THE HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACH
TO INDUSTRIAL MANAGEMENT:
ITS CRITICS AND DEFENDERS**

1. Background Material: Early and Contemporary Research


Presents a detailed description of the studies carried on at the Hawthorne (Chicago) plant of the Western Electric Company between 1927 and 1932. Describes the early “illumination experiments” and the subsequent series of experiments which resulted from the inconclusive findings. These experiments attempted to study the effect on production of such variables as working hours, wage incentives, and degree and kind of supervision. The importance of group formation and worker involvement in decisions were basic findings. The material presented in this work served as the foundation for Elton Mayo’s writings on the problems of an industrial civilization. Mayo is recognized as the important founder of the human relations school, and much of the subsequent criticism of this school has been directed toward his writings.


This work reviews in detail the Hawthorne experiments which underlie the human relations field. In so doing, it makes explicit recent methodological criticisms and evaluates them. The author thus distinguishes Management and the Worker, which describes the experiments, from other products of the early researchers. He believes that too often there is insufficient attempt to distinguish the early research from the subsequent social and political writings of Elton Mayo. He concludes that Roethlisberger and Dickson were not “biased in favor of management, did not regard workers as being spurred on by irrational motives,” and that they saw group formation as “a reaction of workers to threats by management.” The major weakness in their work lies in their not pursuing “their analysis so far as to consider factors such as property ownership, size of organization, and general technological change.”

*Compiled by Myron Glazer, Assistant in Research.
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The contributing authors are men with varying viewpoints and from several disciplines. The volume attempts to shed light on the controversies in human relations research by presenting material on the behavior of people at work and in leisure time activities. It begins with papers offering "two interpretations of the emergence of scholarly and managerial interest in human relations in the work place." A second section "focuses on interplay between... the urban-industrial environment... and... the workplace." The concluding sections focus attention on industrial organizations and trade unions. These writings serve an important function by presenting a broad overview and disciplined treatment of problems pertinent to the human relations approach.

2. Definitions of the Human Relations Approach

Knowles, William H. "Human relations in industry: research and concepts." *California Management Review* (Graduate Schools of Business Administration, University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles), Fall, 1958. pp. 87-105. $2.00.

Two major interwoven trends in the human relations approach result in controversy. The first is a religious belief directed toward saving a world on "the brink of destruction." Drawing upon, but far more extreme than psychoanalysis, it emphasizes "the subconscious, the non-rational, the instinctive, and distrusts conscious, rational, analytical processes." The collective subconscious "will discover the truth." The second trend, which puts the human relations approach into "proper perspective," focuses on informal groups, organization, leadership, and training. The causes of emotional disturbance are pointed out as deriving from "the nature of business organization" and harming business and individuals. The second trend makes a distinct contribution, but unless human relations overcome the gaps in its general theory, it is destined to the same fate as scientific management.


Briefly, but clearly, the several meanings of the term human relations are presented: an intra- and interpersonal phenomenon, a tool kit for practitioners, an ethical orientation, a scientific discipline. The distinction between these must be kept in mind if interested people are not to talk past one another. Human relations is a growing discipline drawing upon several of the social sciences. At the same time it has been applied to industrial problems. The techniques and their use should not be considered synonymous with the subject matter of the field.

3. The Critics

This book traces the history of social science research in industry. It is extremely critical of what the author defines as the attempt to manipulate the behavior of workers in order to attain management goals. Baritz sees the Hawthorne experiments as representing a milestone in the history of this kind of industrial research. Its results, he states, led to the human relations approach with its attempts to manipulate workers through counselling and leadership techniques. The worker is encouraged to follow through "persuasion" rather than through direct order. Increasing production and weakening union attraction are fundamental goals.


The author summarizes the current reaction which he sees against the human relations approach in industry. This reaction includes criticism of the methodology underlying the original Hawthorne studies, the alleged manipulation of workers, and the threats to their individuality, and from management, a dubious attitude concerning the effects of the "democracy in industry" orientation. Jennings voices his own strong doubts as to the ability of American executives to apply the techniques of the approach. Their basically authoritarian orientation belies their commitment to worker participation.


Two economists take a penetrating look at what they refer to as "plant sociology." Their analysis includes the writings of Mayo as well as of the contemporary writers William Foote Whyte and George C. Homans. In comparing the human relations approach to that of economists, the authors find sharp differences resulting from ideological factors. These include "different views of the nature of man and of society, different values and prescriptions for social policy." The authors criticize the perception of man as a social animal desiring security more than freedom and needing the emotional sustenance of the group. The "good society" can then only be found in the plant which needs to be stable. The manager is a key figure and cooperation from unions is essential. The weaknesses of this approach include ignoring of external forces and of incentive to stimulate the manager to engage in good human relations. Market forces, central to the economist's view, are given little emphasis.


There is no quarrel presented with the basic orientation of the human relations approach and its sensitivity to the well-being of the worker. The concern is that the "fad" or "cult" of human relations undermines personal responsibility and emphasizes the avoidance of conflict. Furthermore, training executives in these skills tends to dilute the necessary importance of "the process of analysis, judgment, and decision making." It is destructive both for the worker and supervisor when the latter consciously attempts to "practice" human relations.
4. The Defenders


The human relations approach is applicable to the problems of industrial organizations. The key is to be able to see "concrete organizational situations not only in technical and economic but also in social terms..." Basic to this is the ability to internalize a clinical approach. This is in response to those critics who charge human relations techniques with manipulating and destroying individuality or diminishing the acceptance of responsibility. On the contrary, acceptance of individual differences, sensitivity to underlying sentiments, and awareness of an authority hierarchy which indicates difference and individual responsibility are some of the components of the clinical approach. Because of the youth of this field, its merits must be taken on faith more than on results. Yet because it complements rather than overshadows other management functions, continued research and appraisal are necessary and possible.


The three participants look at the past, present, and future of the human relations field. Spates criticizes the recent "debunkers" of the approach and points to a long list of changes which have occurred in personnel administration over the last forty years. The "treat them rough and tell them nothing" approach has been replaced by a concern for the employee's dignity and self-realization. Drucker points out that the next generation of employees will be largely college educated, New approaches and knowledge are needed which go beyond the original research in the field. Two business assumptions are open to question: it is permissible to attempt to manipulate employees; "business has a right to demand loyalty." Argyris hypothesizes that in the future there will be less emphasis on getting people to "like one another," a changed conception emphasizing that people are only one part of an organization; that people can have an identity separate from that of the organization; and that it is not possible for a supervisor to develop anyone but himself.


This report is written by one of the leaders of contemporary human relations research. In concise and lucid terms he traces the orientations of this approach and the effect of recent research on the field's thinking. Changes have occurred in four major areas: the effective use of money "as an incentive"; "the different forms of group behavior actually to be found in industry" which goes beyond the "simple 'work group' concept"; the effect of organization structure "on morale and productivity"; and awareness of "some of the limitations of human relations training."