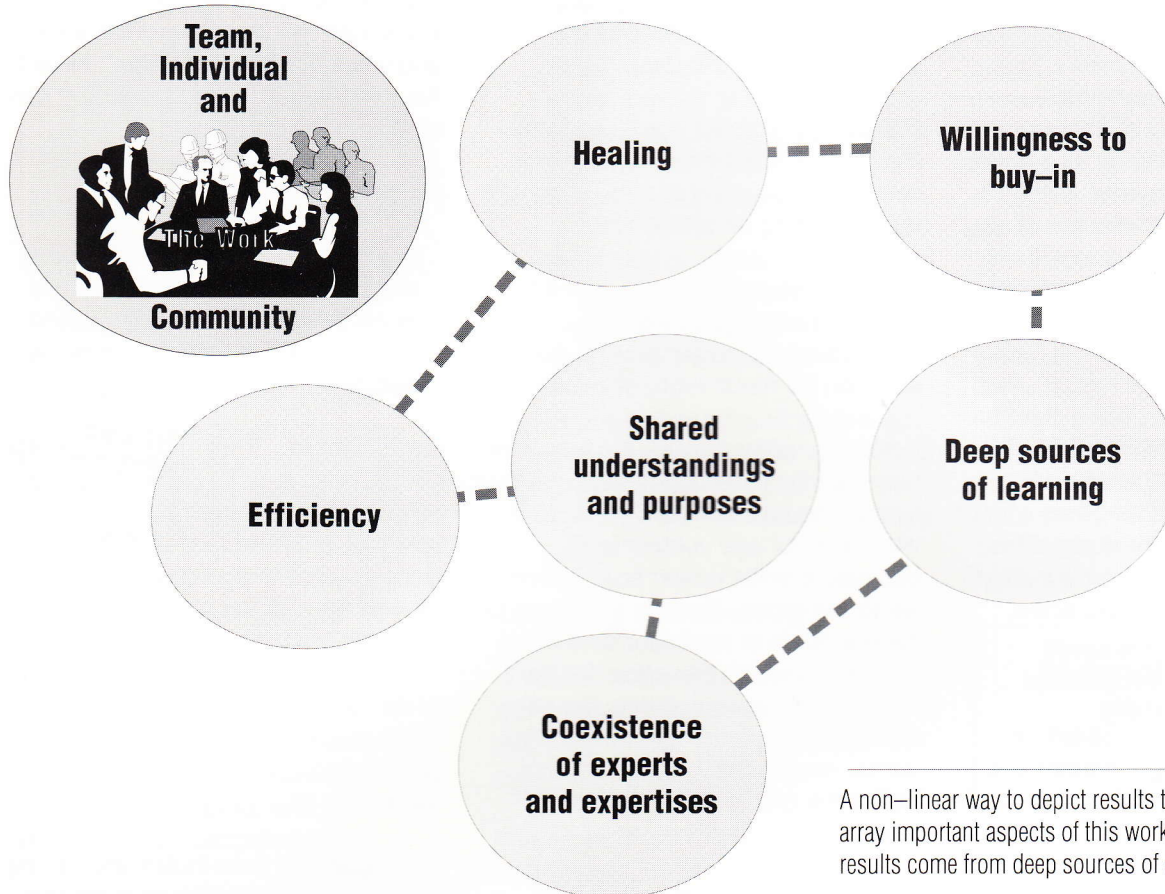
Participant #2: "I was thinking about asking about inclusion. What strikes me is that when we talk about listening I sense a shift in the room. I think that's what we need in organizations, is both speaking and listening. Trying to encourage risk. This type of discussion is a very risky thing to do."

Participant #3: "I work in a very strong, complicated, bureaucratic, busy organization. Lately, I am finding that people respond exactly opposite to the fear you have stressed."

They are responsive to opportunities to slow down and to uncomplicate, to get out the buzz words, and to be with each other. They are responding to cutting through all the patterns. To me... it is very rewarding because it is challenging to overcome a roadblock in the bureaucracy and keep a point of sanity."

Participant #4: "The issue of roadblock is real. I have experienced it. We are going into an organizational program for workteams, a lot of monitoring and analytical work (is) coming around full circle. What I do with my counterparts is try to get them to slow down and, at least, consider other alternatives."

➤ Early results we're seeing



A non-linear way to depict results that are possible is to array important aspects of this work in a constellation. These results come from deep sources of spirit, will and energy.

What I get is, 'You're fighting the turn of events.' A lot of it is to try to sympathize with people and help them consider the consequences and alternatives. This seems to work, at least, with my peers.

I don't think the folks up above me see all that interaction. That is really a fear because I have been thrown out of meetings. I've been told that I'm a roadblock and holding up the whole process. Most people aren't comfortable... they have a goal and they want to run. That's been our tradition. Here's the deadline, provide me with something."

Participant #5: "This is a little complex but the organization I'm with is boring, and there are a few of us who are outcasts.

Some of these concepts are very difficult to communicate. You have to experience them. You have to try it yourself to make that journey.

Some of our research has shown that Americans do not want to do a lot of stuff up front, they want to go for it. They're not big planners.

It's hard to hold these dialogues in hand. You almost have to have the patience to let the child take the steps and run and fall and then be ready, at that point, to come in and help."

Participant #6: "I have had two different experiences... on the management team I am a part of it is difficult to slow down. When describing the talking stick, my boss always wants his own. In that group it is difficult because the leader isn't pulling.

The experience I have in my own group, where I can speed up or slow down the pace, is if you just work on the feeling part of it and the open discussion, you can do the technical redesign as it comes, and it's a heck of a lot easier.

Getting that sense of trust built up in the group first makes the other stuff ten times easier. It doesn't matter what steps you take on the redesigning process as long as people start to share and accept that we're all in this together and nobody is trying to do this alone. You have to have some kind of dialogue or way to start to trust."

Participant #7: "This has opened up a couple of windows for me in that dialogue is what we need to get to because that's when we'll begin to understand each other.

Early results

These are the kinds of things we're seeing in our work with groups:

- Leadership teams that disregard their own hierarchy and include people they really need to get the job done. Individuals who take risks, tell it like it is, and experience reward.

- Organizations able to put their past in perspective, and move on.
- Follow-through that is voluntary, not begrudged.
- Felt relief that work in groups can be safe and productive.
- Discovery of a spirit that can be trusted to guide the group toward its purpose.
- A surprising willingness to slow down.
- A growing ability to hold contrasting points of view as equally valid. And more....

We've come to think of these as minor miracles, related to the interplay of individual, team and community. In talking about this work we are learning to leave behind some of our cause-effect reasoning.

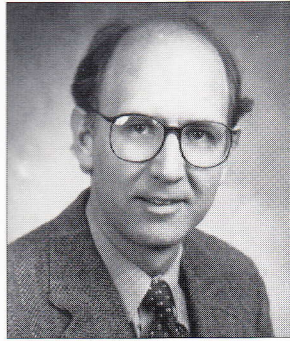
Leadership challenges — Achieving such results requires leadership that can both over-see and understand.

The over-seeing aspect of leadership carries the vision of wholeness and inclusion by working issues of connection and interdependence. Its function is to create an ordered world that includes difference and dissent.

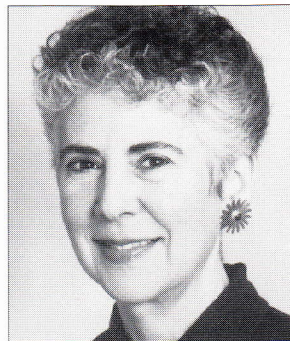
The understanding aspect of leadership stays present and vulnerable; nurturing individuals as it supports the power of the community doing its work. We need leadership creating teams where people can buy-in without selling out.

Filling emptiness with meaning... Working in these ways seems to fill a void in our culture. What is missing is described by an American interviewed in *Habits of the Heart*, "Many people feel empty and don't know why they feel empty. The reason is we are all social animals and we must live and interact and work together in community to be fulfilled." ♦

About the Authors:



Harry Hutson, Ph.D., is director, organizational effectiveness with the Avery Dennison Corporation, where he supports the creation of high performance work systems and total quality cultures. Before the recent merger with Avery, he was Dennison's total quality leader. He has also worked for Cummins Engine Company in a series of human resource roles.



Barbara Perry, Ph.D., is a consultant and anthropologist whose work focuses on helping create the skills, mindsets, cultures and processes at the heart of learning organizations. Her clients have included Apple Computers, Avery Dennison, Digital Equipment, General Electric, Polaroid, Scott Paper, Sun Microsystems, and Syncrude Canada, Ltd.

References and resources

Bellah, Robert N.; Madsen, Richard; Sullivan, William M.; Swindler, Ann; and Tipton, Steven N. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Perennial Library, 1986.

Emery, Merrelyn, ed. *Participative Design for Participative Democracy*. Canberra: Centre for Continuing Education; The Australian National University, 1989.

Peck, M. Scott. *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990.

Weisbord, Marvin R. *Productive Workplaces: Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning and Community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.