

Editorial

Participative Management

Even Nicholas II, the last czar of Russia, believed in or at least practiced participative management. The validity of this statement can be defended because history reveals that Nicholas II allowed others to be involved in governance.

Academic librarians have engaged in a dialogue on the merits of participative management for twenty years. In a recent column, Herb White urges us to look beyond the "shrill tones" of those who advocate participative management as an obvious good thing. He voices a natural skepticism about "management truths that are considered too obvious to require proof" ["Participative Management Is the Answer, But What Was the Question?" *Library Journal* 110:62 (Aug. 1985)].

Critics of participative management have had a field day. They have blunted its progress and clouded its meaning. As a result it means everything and nothing. This was accomplished with remarkable ease. The battle was over before it even began when advocates of participative management allowed others to determine (a) its meaning—the weapons of war, (b) its context—the place of battle, and (c) its value—the rules of war.

Every statement of support for participative management can be thwarted by a clever gambit. For example, participative management has been challenged as suspect because:

- Leaders will not be able to lead.
- Groups are not innovative.
- Committees are conservative.
- It won't work in every situation.
- Some people don't want it.
- Only individuals can accept responsibility.

Obviously, something is wrong. Each statement is just as ludicrous as my loose definition that pulled in poor little Nicky.

First is the problem of definition. The issue is not participation per se but (1) the degree of participation, (2) the type of participation, and (3) the result of the participation.

Donald Nightingale lists eight degrees of participation from "employees need not be informed" to "employees have the final say in decision making" ["Participation in Decision-Making: An Examination of Style and Structure and Their Effect on Member Outcomes," *Human Relations* 34:1119-33 (Dec. 1981)].

In libraries, the lines of authority and responsibility create a structure that governs (1) who sets the goals, (2) how resources are allocated, (3) who makes decisions about what, (4) who evaluates, (5) who is to do what, and (6) what means are to be used. The type of participation relates to the involvement of staff in each of the six governance areas at the unit, department, division, and librarywide levels.

If the participation is meaningful to the employees, if the library benefits its users, and if the library maintains or enhances its legitimacy, then the result of the participation can be deemed successful. The advocates of participative management need to articulate clearly and concisely what they mean, what context they are using, and what the values of participation are to the library, the host institution, and society.

It is my personal opinion that participative management is a limiting concept and that work democracy is a stronger vehicle for advancing the interests of library employees. An emphasis on work democracy would tie in directly to the foundations upon which this nation was founded and would tend to be consistent with them. By emphasizing this approach it might be possible to establish a set of employee rights and to shift the burden of proof onto those who want to restrict the "rights" of employees. Indeed, several European nations have established laws that give formal decision-making rights to employees.

Whether through formal rights, participative management, or a continuance of other modes of governance, each institution should strive to achieve a balance of interests and to perform effectively. However, there is little evidence that all forms of governance show an equal regard for the protection of human rights, respect for the individual or group, and effective use of the employee's talents.

Many academic librarians would cite the decision-making process within the institutions of higher education as models of effective governance. Others would not. "In its formal arrangements, however, the contemporary American academic institution is basically authoritarian, whatever the varying practices—practices which often include the informal granting of rights and authority as a result of mutual agreement, of the institution's functional needs or, in some cases, of professors' perceived status" [William Spinrad, "Pathway to Shared Authority: Collective Bargaining and Academic Governance," *Academe* 70:29 (May-June 1984)].

Certainly we can all agree that the governance issue is a constant factor in the management of our libraries. Some of you may also agree that equity, fairness, and democracy have a role in the workplace and should not be merely words in a grade-school reader.

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