

Legitimacy to Employee Voice: Role of Process Intervention

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This paper highlights the role of joint participatory fora in institutionalizing employee voice and in creating a culture of excellence based on shared vision, common values, commitment and competency building. The action research was conducted in a multi unit public sector undertaking in India. The corporation had set up joint councils at plant, region and national levels a decade ago. It was discovered that the councils had not contributed significantly to the purpose for which they were constituted. Interventions were made with a view to assessing the effectiveness of joint councils as forums for bringing about continuous improvement in performance parameters through employee voice.

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Introduction

The concept of employee voice was first introduced by Hirschman in his book “*Exit, Voice and Loyalty*” in 1970. Attempts have since been made by researchers to identify organizational and individual factors that encourage employees to express their voice to their managers. Employee voice has been recognized as an important source of organizational adaptation to challenges of change. Thus the need for creating an organizational climate in which employees are encouraged to speak the truth becomes imperative (Collins, 2001). Conversely, lack of employee voice “can exact a high psychological price on individuals, generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment, and the like that, if unexpressed, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity, and undermine productivity” (Perlow & Williams, 2003).

Historically, trade unions have been seen as the major institutional form that acted as powerful channel for employees to voice their grievances and dissatisfaction relating to conditions of employment and treatment at workplace. Ex-

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pression of employee voice through the unions enabled employees to air their concerns and protected them from being penalized. During the past two decades or so, it has been increasingly realized that employees voice through unions has its own limitations and needs to be broad based to include direct voice mechanisms within a variety of non-union settings (McCabe & Lewin, 1992; McLoughlin & Gourlay, 1994; Terry, 1999; Benson, 2000; Gollan, 2003, 2006; Butler, 2005; Dietz et al., 2005; Dundon, et al., 2005; Machin & Wood, 2005; Taras & Kaufman, 2006; Bryson & Freeman, 2007; Dundon & Gollan, 2007).

With increased emphasis on employee participation organizations have instituted formal mechanisms such as suggestion schemes, grievance redressal system, quality circles and even open door policies. Many of these mechanisms often are not able to achieve the desired objectives if the management does not have the will to take appropriate action. In the UK Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (WIRS), it has been observed that the nature of voice channels has changed considerably in the 80s and 90s (Michie & Sheehan, 1999). There has been more of direct non-union voice mechanisms such as joint consultation, management employee meetings, project teams and

self management teams serving as collective form of employee voice. These notions challenge the view that trade unions are the only source of collective voice and that other voice mechanisms may be more appropriate at different levels of the organization (McCabe & Lewin, 1992; Benson & Brown, 2010).

Over the years, the scope of employee voice has expanded to include efforts by the employees to improve working conditions. Rusbult, et.al (1988) have defined voice as “actively and constructively trying to improve conditions through discussing problems with a supervisor or co-workers, taking action to solve problems, suggesting solutions, seeking help from an outside agency like a union, or whistle blowing”. It has been further observed that employee voice can act as “promotive behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than criticize” (Gordon, Infante, & Graham, 1988). In the same spirit, Detert’s & Burris ’(2007) have conceptualized voice as “verbal behavior that is improvement oriented and directed to a specific target that holds power inside the organization.”

Employee Participation as a Voice Mechanism

It was during the 60s and 70s that trade unions in India emerged as a powerful force in maintaining and improving the terms and conditions of employment of their members in private and public sector undertakings. To achieve this aim, the unions were able to mobilize resources

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at the local, national and international level and seek active support of political parties and the government. As a result, unions through their collective representational role (Webb & Webb, 1897) have been able to provide a wage premium and better working conditions for their members, influence the wider distribution of income within society and provide support for workers in developing nations (Flanders, 1952; Bloom & Northrup,

1965). The employee voice thus was equated with unions signifying collective representation of employees.

In order to ensure wider employee voice not only restricted to conditions of service, the government of India has taken initiative in formulating various joint forums for giving legitimacy to employee voice in management of public enterprises. So far as institutional mechanisms for employee participation are concerned, the joint forums of management and employees can be formed at various levels for different purposes. The possible types of participative mechanisms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Types of Participation

Type	Level	Means	Scope
Information sharing	All levels	Communication meetings newsletter suggestion scheme, etc.	Information about policies, changes, etc.
Consultation	Enterprise/plant /Shop-floor level	Works Committees, shop-floor, plant councils, joint management councils, etc	Work, working conditions and welfare
Joint decision making	Board/plant /shop level	Representation at board, plant and shop level decision-making bodies	Work-related issues
Self-management	Enterprise-wide	Same as above	All strategic, policy and operational issues

Source: Venkataratnam, & Srivastava, (1991).

Employees' participation can be voluntary or statutory. Usually government sponsored schemes bring compulsion or involuntarism through statutory and other means. Alternative approaches to participation like direct participation and parallel organizations like quality circles are normally volun-

tary. In either case, it is imperative for organizations to institutionalize employee participation as a voice mechanism to cope with the myriad changes in the environment and make the ever increasing expectations of employees compatible with the requirements of high performance.

Government Policy & Participation

In India, more than the employers and workers, the government has been at the forefront in encouraging workers' participation in management in response to the compulsions of meeting the objectives of planned economic development, improving industrial productivity, maintaining harmony in industrial relations and above all in upholding the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. Since Independence, various schemes have been formulated by the Government of India to encourage workers' participation in management, such as Works Committee 1947, Joint Management Councils 1958, and Employee Directors in Nationalized Boards 1970. These forums although well intentioned, could not become effective instruments of employee voice in organizations primarily due to unclear scope and functions of these multiple committees and lack of support from unions and management (Venkata Ratnam, 2006).

It was in mid seventies that there was a renewed initiative on the part of the government to give legitimacy to employee participation in management. The need for the initiative arose due to the growing distance between the management and the employees, confronting stance resulting in increased number of strikes, industrial disputes and man days lost. The worsening IR scenario had its visible impact on productivity and efficiency of practically all major public sector undertakings. Several PSUs were on the verge of being declared sick. The overall decline in revenue from PSUs with heavy investment led to a sort of

economic crises in the country. Besides, rampant indiscipline, low morale, absenteeism and growing alienation of employees were the psychological fallout of industrial unrest. It was in response to this crisis that the government renewed its initiative to provide a mechanism for enlisting support of employees in improving productivity and efficiency of PSUs by giving them a voice in decision making.

The Scheme of Workers' Participation in Management in manufacturing and mining industries was introduced in 1975.

In 1975 the Constitution was amended and Section 43A was inserted in the Directive Principles of the Constitution. This section provided that "the State shall take steps by suitable legislation or in any other way to secure the participation of workers in the management of undertakings, establishments or other organizations engaged in any industry". In accordance with this amendment, the Scheme of Workers' Participation in Management in manufacturing and mining industries was introduced in 1975. The scheme provided for formation of joint councils at shop and plant levels and covered only those manufacturing and mining units which employed 500 or more workers. The scheme was required to be implemented in both public and private sectors, as well as in departmentally run units. Shop and plant level councils were assigned specific functions relating to production and productivity, reduction of absenteeism,

safety, maximizing machine and manpower utilization, etc.

The scheme was subsequently modified in 1977 to include commercial and service organizations with 100 or more employees. In December 1983, following a review of the progress of participative schemes in industry, a new scheme was prepared and notified. This scheme was applicable to all central public sector enterprise, except where specifically exempted. It envisaged constitution of bipartite forums at shop and plant levels. In enterprises considered suitable it was also to be implemented at the board level. The mode of representation of worker representatives was to be determined by consultation with the concerned unions, and parity in representation between management and unions continued to be the norm.

The government introduced a bill in the Parliament on 25 May 1990 to provide for specific and meaningful participation of workers in management.

Article 43A of the Constitution requires the State to take steps, by suitable legislation or in any other way, to secure the participation of workers in the management of undertakings, establishments or other organizations engaged in any industry. So far, all the schemes pertaining to participation of workers in management have been non-statutory. The non-statutory schemes however, were not able to provide effective framework for meaningful participation of workers in

management. Therefore, the government introduced a bill in the Parliament on 25 May 1990 to provide for specific and meaningful participation of workers in management at shop-floor level, establishment level and board of management level in industrial establishments; manner of representation of employees and formation of monitoring committee to oversee compliance of the provisions under the Act.

Prerequisites

A government scheme of this type has to be a general and broad based framework, flexible enough to be adopted to local variations and existing realities in different types of industries in various regions. It will be necessary therefore to develop appropriate structure and processes for operationalizing the provisions of the scheme in organization specific context. Some of the steps that facilitate introduction and effective functioning of the joint councils can be stated as follows:

- (i) Developing a common framework purpose, content, level and types of participation among the members of joint councils so as to take care of differential expectations.
- (ii) Need to jointly evolve and agree upon the processes of agenda setting in terms of content and theme, as well as the methods of identifying problem areas and collecting relevant information.
- (iii) The need to begin with areas where it is relatively easier to have suc-

cessful experience and then to add on other areas gradually.

- (iv) Delineating boundaries and defining relationship among the existing nominated and/or elected committee's vis-à-vis shop and plant councils. There is the need to agree on ways and means to keep the channels of communication open among not only the committees and councils but also among the rank and file.
- (v) Developing guidelines for decision-making by the councils and fixing responsibility and time-frame for implementation of the decisions.
- (vi) Need to identify centre for responsibility for decision implementation in the existing organizational structure so as to avoid situations where managements may give priority to their own tasks over the council's decisions.
- (vii) Defining roles, status, authority, and facilities for members and office-bearers of the councils in relation to the trade unions.
- (viii) The need to keep the employees informed of the decisions arrived at, their implementation and the outcome so that the employees are able to develop confidence and faith in the working of these forums.
- (ix) Continuous evaluation of the functioning of these councils by various mechanisms like employee opinion poll, meetings of all the council members at certain intervals, utilization of suggestion boxes, etc.

The approach outlined above is a necessary condition for the development of shared sense of purpose in providing legitimacy to employee voice in the affairs of the organization. Appropriate interventions were made across all major public sector undertakings in the country to institutionalize the process in varying degrees and with limited success (Srivastava, 1976; Venkata Ratnam & Srivastava, 1991).

Given the importance of employee voice in management of enterprises, organizations have taken initiatives in utilizing participative forum in the form of shop, plant and regional level councils for this purpose. It was in the backdrop of the above, that interventions were made in a large multi-unit public sector enterprise spread over different parts of the country with the aim of making joint councils at shop and establishment levels effective mechanisms of employee voice in bringing about improvement in various performance parameters of the organization.

The Intervention

In order to make these participative forums effective instruments of employee voice, interventions were made by the authors in a multi unit public sector undertaking in India for a period of over four years. The organization had taken a number of HR initiatives aimed at employee involvement in decision making and in translating vision and values into action. One such attempt was the formation of joint councils at regional, plant and shop levels over a decade ago with the stated objectives of enabling manage-

ment and employees actively participate in bringing about continuous improvement in productivity, quality and work system effectiveness in various plants.

The joint councils however had not contributed significantly towards the purpose for which they were constituted. This had led to erosion of faith in the very efficacy of participatory management. In most cases the councils had ceased to function as an institutional arrangement for furthering the cause of the local and corporate management. They had degenerated into far less effective grievance handling forums and gave primacy to furthering issues of sectional rather than common concern. The then existing scenario had contributed to increased schism and distrust between the management and employees.

The joint councils however had not contributed significantly towards the purpose for which they were constituted.

More specifically, the issues pertaining to the joint councils, both at plant and shop levels that needed to be addressed were:

- Lack of appreciation of management concerns on the part of the employees nominees.
- Lack of faith in the ability of employees to contribute to productivity related issues.
- Tendency to link work related issues with sectarian interests, arising out

of grievances, bringing in unresolved issues from collective bargaining/negotiating forum.

- Employees nominees function as representing their own constituencies and adopt the role of protecting their interest.
- Lack of problem solving orientation leading to adoption of win lose strategies.
- Feeling of distrust and inert hostility towards each other.
- Failure to appreciate the basic purpose of joint councils and inability to establish linkage with other participatory/consultative bodies.

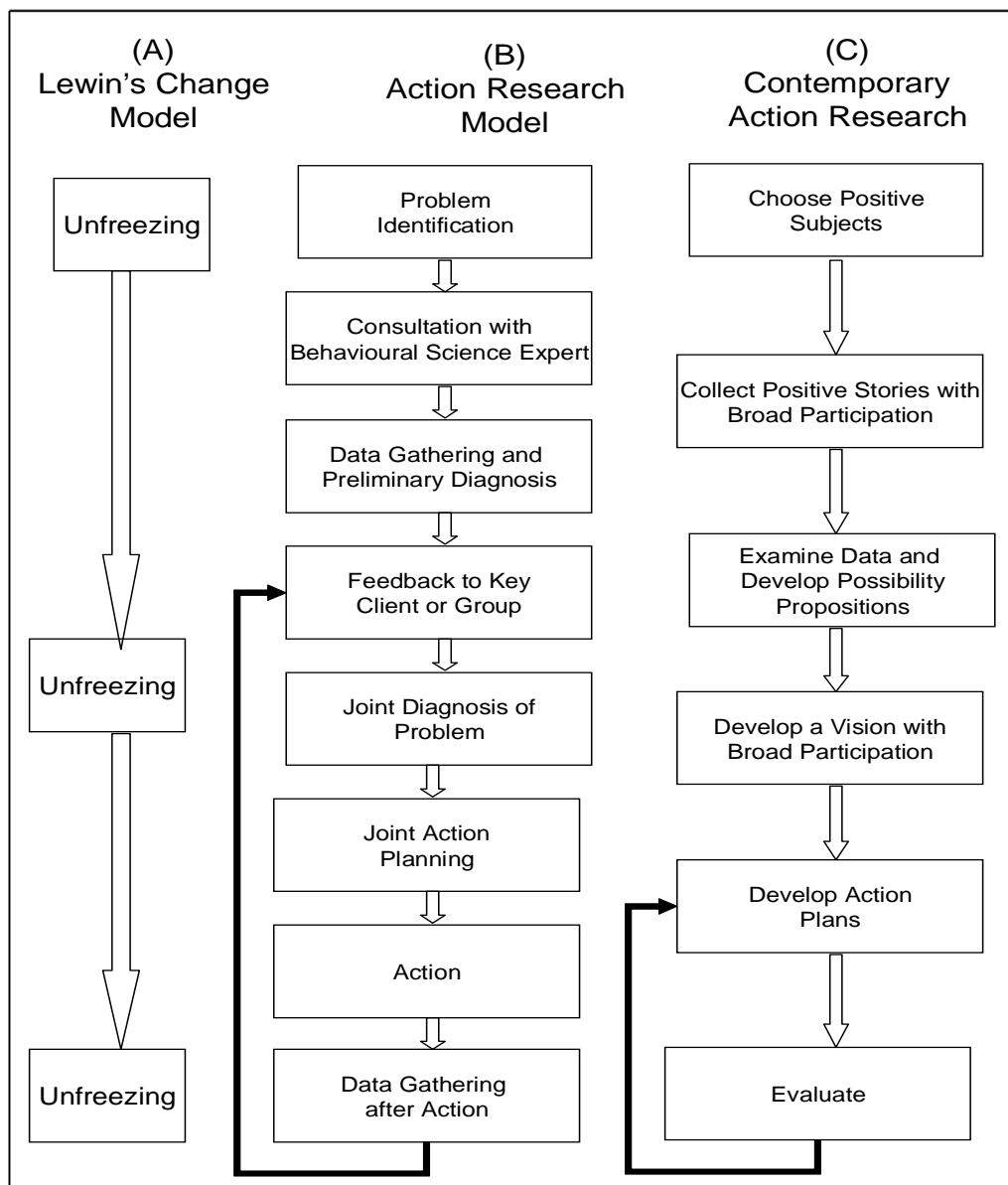
Approach & Methodology

In order to address the above issues and make the joint councils effective mechanisms for institutionalization of employee voice, an action research model was adopted. Action research differs from traditional approach to consultancy as also other forms of research. A comparison various approaches adopted in action research as planned change strategy is presented in fig. 1:

Arising from the above, some of the salient features of action research can be stated as follows:

- It focuses on planned change as a cyclical process of problem diagnosis, action planning and evaluation. The outcome of evaluation leads to carrying out further problem diagnosis followed by subsequent actions.

Fig. 1 Comparison of Planned Change models



Source: Cummings, & Worley(2001):24-26

- Members of the target group such as, organization or community are involved in all stages of action research.
- The researcher works in close collaboration with organization members. Action research thus involves joint efforts of the consultant and cli-

ent in planning and implementation of change.

- The data gathering, diagnosis, action planning, implementation and evaluation of results are carried out systematically on a continuous basis by both consultant and the client. The cyclical planned change would typically include the following steps:

∅∅ Problem identification

∅ Consultation with behavioural science expert

∅ Data gathering and preliminary diagnosis

∅ Feedback to key client or group

∅ Joint diagnosis of problem

∅ Joint action planning

∅ Action

∅ Data gathering after action (Cummings & Worley, 2001)

Action research has also been referred to as participatory action research, action learning, or appreciative inquiry. The focus in all these approaches of planned change is to enable organization members to identify their own problems, choose appropriate interventions and gain and utilize the knowledge and skills needed to change the organization. Both the OD consultant and the target group members are co-learners in diagnosing the organization, designing changes, implementing them and assessment of the outcomes. The consultant plays the role of facilitator of learning and change (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987).

As part of action research, the specific interventions made in the organization under study included the following:

- Target group identification: shop, plant, regional level councils
- A series of workshops for joint councils
- Joint exploration of issues and diagnosis
- Generating options and consensual decisions
- Competency building
- Formulation of time bound action plans
- Implementation by designated members of the councils
- Follow up workshops for review and further diagnosis

An attempt was made to facilitate a qualitative and fundamental transformation in the role, responsibility and accountability of members of the joint councils. This further necessitated developing amongst them systemic orientation, restructuring of mind-set, building perspectives and formulating strategy for alignment of their objectives with the overall objectives of the corporation. The specific issues that needed to be addressed were:

- Alignment of joint councils purposes and objectives with the corporate vision and strategic direction.
- Inculcation of an adherence to the corporate core values.

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- Appreciation of management constraints on the part of joint council members.
 - Appreciation by management that employee nominees can meaningfully contribute to productivity related issues.
 - Improvement in communication across various participative forums and between nominees and their constituencies.
 - Reinforcing and strengthening such participative processes as will contribute to enhancement of the effectiveness of joint councils.
 - Internalizing and institutionalizing participatory management practices through various interventions on continuing basis.

One of the objectives of the workshop was to help the councils identify their strengths and weaknesses and formulate action plans on issues of major concern pertaining to joint councils for improving the effectiveness of the participative forums. The strengths, weaknesses and action plans as identified by the councils are as follows:

Workshop Design

In response to the above issues, as a first step, a series of leadership development workshops were planned for members of regional, plant and shop councils. Regional Workshops for each region of four days duration on residential basis were organized for members of Joint Councils, an average of 27 members from management and the unions participated in each of the workshops. The workshops were organized with the basic purpose of:

- Developing awareness of the changing business scenario characterized by increased uncertainty and global competition and the consequent challenges faced by the organization.
- Changing the mindset based on heightened sense of self efficacy, internal causation, trust and collaborative orientation, openness and “we” rather than “we - they” syndrome.
- Acquisition and sharpening of behavioral skills in problem solving, giving and receiving feedback, constructive use of conflict and leadership.
- *Problem Solving Orientation:* The councils facilitate comprehensive approach to problems as various levels are involved, solutions arrived at are also comprehensive.
- *Communication:* There is transparency in communication, as the councils provide a common communication platform for higher management to communicate to workmen and vice versa; there is information sharing and improved awareness, suggestions are also solicited and welcomed.
- *Employee Relations:* Helpful in promoting healthy industrial relations as IR issues are resolved and reduced due to discussions on a single table
- *Shared Ownership:* The councils promote a sense of ownership and

pride due to joint decision making processes.

- *Execution:* There is better acceptability and quick implementation of decisions; proper responsibility and execution of work is helpful in productivity improvement.
- *Work Culture:* Joint responsibility, feeling of self pride/ownership leads to improvement in discipline, creates a culture of team spirit and helps in maintaining a healthy work atmosphere.
- *Broader Perspective:* Such forums provide opportunity to understand management constraints like budget provisions, legal provisions, directives of central government.

Issues of Concern / Weaknesses

The following are some of the issues/weaknesses of the Joint Councils identified by the participants:

- *Lack of awareness and commitment:* amongst employees regarding importance of joint councils; lack of seriousness and low priority accorded to joint councils by both sides; meetings more of a ritual; and are not held regularly there is low attendance in meetings.
- *Scope:* Lack of clarity regarding scope of joint councils vis a vis other participatory bodies such as Quality Circles, amongst members resulting in inclusion of trivial and / or bargainable issues including individual grievances and complaints.

- *Role, responsibility:* Lack of clarity with regard to role, responsibility, accountability of members; lack of individual initiative; lack of training of members to effectively participate in such forums; feeling of 'we' vs. 'they', sectional interests are highlighted; individual views given more importance.

- *Decision Making:* Unequal representation, at times management invites additional members in meetings. All associations/ unions not represented in some cases. Decisions are at times imposed by management and no serious attempt is made at consensus building; non-availability of information affects the quality and timeliness of decisions.

- *Conduct of Meetings:* Agenda setting process is not transparent and there is lack of proper system for screening of agenda. Agenda points are not circulated on time for members to come prepared. There is a feeling that very few agenda items are proposed by the management side. Minutes of meetings are also not prepared and circulated timely.

- *Decision Implementation:* The members feel that there is delay in implementation of decisions and no follow up of decisions taken. There is lack of ownership and support for joint decisions taken. Perceived lack of authority of joint councils particularly in matters involving financial implication.

Action Plans on Joint Council specific and organization wide issues of concern.

Participants in small groups were assigned the task of analyzing Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats of Joint Councils in their respective regions. Common issues of concern were then identified after consolidating the views expressed by the groups. Five inter-plant groups were constituted and each group was asked to formulate action plan on a particular issue of concern.

In addition the groups were also asked to develop Action Plan on the following common organization wide issues identified at the National level joint council meet:

- Strategies for Productivity and Quality Improvement
- Improving Communication amongst Employees
- Education and Training of Employees
- Role of Participative Forum in Actualization of Core Values
- Total Quality Management

Follow up Workshops

Action plans formulated by various groups of participants on issues of major concern pertaining to the functioning of the Joint Councils were consolidated region wise and for the whole organization. Action Plans on the five company wise major issues were also consolidated.

The consolidated Action Plans were distributed amongst the participating members of workshop. The Member

Secretary of Joint Councils at Plant level discussed with the respective Chairman and worked out the modalities for implementation in the concerned plants.

Follow-up workshops in each region were held for the members who participated in regional workshops, with the purpose of:

- a) Reviewing the initiatives taken by them in transferring learning from the workshop in their respective participatory forums.
- b) Reviewing steps taken by them in implementing the recommendations contained in the Action Plans formulated by them.
- c) Identifying blockages and factors hindering the successful implementation of the recommendations and/ or transference of learning.
- d) Building competencies and skills in effective team working for creating synergy and to inculcate team spirit.

Outcome

The workshop acquired high degree of credibility with active involvement of top management personnel from corporate HR and senior managers of the respective regions.

The representatives of both management and the unions realized the need for redefining their role, responsibility and accountability in accordance with the demands of the current scenario.

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The pedagogy adopted in the program enabled the participants interact with each other and with the resource persons with high degree of openness and intensity. It appears by the end of the program practically all participants were able to relate concepts and theories pertaining to various topics discussed with their day to day experience; critically examine the relevance to their respective roles and generate viable behavioral options for improved effectiveness.

There was an observable change in the mindsets of all the participants regarding the efficacy of Joint Councils in developing and strengthening participative culture based on shared vision, adherence to core values, competency building, commitment and learning.

Both the management and employee representatives became aware of the need to develop mechanisms for integrating the efforts of other bipartite forums like Quality Circles, professional circles, thereby making their impact on productivity, quality, realization of corporate vision and adherence to core values.

Joint Councils at plant and shop levels in each project were encouraged to develop their own vision, set of values and code of conduct which would provide the basic framework within which members will direct and regulate their behavior. Appropriate guidelines were developed and

shared widely with all the employees focusing on Joint Councils as a joint forum constituted for the purpose of dealing with common areas of concern. Joint problem solving approach and collaborative orientation replaced bipartisan politics and distributive bargaining mode of conflict resolution. For greater employee involvement and in keeping with the spirit of partnership, it was agreed to select a Vice Chairman from the employee side who could be involved in screening of agenda items, writing of the minutes and presiding over the meetings as and when necessary.

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The Joint Councils were encouraged to learn from each other about their achievements and contributions towards meeting the objectives of the participative fora. It was suggested that an annual meet of all the Joint Councils could be organized for sharing of learnings.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates the powerful role that interventions based on action research model can play in institutionalizing a participative mechanism for providing legitimacy to employee voice in the affairs of organizations. The emphasis has been on developing internal capabilities of joint forums to enable them identify their own problems and gener-

ate such options as are necessary for increasing the efficacy of the system on a continuing basis. Unlike other forms of applied research, the present approach requires deep involvement and active participation of researchers as agents of change. In other words, it is an attempt to developing a change enabling organization. This has therefore policy implications for enterprises for creating a culture of high performance, knowledge creation and caring in order to gain and maintain competitive advantage in global economic order.

The present approach requires deep involvement and active participation of researchers as agents of change.

In order to reinforce and strengthen participative culture, the efforts of representative forum like Joint Councils will have to be supplemented by developing mechanisms of direct participation of workmen in their respective spheres of work. To that end, at the shop floor, self-managing integrated work teams as also functional and cross-functional teams will be constituted. These teams will be responsible for work planning and scheduling, job allocation, multi-skilling and co-ordination. Every team will have a team leader who will interact with the supervisor for target setting, sourcing and inter-team co-ordination. It was realized that management personnel should proactively take up the role of pace-setters and reciprocate with greater intensity any positive response and gesture coming from workmen with empathy,

concern and respect thereby providing legitimacy to employee voice.

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