

12

Quality circles and institutional culture: a proposal

Anand Kumar

• Organisational environment and culture

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is one of a set of methodologies that emphasise the participation of resource poor people in developmental processes. PRA has gone a long way in changing conventional development approaches towards more participative ones. It offers a people-oriented approach to sustainable development that includes a well-defined and expanding set of methods, for use in achieving its objectives. These have altered the way most development practitioners view the development process, and is reflected in the increasing popularity of PRA and people-centred development processes.

One deficiency with PRA is that it is somewhat weak in its institutional aspects. See, for example, the section on 'Institutional aspects' in 'Sharing our concerns and looking to the future' in *PLA Notes 22*. This paper sets out a proposed methodology for improving the ability of institutions to employ participatory approaches.

• Guidelines for institutional management and style

It is now clear that PRA and associated participatory methodologies will not take root unless the organisation culture is supportive. Two principles are important:

- (i) There should be a transition from management styles based on hierarchy, inhibited communications, command and obedience relationships to more organic styles that encourage lateral

communication, collegial authority and flexible roles and procedures.

- (ii) Institutions should create conditions that encourage employees to be participatory in their work with each other, and not just during 'field visits'.

These guidelines are good for small organisations and those which are starting afresh. However, most development work in countries of the South is undertaken by the government or donor agencies. In these organisations there is less flexibility to build an institutional culture that would foster PRA. The organisations are massive and have inherited and imbibed their culture from the prevailing structure of government organisations.

Thus, the spirit of PRA invariably may get defeated in a target-oriented, hierarchical, top-down culture whose management style is based on command and obedience relationships, following a blueprint. This impedes efforts to implement PRA through government agencies, unless handled by well-trained, sensitive and dynamic individuals.

• Quality circles

The answer to this, in my view, may lie in developing the organisation using PRA skills amongst implementing agency staff. Organisation development conjures up a corporate image and a wide variety of approaches are currently in fashion. However, I envisage a fairly simple, time-tested and incremental approach to bring about a more participatory, experimental and flexible functioning of organisations.

The concept of *quality circles* is fairly simple and needs no special adaption to developmental organisations. Quality circles are generally associated with industrial product quality, but this is too narrow a concept of quality. Quality is everything an organisation does in the eyes of its customers or clients, which encourages them to regard the organisation as the best in that field. Simply put, quality is a measure of achievement of customer satisfaction.

'A quality circle is a small group between three and twelve people who do similar work, voluntarily meeting together regularly for about an hour per week in paid time, who are trained to identify, analyse and solve some of the problems in their work, presenting solutions to management, and where possible, implementing the solutions themselves'

Quality Circles Handbook, David A. Hutchins

• **Benefits**

The concept of quality circles is based on the simple recognition of the fact that, given the right environment, people do want to work. They want to improve both themselves and their organisation and, provided they are compensated fairly, gain considerable satisfaction from recognition of their talents and creativity.

Quality circles use participatory methods to involve employees in the success of the organisation through the development of self-control in 'small group' type activities. Although there are any number of small group activities, such as project group, task force, action groups, etc., quality circles are unique in philosophy and content. They have a long-term view, are incremental and most importantly, explicitly aim to develop frontline staff. As the ethics and philosophy of quality circles takes root and develops in an organisation, the organisational culture desired by PRA takes shape.

Quality circles come under many names and have been effectively used across the world in environments ranging from heavy manufacturing to consumer goods and services like telecommunications and banking. They have cut costs, improved processes and increased customer satisfaction. More

importantly, they have contributed significantly to employee development. Employees have become more involved with and see the value of their work, become aware that their work gets recognition and solve their own problems. It has led to more participatory and trusting organisational environments where the recommendations and voice of frontline staff is valued.

The kind of organisational cultures which have resulted from a committed and sensitive use of the quality circle concept are similar to those desired by PRA. The best feature of quality circles is that they have succeeded in changing organisational cultures which were initially very similar to those which exist in typical government agencies - hierarchical, rule-bound, top-down and non-experimental.

The apparent simplicity of the concept is both a strength and weakness. Properly introduced, and given the right environment, quality circles represent an opportunity to create a new kind of work environment, based on participation and operational flexibility rather than rule-bound constraints. They work gradually, taking the whole organisation with them rather than through a revolutionary upheaval. The danger is that if the ideas do not have the support of top management, are introduced in a perfunctory manner and do not receive the necessary support, they fail and add to the cynicism of employees. This reduces the concept to just another fashion.

• **Conclusions**

My suggestion is that quality circles are easily introduced, are simple, and after taking root they can help to create a participatory management culture in organisations.

They have considerable potential for altering organisational cultures from top-down, hierarchical, role-bound ones to more participatory, open and experimental ones in development agencies. This could complement the existing PRA approaches towards a comprehensive implementation of the PRA philosophy. I wanted to share my ideas with readers and hope this proposal will challenge people to action. More importantly, I hope it can trigger discussion and debate on improving the organisational effectiveness of PRA.

- **Anand Kumar**, 2/142 Vikasnagar, Kursi Road, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh 226 020, India.