

Chapter 12

The Amplification of Power Dynamics in Virtual Work

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how power dynamics are manifested in virtual work. It starts with a look at how power is demonstrated in traditional decision making, and progresses to an exploration of how some organizations are experimenting with different forms of e-participation. Two cases are presented to illustrate some of the decisions associated with the implementation of information and communication technology (ICT), and the consequences of those choices. The first case looks at President Obama's platform on technology and how his administration has embraced it to expand his vision of democracy in the information age. The second case portrays a utility company seeking to increase the involvement of its stakeholders through the creation of a blog site for the exclusive use of its community council. Both cases reveal a complex view of how organizations attempting to increase participation can paradoxically find themselves stifling it.

INTRODUCTION

Working in virtual environments provides a number of tools that can serve to amplify the power dynamics involved in the relationships among the relevant stakeholders. The internet was developed under a premise of facilitating open information sharing and providing a platform for more equal participation. There are many information and com-

munication technologies (ICTs) that demonstrate the attainment of these ideals. However, there are also many developments in other ICTs that have provided a more sophisticated means of command and control that could signal the arrival of a type of neo-scientific management. At either extreme, it would appear that the ordinary power dynamics associated with the traditional working relationships between employers, employees, customers, suppliers, regulators, and other stakeholders are all amplified by technology that either enhances the

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participation of these stakeholders by increasing the levels of participation in both a quantitative and qualitative sense, or strengthens the capacity of those who desire to monitor and constrain their communication. The objective of this chapter is to identify how these competing organizational paradigms are invoked by engaging organizational stakeholders through the various processes of virtual work and electronic participation.

BACKGROUND

Power is one of the most frequently studied concepts in the social sciences. Accordingly, there are many different perspectives on how power should be conceptualized. One of the most frequently cited frameworks for understanding the various bases of power was provided by French and Raven (1959). Work on this framework has been sustained for almost 50 years (Raven, 2008) and has led to the development of the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) utilize Edwards' (1981) historic description of the progression in communicative strategies moving from simple control, to technical control, and then bureaucratic control. They then add concertive control to the list to describe how organizational values continue to unobtrusively influence the behavior of organizational members in the absence of any overt controlling mechanism. Despite the recognition of the multiple bases of power held by members across the organizational hierarchy, the concept of power has mostly been viewed as inherently located within the organizational structure, which thereby produces dominant relationships. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) make a distinction between power and control where power is the capacity to achieve a goal and control is the exercise of that capacity. Barker and Cheney (1994) point out that any form of power is "most meaningful, then not as a commodity (though we commonly reify it metaphorically so: "Her power rose yesterday") but as we exercise

it" (p. 22). Mumby (2001) also advocates a more communicative view that conceptualizes power as the situational accomplishment of actors, which allows for a more open view of how organizations are constructed. This view is particularly valuable when thinking about how the work of organizations is accomplished in virtual environments where the "organization" is no longer bound by physical space or the traditional markers of status. Rather, organizations are beginning to be defined by the relationships between the various stakeholders who share interdependent goals. These relationships do not necessarily require the face-to-face contact traditionally encountered between the hours of 9 to 5 on Mondays through Fridays. These relationships are now constructed in a virtual space that can potentially span the globe as a result of various networked technologies.

There has been a great deal of work on participation in decision making (see review by Seibold & Shea, 2001) that demonstrates some resistance to the dominant power structures by attempting to empower workers to assume more responsibility for organizational outcomes. However, in this approach the ultimate responsibility for empowering or inviting participation still resides in those located in the upper echelons of the hierarchy. This is seen particularly when examining the use of quality circles, which were derived from the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM). The premise of TQM was to engage in a continual search for the most efficient ways of running a given business. This search was ideally accompanied by the use of data analysis in a manner reminiscent of Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management (1911). This approach was criticized for the inequitable treatment of workers that was attributed to the application of these methods. Although this approach was ultimately replaced by efforts to humanize the workforce, characteristics of these classic organization principles persist in organizations today. New developments in information and communication technology hold the latest promise of being able to provide

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