Democratic alternatives to hierarchy — why so few?
Bob Dick

Abstract: Examples are briefly described of organizations that offer a perspective to complement the experience of industrial democracy in Norway and Mondragon. The examples are organizations choosing a structure and culture that minimize hierarchy. They provide a less-traditional approach to balancing political and socio-technical participation. To do so they devolve responsibility for coordination of effort and expertise to individuals and teams most directly providing the effort and expertise. This gives the individuals and teams high autonomy. Examples include a university class, action learning projects in community and organizational settings, and a voluntary self-organizing network of facilitators. In addition, a small sample of organizations from the larger sample documented by Corporate Rebels (https://corporate-rebels.com/) is also briefly described and compared. Finally, the examples are located within other, wider, changes taking place.

Keywords: balancing political and socio-technical participation, organizational structure, organizational culture, industrial democracy, minimal hierarchy, butterfly effect, paradigm shift

Alternativas democráticas a la jerarquía - ¿Por qué tan pocas?

Resumen: Se describen brevemente ejemplos de organizaciones que ofrecen una perspectiva complementaria a las experiencias de democracia industrial en Noruega y Mondragón. Los ejemplos son organizaciones que eligen una estructura y una cultura que minimizan la jerarquía. Proporcionan un enfoque menos tradicional para equilibrar la participación política y sociotécnica. Para hacerlo, devuelven la responsabilidad de la coordinación del esfuerzo y la experiencia a las personas y equipos que hacen ese esfuerzo y tienen esa experiencia de manera más directa. Esto da a las personas y equipos una gran autonomía. Los ejemplos incluyen una clase universitaria, proyectos de aprendizaje en acción en entornos comunitarios y organizacionales, y una red voluntaria de facilitadores autoorganizados. Además, también se describe y compara brevemente una pequeña muestra de organizaciones de la muestra más grande documentada por Corporate Rebels (https://corporate-rebels.com/). Finalmente, los ejemplos se ubican dentro de otros cambios más amplios que están ocurriendo.

Palabras clave: equilibrio entre la participación política y socio-técnica, estructura organizacional, cultura organizacional, democracia industrial, jerarquía mínima, efecto mariposa, cambio de paradigma

1. Introduction

This paper engages particularly with the tension between political and socio-technical participation and how to resolve it. My intention is to explore some examples that may suggest alternative theoretical and practical approaches. I draw on two different samples. One is my own experience over half a century in structuring academic classes participatively, and in the use of participatory action learning for large action learning programs in community and organization development. I also draw on the 25 years of existence of the Australasian Facilitators Network, a self-organizing network of about 800 facilitators in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. A second, brief, sample is drawn from the growing collection of trail-blazing organizations identified and documented by Corporate Rebels on their corporate-rebels.com website ‘bucket list’.

Let me anticipate the conclusion I will later draw. As in the lead article in this issue by Johan Ravn and his colleagues (Ravn et al., 2023), culture is an important aid or hindrance to innovative structures. In particular, I conclude that existing and partly tacit assumptions about the nature of organizations, leadership, and coordination, are central. A widely held set of these assumptions can be characterized as the bureaucratic mindset. For people with such a mindset, I conclude that some promising alternative structures violate too many of their assumptions. The Ravn et al. article identifies many other aspects in its Norwegian and Mondragon examples. All are again relevant to the examples below, though only the aspects of organizational environment and of individual and cultural evolution are explored.

I too have assumptions. One of them that underpins my understanding of the different examples is explored below. It concerns organizational structure. Organizations can achieve large or complex tasks beyond the ability of unorganized individuals. They do so by coordinating the effort and expertise of multiple individuals and teams. Important questions follow from this idea — how is the coordination actually achieved, and by whom? Answers to this question open up some alternative ways of resolving the tension between political and socio-technical participation.

With this background, and the focus it provides, I now describe each of the examples. I begin with some of my own experience as learning facilitator and change facilitator. I also draw on my experience as the moderator of the email list that is the main coordination mechanism for the Australasian Facilitators Network.

2. Classroom and community participation

2.1. A university class

The example I draw on here was a fourth-year optional class in the final year of a four-year undergraduate program in psychology. The version I describe here evolved from many years of trial-and-error pursuing continuous improvement. My aim as course convenor was to bring democracy and participation to the classroom. For a little more detail see Dick (1991).

The starting point was very different. Initially, in the first week I tried to engage the learners in co-designing course content and process. The outcomes were disappointingly pedestrian. Each subsequent year I continued to experiment to find ways to improve learner