Participative Management or Unionization?

One of the legacies of the protest movement of the last several years has been a certain restlessness and searching on the part of librarians for a greater role in the decision-making process in their libraries and a voice in the conditions of their employment. Two powerful ideas and trends have begun to emerge out of this confused and stressful situation: participative management and unionization.

We are told by some authorities that a managerial revolution based on participative management is in progress and that the death knell is sounding for the hierarchical form of organization. However, other evidence and other authorities suggest that the current trend toward the unionization of white-collar workers will accelerate in the next decade and eventually become the dominant form of employer-employee relationship in government and education—including libraries. While there is perhaps no inherent reason why unionized organizations cannot at the same time be participatory, it is far more likely, given their basic conservatism, that unions will reinforce the conventional hierarchical structures and inhibit any parallel movement toward participative management. It is clearly understood and accepted in the union culture that management and employees are in an adversary relationship. The workers do not aspire or pretend to participate in the management or governance of the organization. The unions themselves, despite a veneer of democracy, are frequently as authoritarian as the managements they oppose and severely limit the individual freedom of action of their members.

The hypothesis upon which participative management is based is that the greater the involvement of the employees in the decision-making process, the more satisfied and productive they will be and the more effective the enterprise will become. Although these assumptions are widely accepted as truisms they have not yet been adequately proved. While there is some evidence that involved employees may be more satisfied, it does not necessarily follow that they will be more productive or that their organization will be more effective. In any case, all of us have had a lifetime of experience and conditioning in conventional hierarchical structures and are accustomed to directing, being directed, and generally behaving in certain familiar ways. It would be totally unrealistic to expect that in the space of a few short years we will all—managers and managed—shed these deeply ingrained habits and attitudes and embrace a whole new life and work style in our organizations. Participative management is a

process that must be learned, and the learning will take time and effort.

While it is difficult to predict whether unionization or participative management will emerge as the dominant trend in libraries in the next decade, it is quite clear that these two ideas are basically incompatible. Those idealistic librarians, and there are many, who espouse both unionism and participation will be forced to make a choice when these two ideas clash as they inevitably must. Whatever the choice, there is likely to be considerable disillusionment, for the disadvantages of unionism are sometimes underestimated while the promises of participative management are frequently exaggerated.

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