

Chapter 6

Managing In–Company Standardization While Avoiding Resistance: A Philosophical–Empirical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Standards may be an advantage for a company, but employees often resist them because they feel they are forced to behave in a certain way. Even a broad approach like TQM seems to have too little focus on the “human aspects” to prevent resistance and failure during change projects like in-company standardization. This chapter uses a philosophical approach to study why staff tend to resist company standardization initiatives. Foucault and Habermas provide insights into the reasons for this resistance but do not solve the tension between freedom and control. Dooyeweerd’s philosophy seems to be more promising. This chapter uses a company standardization project of an automotive supplier to examine these three philosophical approaches to understand resistance to standards and to investigate how this resistance can be avoided by managing in-company standardization in a more holistic way.

INTRODUCTION¹

‘Conforming to standards means following the advice of others, relinquishing a certain degree of one’s freedom of choice and self-control to others, and often becoming more similar to many others as well – none of which is very consistent with the concept of an actor. We may therefore expect a certain reluctance to follow standards – in particular those that are well known and followed by many – from individuals and organizations seeking to be highly autonomous, innovative, and different’ (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000, p. 134). Actors may view standards negatively because these can limit responsibility, prevent them

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from doing or saying what they want, and incur high costs during conversion from current practice to the practice prescribed in the standards. Moreover, standards may lead to uniformity (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000, p. 136). ‘Many of the objections to standards are similar to the objections to rules and regulation in general. Standardization is often seen as an unwelcome, unnecessary, and harmful intrusion into a world of free, distinct individuals and organizations that are wise enough to decide for themselves, or into the world of civil society or free markets. Standardization, it is felt, will mean regulation from outside, whereby actors, things, and conditions are now to be shaped in a uniform manner’ (Brunsson, 2000, p. 171). Standardization is the activity of establishing and recording a limited set of solutions to actual or potential matching problems, directed at benefits for the party or parties involved, balancing their needs, and intending and expecting that these solutions will be used repeatedly or continuously, during a certain period, by a substantial number of the parties for whom they are meant (De Vries, 1997). In the case of in-company standardization, the activity is carried out fully or mainly within the company, the standard may be used outside the company as well.

The issue of resistance to standards has received little attention in the literature on managing standardization within a company. Even studies that provide a broad managerial approach ignore it (Adolphi, 1997; AFNOR, 1967; Boh & Yellin, 2007; Wenström et al., 2000; Van Wessel, 2010). These objections may apply to all standards but probably in particular to management system standards because these affect human behavior in a more direct way than technical standards. Therefore, this chapter starts by discussing management standards and examining the paradox between benefits of implementation on the one hand, and resistance to this implementation on the other hand. We discuss that broad implementation approaches like TQM and BPR fall short in avoiding resistance and/or failure. Inspired by Lelong and Mallard (1995) who referred to Foucault in their introduction to a special issue of *Réseaux* on standardization, and by a study by Van Veldhuisen (1996), we analyze resistance to such standards using Foucault’s (1977) analysis of anonymous power systems. This analysis provides an explanation for resistance but not for benefits. Habermas’ (1987) concept of communicative action provides additional insights but does not solve the problem of the tension between control and freedom. Dooyeweerd’s (1955, 1957) philosophy overcomes this tension and provides the basis for a holistic management approach. We apply this approach in the case of a standardization project in a company. This project was related to the company’s quality management system which was based on an international quality management standard. We evaluate the company standardization project and the resistance to it during a six-year period, using quality management literature and philosophical studies by Foucault, Habermas and Dooyeweerd.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Paradox: Benefits of Standards and Resistance to Them

The paradox of benefits of standards and resistance to them may be related to the difference between common and individual benefits of standards mentioned by Arthur (1989). Psychologists emphasize human resistance to control – freedom versus order (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). The same terms are used by David (1995, p. 18): ‘The kernel of the problem posed for private and public decision-making with regard to the setting of technology standards may be construed to be nothing more and nothing less than the fundamental issue with which all social organizations are confronted: where to position themselves on the terrain between the poles of ‘order’ and ‘freedom’.

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