

1985

## Theory Z and school improvement

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### Recommended Citation

Schoneman, Paul H., "Theory Z and school improvement" (1985). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3247.  
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## Theory Z and school improvement

### **Abstract**

Improving American schools is a continual concern to school administrators because many economists and citizens argue that if our economic community is to continue as a world leader our schools must also be world leaders in the area of education. As a result of this logic, the American public always seems to demand more accountability from our schools. This demand has put school administrators to work in search of ways to be more productive in our schools in hopes of showing school accountability to the American public.

THEORY Z AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Paul H. Schoneman

December 1985

This Research Paper by: Paul H. Schoneman

Entitled: THEORY Z AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Improving American schools is a continual concern to school administrators because many economists and citizens argue that if our economic community is to continue as a world leader our schools must also be world leaders in the area of education. As a result of this logic, the American public always seems to demand more accountability from our schools. This demand has put school administrators to work in search of ways to be more productive in our schools in hopes of showing school accountability to the American public.

The Commission on Excellence in Education apparently voiced frustrations of many Americans with the now famous line from its A Nation at Risk: "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people," (cited in the Chronicle of Higher Education, p. 11). Not surprisingly, since the Japanese were praised frequently in A Nation at Risk and had also achieved remarkable industrial and business success in the last two decades, much of the search focused on Japanese management methods.

During a time of educational turmoil in this country, it was perhaps predictable that American educators should become interested in Theory Z. For those who were administering schools, rather than business or industries, anything which held the possibility of improving American schools became a

subject for serious study. American industrialists generally conceded that there are major differences in Japanese and American management systems, and no system attracts as much attention as Theory Z.

### History

Following World War II Japan was faced with the task of rebuilding its industry. Historically Japanese products had been considered inferior by international standards. However shortly after World War II, under the MacArthur Plan, thousands of Japanese industrialists were brought to the United States to be trained by their American counterparts in hopes of rebuilding the Japanese system. As the Japanese integrated American ideas, a rapid turnabout took place in such companies as Sony, Honda, and Toyota whose products were now becoming leaders in their fields. Many American observers insisted that the key to Japanese success was that an unusual spirit of cooperation existed between management and workers. Other Americans speculated that the reason for such successes lay in the cultural background of the Japanese people, which stressed the necessity of cooperation between people because of the compact physical environment that exists on the Japan islands.

In the past ten years many authors have written about this sense of cooperation that exists between management and

workers in Japanese industries. A leading author from the United States who has written about this topic is William G. Ouchi, a UCLA professor who studied Japanese management techniques and their potential application to American companies. His book, Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge (1981), became a best seller and provided an opportunity for many to study Theory Z. A large portion of Theory Z is dedicated to this sense of cooperation that exists between Japanese industries' management and workers. Many recent authors refer to this sense of cooperation as participatory management. The two aspects of participatory management most frequently discussed were Quality Circles -- a management technique used to make workers more effective -- and the need for trust development between workers and management. Educators have been prominent among the students of Theory Z's form of participatory management, hoping it might be used to make the American educational systems more productive.

#### Quality Circles

Although Quality Circles theory originated in the United States, its practical use was not developed because many people were skeptical about its effectiveness in this country. At that time our industrial growth in the United States was thriving, so many industrialists were leary in attempting to

implement any new management theories. Quality Circles application actually began in Japan after WW II, with the avowed purpose of helping improve the country's industries. It was not until after the Japanese were successful with using Quality Circles that Americans wanted to try that management form.

Educational leaders such as Lindner (1984) have stated that the Quality Circle idea has shown definite promise for our American schools. "Quality Circles have since been used successfully in many corporations and in some public agencies. We see no reason why Quality Circles - or a modification of them cannot be used to improve the quality of service in schools" (Dunne & Maurer, 1982, p. 88). Other educators such as Moretz (1983), have observed actual case studies of Quality Circles at work in our American educational institutions. One such study was that of Central Piedmont Community College of Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the first educational institutions to implement Quality Circles. The CPCC project extended from July, 1981, to November, 1982, and demonstrated the potential for successful use of the Quality Circles in school systems. Administrators and teachers surveyed felt as though they had done a better job teaching students as a result of the use of Quality Circles.



Although definitions of quality circles vary, most authors agree with "a technique used in participatory management to help improve the performances of the organization." According to Chase (1983), a Quality Circle is "a small group of employees (5-12), who voluntarily meet on a regular basis to identify, analyze, and solve various problems." Circles usually meet for an hour each week, but time varies depending on the problem, the stage of the problem, and the state of the problem solving process with which the group is engaged.

The main purpose of the Quality Circle has always been to solve problems by small group consensus (Aquila, 1982). The democratic processes of debate and voting have been used to help make decisions concerning potential changes for improvement. In the schools, typical problems that Quality Circles dealt with included improving student discipline, increasing student time on task, and improving school and community relations. These goals have become more common in today's American schools.

For Quality Circles to be successful in the schools, however, it is essential that a solid planning stage be established. Administrators and teachers must be oriented to the concepts of Quality Circles before their introduction into a school. Teachers, like workers everywhere, need inservice

training to ensure that they understand the complexities of Quality Circles (Aquila, 1982)..,

Usually forming a steering committee is the first step followed by choosing teacher leaders and informing them about the Quality Circle process (Miller & Sparks, 1984). Many principals hire a consultant to help train staff members in the Quality Circle procedures (Dunne & Maurer, 1982). Once these preliminaries have been completed, all staff members must be informed about the background and purposes of the Quality Circle programs. Effective Quality Circles take time to organize; it is generally accepted that at least eighteen months of organizing/training is required before Quality Circles could be put into action (Chase, Dunne & Maurer, 1982). Gaining support from the administration, staff and school board invariably becomes a time consuming effort, but a necessary one to take place if the Quality Circles have any chance of working.

Quality Circles require the principal to be an 'expert' in working with people. Principals should grow to elicit peoples' viewpoints and serving as facilitators in reaching solutions. But, before implementing Quality Circles a principal should evaluate his or her own leadership style (Dunne & Maurer, 1982). Some principals studied had difficulties

developing Quality Circles when they came to believe it meant giving up some of their power.

Quality Circles were not meant to take power away from the principal; rather they were designed to provide him or her with the best resources available in solving problems (Chase, 1983). The principal actually enjoys the final say in the decision making process. However, the principal must ensure that suggested solutions presented by the Quality Circle are carefully considered. If a principal were to implement the ritual of Quality Circles but never consider using the solutions proposed, it would have a negative effect on the principal's ability to command the respect of the group and eventually of his or her leadership. Spirited leadership is needed to get faculty and students committed to working toward the same goals and objectives (George, 1983).

In addition it is crucial that the principal understand what makes the Quality Circle process unique. The eight steps in the process include: round robin brainstorming, voting to achieve group consensus, cause and effect analysis, data collection, decision analysis, generating solutions, management presentations, and evaluation (Chase, 1983).

The first step in the Quality Circle process is to determine the cause of the problem currently being studied (Chase, 1983; Lindner, 1984). Members of the group usually

are able to provide enough information to ensure objectivity in the analysis of the problem. Decision analysis is enhanced by communication between Quality Circle members and their colleagues. Those who serve on school committees discover it is relatively easy to gain information from their peers in informal conversation settings.

Once the causes of a problem are fully understood, the group searches for ideas and solutions to the problem by brainstorming. Romine (1981) and Chase (1983) stressed that to accomplish the brainstorming phase, participants must be open minded, willing to partake in discussion, and willing to put school goals above their ego. Once potential solutions are discussed, logic is required for the group to consider the best possible solutions. Solutions presented to the administration, and afterward, potential solution's evaluations completed and discussed. Workable suggested solutions are then implemented.

A positive outcome of participatory management is staff satisfaction. Teachers who have a hand in decision making are more committed and more motivated in their work (Dunne & Maurer, 1982), leading to an increase in efficiency and productivity directly related to instruction (Bonner, 1982). Rogus and Shaw (1984) stressed the importance of involving the entire staff in setting group goals and restructuring the

organization in their schools. Krammer (1977) and Wilhelm (1984) argued that it was impossible to run an effective school if the principal acted as though he were an absolute monarch. Principals needed to realize that administrative decisions were a cooperative effort. It seems easier to run a school when staff members and administrators are working together toward common goals.

According to Ouchi (1981) and O'Hanlon (1983) a participatory approach to decision making is also more effective than individual decision making. When administrators serve as facilitators in decision making, the problem or project is looked at more carefully because of the larger number of people involved. Many of the pros and cons are developed in discussion, so better decisions are more likely to be reached. (The potential for innovative ideas is also enhanced in this atmosphere.) Administrators often forget that teachers are a valuable resource in their school and could work together to improve curriculum and instruction when given the opportunities to do so. No administrator could understand the complexities of every subject area and activity that take place in a school. So it makes good sense to encourage staff members to work on the shortcomings in their individual areas as well as in general school areas.

Administrators who think they could make all decisions on their own were destined to fail.

Dunne and Maurer (1982) summarized the following positive consequences of Quality Circles. They

- a) develop the problem-solving capacity of the staff.
- b) provide input on problems and potential opportunities from all corners of the school.
- c) provide different perspectives on major issues.
- d) establish an ongoing system for solving critical problems.
- e) increase the collaboration between teaching faculty and administration.
- f) help everyone focus on results.
- g) turn the powerlessness felt by many teachers and administrators into result-oriented activities.
- h) change from reactive problem-solving to active goal-setting groups.
- i) actually help solve problems.

#### Trust

In any participatory management approach, trust must be developed between the principal and staff. Teachers must feel as though they can talk to administrators about nearly any problem. Trust is clearly the one essential ingredient in making Quality Circles work effectively, and it may be the one

indispensable tool for school principals as well. However, trust is a leadership ingredient that many school administrators tend to overlook. When one asks teachers what is most needed for our schools to become more effective, the response is often, "develop a climate of trust" (Rothberg, 1984, p. 18).

There are clear indications that many administrators fail to understand the disadvantages of not being able to establish a trust relationship in their schools (Miller & Sparks, 1984). Research has shown that when a lack of trust toward administrators exists, teachers tend to complain more about stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Cruickshank, 1981). This feeling of alienation between teachers and administrators contributes to the fact that approximately 50% of our most promising young teachers leave the profession within their first ten years of teaching (Vance & Schlechty, 1982). The teachers who stay in the profession, despite the lack of trusting atmosphere, are likely to undermine decisions and moves made by untrusted administrators.

Fortunately, several school administrators have recognized the advantages to democratic leadership and the reasons for developing trust between themselves and their staff members. Albrecht (1981) and Green, Cook, and Rogers (1984) suggested a sense of "team" should be developed in

schools, not a hierarchial we-they relationship. This sense of team tends to result in a better learning atmosphere for students because teachers are striving to achieve common goals. This sense of "team" also keeps teachers motivated to improve and as a result they consistently demonstrate higher job satisfaction (Cooke, Kornbluh, & Abramis, 1981). "The whole notion of involving others in decisions that will effect the 'buying-in' approach makes sense" (Alfonso, Firth, & Neville, 1981, p. 20). When staff members feel as though they are an intricate part of their school, they feel better about themselves, their jobs, and their school. That reality is sure to reflect a positive image of the administrative staff and their approach toward staff development.

To establish this "team" approach between administration and staff open communication must exist. Administrators must make their goals and expectations clear to their staff members. Whenever an administrator is working with a group of people to accomplish common goals, he or she must be sure everyone in the group understands his or her intentions. Administrators who do not communicate effectively with their staffs are likely to have a lack of trust with their school (Schmuck, 1977). Establishing a sense of professionalism in teachers is also important in establishing a "team" approach. Teachers want to be treated like professionals and they want to use



their professional abilities to help improve their school. Professionalism is developed by sharing information, promoting staff involvement on projects, and trusting staff members with responsibilities (Harlon, 1983).

#### Conclusion

The literature suggests that the use of Quality Circles in American schools concomitant with an increased sense of trust between administrators and teachers offers positive strides toward school effectiveness. It further suggests that these may be key factors in determining the effectiveness of schools. The general philosophy of cooperation and participation between administration and staff in the decision making process has existed for years, but specific methods in accomplishing this goal have been rare. Quality Circles have proven to be successful in many industrial settings throughout the world and the time may now be appropriate for American schools to use the procedures of Quality Circles to help their quest for more effectiveness. The methods and procedures of Quality Circles is what make them unique. Those Quality Circles procedures and the cruciality of developing trust in the organization are the lessons to be learned from Theory Z. They may well hold the key for school principals who seek to initiate school improvements.

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