PARTICIPATIVE WORK DESIGN

The starting point for work design can be summarized by two principles:
i)   any part of the organization should be designed as a whole 'open' system within the context of its task environment; and
ii)   those persons affected by the design must be able to influence it.
With (re)design of whatever aspect of work, it is people who make it work.

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OVERVIEW:

The conceptual framework involved in a "whole systems" approach views work organization as an open, socio-technical system. For the viability of the whole system, "openness" compels an understanding of the nature of the organization or unit task environment as well as the characteristics of internal components of strategy, structure, etc.
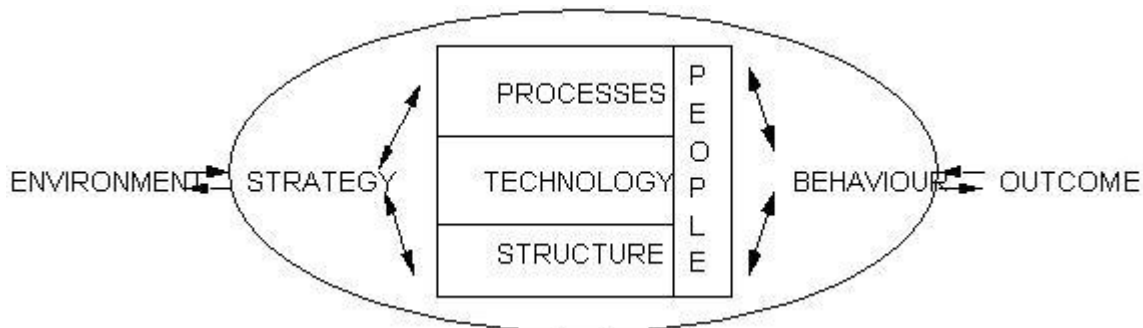
People are, ideally, both a 'subject' and an 'object' of work (re)design. The knowledge and skill of people are usually a critical developmental factor, and people are the medium through which any change will have to occur, in behaviour, and therefore, outcomes.

There are two major logistical challenges to participative work design. First, many of the people and resources involved in the (re)design are also key to the ongoing functioning of the organization. Secondly, business requires a fast cycle time for planned change, at no loss of quality.

To deal with these challenges, there have been developed "Options for Accelerating the Design of High Performance Organizations" (see *Good Reading*, W.O. Lytle). As examples of the options, the two workplaces featured in the program "**Participative Work Design**" took modified traditional approaches, while one of the worksites (Story 1) in the program "**Responsible Self-Management**" used a variation of the multiple-conference approach.

In each of these examples, however, there has tended to be a two-phase process--first, a "Macro" design phase, and then, a more detailed Work Unit design phase. At the "macro" level, key features of the desired

future for the 'big picture' or larger system are described, so as to clarify the 'broad' characteristics of such dimension as organizational values, goals, unit boundaries, technology, and information systems. This 'macro' phase defines key parameters within which people can design their own jobs and work unit.

An extremely effective process option for the 'macro' phase of defining the desired future for the larger system-in-its environment is the "Search Conference" pioneered by Fred and Merrelyn Emery. This methodology is described by Morley & Trist: "A Brief Introduction to the Emerys' Search Conference" in Vol. II: Trist/Tavistock Anthology. Another source is Cabana: "The Search for Effective Strategic Planning Is Over", and the primary source is the book by Emery: "Participative Design for Participative Democracy" (see both references in *Good Reading*).

For the detailed design of the Work Unit, a related process is "The Participative Design Workshop", also pioneered by Fred and Merrelyn Emery (see Vol. II: Trist/Tavistock Anthology). Both the Search Conference and the PD Workshop have as their basis, "The Second Design Principle" (see Emery: Vol. II: Trist/Tavistock Anthology). A variation of the PD Workshop methodology was used by one of the worksites (Story 2) in "**Participative Work Design**", and the methodology proved critical in helping the organization overcome resistance to change for significant eventual benefit.

The experiences of worksites in the program "**Participative Work Design**" illustrate another feature of whole systems design, namely, Technological Choice. In one case (Story2), the (re)design of jobs included major choices about preferred types of automation control systems. A substantial chapter in the program "**Engineering for Commitment**" provides other examples of this technical design choice. See also a case study, *Good Reading*, Painter: "Socio-Technical Design of Knowledge Work & IT".

The case study above is one example of participative work design in a white-collar environment. Another example is Swayze & Bromilow, "Not Just an Operator: How Manitoba Telephone System & CEP Implemented Work Redesign" (see Good Reading). Chapter 6: Legacy for the Information Age in the program "**Engineering for Commitment**" relates another case in the service industry, and multiple examples are documented in Fisher: "The Distributed Mind: Achieving High Performance Through the Collective Intelligence of Knowledge Work Teams", see *Good Reading*).

The process of involvement of people in the (re)design of their work provides vital congruency with the objectives of a 'learning' organization, teamwork, or indeed, self-management. In fact, participative work (re)design is best conceived as a continuous learning process (see *Good Reading*, Painter: "The Process and Content of Work Design").

Fig. 13: Work Redesign as a Continuous Process
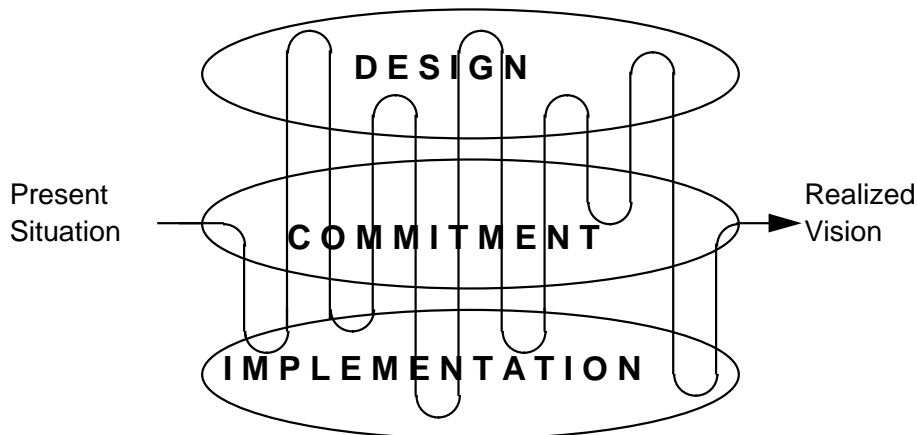
If one seeks a high-commitment, high-involvement, and continuous learning organization, some form of participative design of work is an imperative, and it is what engenders in people excitement at the prospect of ongoing renewal—to better their work lives and the enterprise.

SAMPLE THEMES:

i) **Getting Started** – Why Change? There are some common beginnings and common ends-in-mind with the start-up of (re)design in many of our Stories of innovative workplaces.
See "Participative Work Design"
Story 1: Chapter 1, Build-up to Change
Story 2: Chapter 1, To Revitalize the Organization;
See also: "Responsible Self-Management"
Story 1: Chapter 1, A New Work System
Story 2: Chapter 1, Total Involvement Organization;
See also: "Whole Systems Teamwork"
Story 1: Chapter 1, A Participative Work System.

ii) **Principles & Methods**. In addition to the articles referenced above, see Cherns: Principles of Socio-Technical Design", Vol. II: Trist/Tavistock Anthology.
See "Participative Work Design"
Story 1: Chapter 2, New Unit—New Work Design;
See also: "Engineering for Commitment"
Chapter 1: Systems Thinking
Chapter 2: Design Principles & Method
Chaper 4: A Philosophy for Work Design.

iii) New Organization – "**Greenfield" Design**.
See "Participative Work Design"
Story 1: Chapter 2, New Unit—New Work Design
See also: "Whole Systems Teamwork"
Story 1: Chapter 1, A Participative Team System;
See also: "Engineering for Commitment"

Chapter 3: Choice in Technology & Systems.

iv)   Re-Designing Existing Facilities – **"Brownfield" Design**.
     See "Participative Work Design"
     Story 1: Chapter 3, Re-Designing Existing Facilities
     Story 2: Chapter 2, The Macro-Design Phase
     Story 2: Chapter 3, Transition;
     See also: "Whole Systems Teamwork"
     Story 1: Chapter 1, A Participative Team System;
     See also: "Beyond Collision"
     Chapter 2: Canadian Pacific Railway & Teamsters Rail Conference.

v)   **New Roles** for Workers, Supervisors & Managers.
     See "Participative Work Design"
     Story 1: Chapter 4, New Roles for Workers, Supervisors & Managers
     Story 2: Chaper 4, Resolving the Detail Design;
     See also: "Beyond Collision"
     Chapter 2: Canadian Pacific Railway & Teamsters Rail Conference
     See also: "Engineering for Commitment"
     Chapter 5: Social System Design.

vi)   **Extraordinary Results**.
     See "Participative Work Design"
     Story 1: Chapter 5, Challenges & Pay-Offs
     Story 2: Chapter 5, Perseverance & Results;
     See also: "Whole Systems Teamwork"
     Story 2: Chapter 5, Extraordinary Results;
     See also: "Engineering for Commitment"
     Chapter 6: Legacy for the Information Age.