«HUMAN RESOURCES DILEMMAS IN RESTRUCTURING: LESSONS FROM THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY».

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ESSEC

INTRODUCTION

Waves of lay-offs and closures during the recent deep recession focused the attention of academics not only on the human impact and the moral issues posed to managers, but also on their economic success in returning companies to better health. The word «downsizing» has come to be used to represent the gamut of strategies of size and workforce reduction aimed at overcoming the threatening symptoms of decline.

We are all well aware that such strategies can be implemented rapidly, with relatively little care and with - seemingly - minimal consideration for the fates and futures of those being laid off. French legislation is of course designed to discourage such practices (the «taxi-licenciements» etc.) by surrounding the Plan social with an important series of legal requirements making it even possible for the companies' strategy to be declared as «null and void» in the courts.

Conversely we all know that some companies invest heavily in minimizing the human costs of downsizing and strive to restructure in such a way that the culture and climate of the reshaped organization remain conducive to renewed economic health. These firms develop Human Resources (HR) strategies which are sensitive to the individual costs of restructuring (retraining, outplacement, inplacement, etc.) and also, in many cases, sensitive to the organization-wide effects of reductions in resources, revenues and market share. Some of these effects are by now better understood, thanks to the work of American researchers on the processes and stages of decline in organizations (Cameron K., M. Kim and Whetten D.A. (1987)) :

    Centralization
    Poor leadership
    Loss of innovativeness
    Non-prioritized cut-backs

    Short-term crisis mentality
    Decreasing morale
    Loss of trust
    Resistance to change

    Restricted communication
    Politicized factions
    Increasing conflict

    Lack of team-work

These negative effects clearly pose a considerable challenge to the organization. Restructuration has to minimize such effects while at the same time ensuring that a better performance strategy is in place. A considerable challenge.

The evidence available suggests that firms more often than not fail in this task. Work by Henkoff (1990) and Koretz (1991), among others, shows that only 50% of firms examined reported having improved their efficiency after downsizing surgery - not an encouraging proportion at all. These poor results are confirmed in Cascio's (1993) review of studies on the issue. What are the main causes of this failure ?

We are a long way from an answer to this complex question, but recent work on the automobile industry does constitute progress. My purpose in this paper is to consider this work critically, and in the light of a broad literature available on the gradual and halting emergence of a new «production paradigm» in this sector of industry. I will argue that only by bringing in recent case study work on automobile firms can we understand the «social psychology of restructuring» and that this latter is essential for a correct comprehension of the success or failure of strategies. «Paradoxes of motivation» lie at the heart of the new psychological contract between workers and managers that the new production paradigm demands and restructuring only seems to render them more acute.

Based essentially on «total quality management» (TQM) and «lean production» this paradigm reconstructs the relations between management control and employee consent by trying to «engineer» high organizational commitment. This latter is difficult enough to accomplish and, as case study evidence shows (Fucini and Fucini (1991), Graham (1993)) often breaks down. When downsizing is placed within this context of a shift in control and consensual relations, the problems are compounded because job insecurity and «threat-rigidity» effects on employee behaviour inevitably increase.

This important issue is minimized in the American work on restructuring and downsizing which I consider here, and an effect of this is a lack of realism in its recommendations to managers on «best practice». In the following section this research is described and then a critique along the lines sketched above is offered. This modifies and deepens earlier approaches (Jenkins 1994(b)).

1. TRACKING DOWNSIZING IN THE U.S. AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY.

Relatively few systematic studies of restructuring from the human resources angle have been completed. McCune's study of 1988 is notable but by far the most important is that carried out by Cameron and his colleagues at the University of Michigan, with the avowed and ambitious aim of discovering what constitutes «excellence» in downsizing (Cameron, Freeman and Mishra (1991), Cameron (1994), Mishra and Mishra (1994)). It focuses on restructuring in thirty establishments in the U.S automotive sector, and this

longitudinally over a period of five years. Restructuring in all the firms was an overall strategy to tackle a number of classical symptoms of decline - profitability and market share loss in particular - and a variety of individual practices were found in combination in each of the thirty organizations. Cameron and his group classify these practices into three types.

Firstly there was «work force reduction», the straightforward diminution in numbers of employees on the firm's payroll by a variety of means (lay-offs of course, but also outplacements, early retirements, transfers, etc). Secondly, «work redesign» strategies which revise organizational structure or reshape job contents, boundaries and responsibilities. Work processes and flows were reconfigured and usually simplified so that if work force reduction is absolutely necessary then remaining employees are (in principle) properly prepared to tackle a new (and often heavier) work load - such effort corresponds to a medium term strategy. Finally there were «systemic» or «cultural» strategies which have a more long term orientation in seeking to radically change the norms and values which have built up historically in the work place around key processes and forms of coordination. Downsizing is here integrated into a policy of broad organizational change in which quality improvement and better value creation are central objectives. Typically total quality management (TQM) projects were instigated.

Cameron (1994) stresses that far from being mutually exclusive, the way these approaches were combined in firms provides a distinctive classification - companies varied both in depth of use (number of strategies of one type) as well as in breadth (variety of strategies of different types) as the following table shows ;

Correlations between different combinations of these types of policies and establishment effectiveness were sought, various measures of organizational performance being used as Cameron specifies ;

«Ratings by organization members were obtained on the extent to which their organization's performance had improved as a result of downsizing. They also rated the relative effectiveness of their firm compared to its previous two years' performance, its best domestic and global competitors, the organization's own goals, and the expectations of its customers ... data on productivity and costs were obtained from company records». (Cameron (1994) p200)

Downsizing Strategies

Workforce reduction	Work redesign	Systematic / Cultural

Increasing breadth (variety) ————————>

Increasing depth

(quantity)

	Workforce reduction	Work redesign	Systematic / Cultural
	Layoffs	Cut layers	Systems re-analysis
	Retirements	Merge units	Culture change
	Job banks	Remove products	·Participative reengineering
	Outplacement	Alter work	
	Inplacement,	Job redesign,	Tackle hidden,
	etc.	etc.	costs etc.

Two types of relations between effectiveness and downsizing strategies (in combination) could then be explored statistically ; on the one hand between strategy and performance improvement / deterioration and on the other hand between strategy and «absolute» industry -pertinent performance levels.

Generally very few organizations reported improvements in effectiveness of a really significant nature, a proportion much worse than the 50% cited earlier from nation-wide surveys, only five of the thirty. In relation to the table given above,

« ...ineffectiveness, lack of improvement and high scores on dysfunction are all present when workforce reduction strategies such as lay-offs, attrition, and buy-out packages are used by themselves... organizations with little breadth in their strategies, regardless of their depth, tended to be less effective than those with strategic breadth in executing downsizing ...on the other hand, firms whose performance was improving, that were effective, and that had an absence of the dysfunctional attributes prepared for downsizing by conducting systematic analyses, by involving employees, by increasing communication, and by implementing strategies incrementally. An

advanced quality culture was also a characteristic of these firms». (Cameron 1994 p206);

In the five «effective firms» six specific strategies for implementation were all present whereas absent or sparse in the ineffective and averagely effective plants. This leads the authors to posit « a configuration» thesis - the combined presence of the six policies in configuration constitutes excellence in downsizing. The six practices are as follows ;

1) Initiate downsizing from the top with firm, clear and consultative leadership. Attribute the precise re-design of jobs and units to accountable groups of employees charged with work process analysis and external comparisons («benchmarking»).

2) Implement cut-backs in the short term, across the board (for all), equitably and so as to signal the urgent need for collective effort, but also implement long term organization and job redesign and systemic «cultural» change.

3) Accept responsibility for the placement, counselling, relocation expenses and sponsoring (to other employers) of those losing their jobs while also paying special attention, by means of

human resources practices such as training, to the psychological difficulties posed by the transition to those remaining with the firm.

4) Implement downsizing externally - by analysing and streamlining relations with partners, suppliers and distributors as well as internally.

5) Aim to produce «specialised , flexible, loosely coupled units, while at the same producing generalized, coordinated, centralized units» (ibid.p.66) That is to say, combine corporate decentralization to strategic business units with strong corporate rationalization of costly and dispersed services (eg. information systems) and strong corporate 'clan» control (Ouchi (1980)).

6) Use downsizing as a means to short and medium term ends, but also propagate a mentality of «continuous improvement» (after the Japanese «Kaizen») favouring a view of downsizing as a permanent and ever present end in itself.

These are carefully expanded into twenty one «prescriptions for best practices» in the most recent discussions (Cameron 1994) but their essential logic remains the same.

I will argue in what follows that it is both premature and naive to offer such prescriptions and also, that behind the statistical correlations on which they are based lies an important series of questions that the authors of the study pass over. These questions centre on the issue of which factors in the structures, culture and management of the five «excellent» downsizing firms facilitated the emergence of their particular configurations (breadth) of strategies. The «contextualist» approach to the birth, implementation and success of management strategies developed by Quinn, Pettigrew and others (Pettigrew (1985)) provides the inspiration for the analysis.

2. BEST PRACTICES FOR WHOM ? BASIC QUESTIONS OF GENERALIZATION.

2.1. The automobile sector as a specific organizational field.

The first critical point about the lessons drawn from the study by the authors is fundamental, concerning how far we can generalize these putative principles of best practice. Clearly they are sector specific in derivation, and it is worth dwelling for a moment on what this

implies.We need to emphasize the specificities of the automotive industry in order to underline social forces which are insufficiently taken into account in the study.

We are dealing with manufacturing firms in an industry by now well versed in the processes of restructuring, this having begun way back in the second half of the 1970's. Attacked again and again by Japanese competition in the 1980's, we can speak of «waves» of restructuring and thus of firms well acquainted with most stages of the decline process. Furthermore such companies, as the authors themselves point out - «benefit» from years of performance research and benchmarking which has centred on productivity and (above all) quality strategy ; principles, programmes, coordinating mechanisms, etc..Total quality management (TQM) has become, in the last ten years, the obligatory strategy in the sector, as the global MIT report The Machine that Changed the World pointed out (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990)

In this sector TQM and Toyota-inspired «lean production» provide principles and models of exceptional detail and with a considerable «experimental history» - such firms as Renault, PSA, Rover, Bosch and Lucas for example have all had long periods of organizational learning in which they were able to assimilate from each other - and adapt after their own manner - «proven» techniques of organizational redesign and culture change. In a sense, then, it is not at all surprising to find the above six practices being used in the sector - what is perhaps more surprising is the high proportion of firms failing to combine them or using only one or two of them in any systematic sense.

This suggests that the extent to which a given company combines strategies such as the above six, and also the extent to which short-term workforce reduction is complemented by medium and long term organization redesign and culture change, will depend on sector specific conditions of organizational learning ; the availability of techniques and «role models», the way managerial knowledge as regards downsizing is circulated, etc. Such conditions are relatively neglected in the literature on strategy choice as regards downsizing (Greenhalgh, Lawrence and Sutton (1988)).

Indeed, while we must accept that responses to decline will naturally be mediated both by the cognitive structures of decision makers and by firm-specific norms in business and HRM strategy, the organizational «field» of firms of suppliers

and customers in automotive products, ever more tightly structured by the requirements of just-in-time production and delivery, and by higher and higher levels of quality assurance, also constitutes a formidably «tightly coupled» system in which the transfer of managerial techniques and knowledge is relatively fluid. Our conclusion should be, then, that the applicability of Cameron, Freeman and Mishra's six strategies, six elements of «best practice», will depend on the presence of conditions of knowledge transmission similar to those in their sector (the automobile industry). The frequency of use of particular restructuring strategies - or quality management techniques (see Jenkins and Mesure (1993)) - will be governed by the particular sociological and inter-organizational factors which retard or accelerate their spread across a specific organizational field

3. BEYOND THE STUDY. INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE CONDITIONS GOVERNING RESTRUCTURING STRATEGIES.

Similarly, at the more «micro» level, a level not explored in the Michigan work, it can be argued that the likelihood of one specific plant developing such downsizing strategies will depend on particular organizational contingencies (Pettigrew's (1985) «internal context») which lie behind the statistical correlations of the authors' study. This is clear for each of the policy profiles ; their emergence was conditioned by historical and intra-organizational forces. Generally one can argue straightaway that four organizational conditions will favour the combined use of the six practices ;

(A) a history of success in managing work and organization re-design projects (particularly important for 1. and 2.)

(B) employee and industrial relations conducive to constructive worker involvement in such projects (also for 1. and 2.)

(C) a history of successful human resources planning (important for 3.).

(D) leadership (at both plant and corporate level)

(i) willing and able to plan for, and invest in, the minimization of the human costs of downsizing (see 3.), and

(ii) willing to, and capable of, «marketing» the radical changes necessary to the workforce (vital for strtategies 1.2.3. and 6.).

Only when these conditions are present will there be a real chance of Cameron et al's «best practices» emerging. Case studies in other areas show clearly the kind of thing that happens when they are lacking, and to see this we only have to consider recent work on the emergence and progress of work redesign policies aimed at instituting autonomous work teams. Patterns of supervision and previous patterns of manager-union negotiation - to take but two sets of factors - condition very strongly the «fate» of a policy requiring increased «employee involvement» as Carr (1994) makes very clear in his discussion of Vauxhall, the U.K. subsidiary of General Motors.

3.1. Leadership and the selling of permanent restructuring.

This point can be developed a little if we take the leadership condition (D). Cameron et al are relatively silent about (i) and (ii) but these aspects of the mentalities of top leadership coalitions can be considered crucial to the direction of change. On the one hand the scope of leaders' notions of their responsibility for human costs, particularly in countries where legislation covering lay-offs is limited, is a key determinant of the form of downsizing strategy, while on the other hand willingness to sell unpopular and radical upheavals will obviously condition the compliance of employees to a process typically provoking stress, insecurity, anxiety and (perhaps) guilt, in large measure (Brockner et al (1988)).

This «selling» will be reinforced if top managers succeeed in getting it integrated into the processes of socialization into the organization's culture, as outlined in the classical work of Edgar Schein (Schein (1987)) - carefully linking it to the detail of «what managers at all levels pay attention to», and reinforcing it by HR policies on appraisal, careers and training. Unity of purpose in the managerial team as a whole seems fundamental to this.

While the first point has reminded us that principles of «best practice» are very often at the same time moral principles and that there is no replacement for reasoned and humanist analysis of «social costs», the second raises the whole issue of the effects of downsizing on the «psychological contract» between employer and (surviving) employees. Consideration of the moral problems will have to be given elsewhere - we might just note en passant their often complete absence in the OB and HRM literature on decline and downsizing.

If I use the terms «selling» and «marketing» above, then this is wilfully, so as to highlight the delicate and controversial nature of strategy 6.

We are told by Cameron et al. that leaders of the most effective downsizers (those using all six policies) refused in their communication with employees, to interpret downsizing «as an admission of failure or weakness». On the contrary they presented it positively as just one element of an overall productivity and quality improvement strategy - TQM and continuous improvement (a kind of western «kaizen») forming the «theoretical» framework. Downsizing is thus legitimated and presented as inevitable, now and in the future. Its «instutionalization» is recommended and legitimized as an aspect of constant restructuring.

The implications of this «institutionalization» are far-reaching, but Cameron et al are prepared to take them on board, as they do when they declare that ;

«Decline and, most certainly, downsizing are likely to be a recurring part of many   organization's life cycle stages in the future. In fact this study's results suggest   that   downsizing should become a permanent and on-going activity in organizations. Like fine-tuned athletes who constantly try to improve their performance, firms should be constantly looking for ways to improve efficiency through downsizing». (Ibid. p.71, emphasis in the original).

In this passage (and in the study generally) not only is the moral dimension of lay-offs «evacuated» but there is also an interesting overt slide from the study's finding that some effective firms present downsizing as part of a continuous quality improvement strategy to the judgement that its permanent use may be conducive to organizational health. The HR and organizational implications of this latter idea - one fully endorsed by others like Cascio (1993) - are troublesome to say the least, but regrettably they do not seem to be much explored in the current literature.

This lacuna is above all symptomatic of a lack of consideration of the evidence on the conditions governing automobile employee motivation and commitment which is provided by a number of recent case studies. It is not just that the author's analogy of the firm with an athlete is a little facile, it is also that the meaning of working in this way - that is with an acceptance that downsizing will always be looming its head in the future - is radically unclear and needs to be carefully considered.

What kind of a psychological contract between employer and employee does this «institutionalization» suggest ? What expectations of employees from their managers does this imply, and what HR policies are compatible with it ?

3.2. TQM, continuous improvement and human resources - the evidence from case studies.

Research on western companies implementing TQM and trying to give meaning to the notion of «continuous improvement» - not an easy task - reveals something of the variations possible in replies to the above two questions, and thus the beginnings of an answer. For the most part this is work on manufacturing companies in highly competitive sectors and it tackles a wide range of themes associated with the progressive modification, but not abandonment, of Taylorist principles in work organization as a new production paradigm emerges. This work reveals considerable variation in the new configurations of work system gaining ground ; variations particularly concerning the way job designs / contents are influenced both by supervisor <—> team authority relations, by distinct HR practices as regards appraisal, careers and skill development and also by industrial relations negotiations.

At one end of the scale we have firms willing to institute what some call a «régime of total surveillance» in order to reinforce innovations such as Just-in-time (JIT) and semi-autonomous teams, as Wilkinson and Sewell (1992) and Zuboff (1988) report. Here an implicit management authoritarianism prevails despite the «participative» mechanisms and ideology of «egalitarianism» often present. To judge from some detailed case studies (e.g. Fucini and Fucini (1990) and Graham (1993)) often a climate of very considerable tension and stress pervades working life in such firms, apparently often because of internal contradictions between managerial promises and rhetoric, and the lived realities of working conditions. The expectation of imminent and repeated downsizing adds to overall insecurity. Turnover and accident levels and other social indicators reveal a climate of anxiety.

In contrast, at the other end of the scale, we find companies more willing and able to build the elements of a climate of confidence alongside TQM practices. Margins of worker and team autonomy are defended and peer controls preferred to extensive managerial surveillance ; the excesses of lean production are understood and consciously avoided (Jenkins (1994(a))) as they have been in many Scandinavian manufacturers. The firm gradually and carefully - in a consensual manner - implements aspects of what Lawler (1992) and Nadler (1991) call «high involvement management» (Buchanan and Calman). Here the importance attached to stability in human resources flow and a climate of trust   makes

reliance on short-term approaches to performance problems (such as reducing the workforce) unlikely, and places more creative ways of gaining efficiencies (alterations to working time, changes in remuneration, etc.) high on the management agenda.

Between the two lies an interesting population of firms - many of them car producers - whose work designs combine rigorous standardization with an emphasis on worker polyvalence and continuous improvement - some of the «Japanese transplants» such as NUMMI (described provocatively by Adler (1993) as «learning bureaucracies»), and Nissan (Wickens (1989) come into this

category. Much controversy still surrounds the human implications of these forms of work design, presented by their champions as neo-Taylorist - «lean yet not mean». In addition, given their _differences in mechanisms for employee and union influence_ - a point which should not be forgotten - many questions about the patterns of negotiation of change within them still remain to be answered.

Thus, in these different groups of firms, research reveals a _variety_ of relations between the following practices, suggesting their relative independence from each other ;

Restructuring policies.

Work system design

Quality and learning strategies.

Employee and union influence

Two consequences of importance stem from this. One is that it is somewhat futile to recommend that firms best prepare their restructuring by investing in work redesign and «cultural» changes when a whole series of contingencies proper to the specific company may render them difficult if not impossible (union reaction, workforce hostility or apathy etc.). This point has already been highlighted above - the Michigan team's discovery of «best practice» is far too premature.

The second point is that there is no mechanical or simple causality between managerial strategies (whether emanating from the «line» or from HR staff) and the kinds of climates of _trust_ which are needed for genuine employee participation in forms of radical organizational change. All the evidence shows that restructuration generates insecurity - expressed in Cameron's «effects of organizational decline» - if some firms succeed in minimizing this while mobilizing participation in redesign and re-engineering then we need to know more about _the qualities of the workforce and the social-psychological conditions and patterns of interaction_ which make this possible. Behind the statistics of «success» there are stories of sacrifice, commitment, negotiation and struggle whose sociology is important. Correlating successful downsizing with the use of

TQM and continuous improvement begs the question of what renders _them_ possible, in human terms.

Continuous improvement has a psychological and social price which is as yet poorly understood but one element this is some - even if limited - job security, even if considerable in-firm mobility is demanded. If this price is not paid by the company then it risks «demobilizing» the very intelligence and creativity on which TQM must feed. Such a management system already demands a great deal of the individual employee in terms of inter-functional and horizontal mobility, polyvalence and learning ; adding to this a readiness to accept continuous downsizing seems unrealistic and perhaps even insulting.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion is clear. A discovered association of successful restructuring and downsizing with TQM and quality culture change is just the beginning of an important series of questions which need to be answered prior to any «best practice» recommendations. These questions require a contextualist and micro-sociological approach

which is able to explore the causalities behind statistical correlations. This approach has to leave statistics on one side but this does not mean that macro and micro levels become artificially separated. Work on automobile manufacturers functions at both sector and case study levels to provide valuable such linkages.

The continuing importance of the modification and «refraction» of management policies by the action of employees, of the infusion of new meanings into practices as they are implemented and negotiated, should remain constantly in our minds and remind us of the the continuing value to HR research of sociological and psychological research on patterns of interaction. The conditioning role of these patterns has to be understood if we are to avoid attributing mechanical and simplistic relations between HR policies, practices and observed effects, as the «contextualists» (Pettigrew (1985)) have always argued. The recent work on restructuring and downsizing I have considered here should be re-read and reappraised with this in mind.

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