

Attributions for Participation and Nonparticipation in Gainsharing-Plan Involvement Systems

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Gainsharing plans often provide highly structured suggestion systems that allow employees to participate in work-related decisions. However, individuals differ in their willingness to become involved in this suggestion-making process. To better understand the reasons for this, interviews were conducted with 149 supervisors and nonmanagement employees in five gainsharing companies. Nonmanagement suggestion contributors as well as their supervisors said that the desire to improve performance, make the work easier, and become involved in work decisions were important determinants of an employee's decision to contribute suggestions. Both groups viewed the desire for influence as being more influential than the desire for bonuses. Nonmanagement noncontributors and their supervisors indicated that apathy and negative attitudes toward the plan, management, and the company were important determinants of an employee's decision not to contribute suggestions. The discussion includes implications for practice and a tentative model describing the multiple determinants of behavior under gainsharing.

Performance gainsharing plans improve organizational effectiveness by paying companywide bonuses to employees when they cut costs, increase product quality, raise output, or in other ways improve the performance of a facility. These bonuses are generally paid as a percentage of wages to all employees at a given facility, and in the majority of cases they may be earned on a monthly basis. The Scanlon plan, the Rucker® plan, and Improshare® are prime examples, although many firms develop customized plans to meet their special needs.

In a review of 33 case studies of firms with gainsharing plans, Bullock and Lawler (1984) found that 73% provided for some formal system that encouraged employee involvement in work decisions. Although a variety of

participative decision-making mechanisms have been used in conjunction with gainsharing (e.g., special task forces, quality circles, and self-managed work teams), one of the more popular variations derives from the departmental team suggestion system associated with the Scanlon plan (Moore & Ross, 1978). At the heart of this system are formal suggestions contributed by individual employees that provide ideas for cutting costs, changing work methods, streamlining procedures, or in other ways bettering performance. Employees complete suggestion forms, and these are reviewed by a team consisting of the supervisor and elected nonmanagement employees from that department. These teams may implement suggestions that do not influence other departments or cost beyond some fixed amount. Suggestions exceeding their authority are referred to a larger, organization-wide team that reviews ideas, sets goals, and coordinates activities.

Obtaining broad participation from the work force via the involvement system can be important to gainsharing-plan success for a number of reasons. Perhaps most obvious is that, whereas the bonus motivates employees to work more effectively, the involvement system allows them to make changes necessary for this. Some (e.g., Frost, Wakely, & Ruh, 1974; Rosenberg & Rosenstein, 1980) have argued that productively improvements and plan success depend heavily on engaging rank-and-file employees in problem identification, problem solving, and participative decision making. In support of this, measures of the economic performance of organizations have been shown to be related to employee activity in involvement systems (Katz, Kochan, & Weber, 1985; Rosenberg & Rosenstein, 1980).

Beyond this, it is believed that involvement in work decisions also has important indirect effects on organizational effectiveness. Studies have shown that participative decision making improves perceptions of communication (Marks, Mirvis, Hacker, & Grady, 1986); role conflict and ambiguity (Jackson, 1983); job satisfaction (Cotton, Vollaeth, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988; Miller & Monge, 1986); and a variety of work-related attitudes (Macy & Peterson, 1983).

It is therefore not surprising to learn that gainsharing plans are more likely to survive in companies in which managers have more favorable attitudes toward worker involvement (Ruh, Wallace, & Frost, 1973) and that rated gainsharing-plan success is positively correlated with the amount of participation reported by employees (White, 1979). Given this relationship between employee involvement and plan effectiveness, it is fortunate that gainsharing plans are generally successful in achieving high levels of participation, with studies showing that about 80% of the work force contributes suggestions annually in active plans (Bullock & Lawler, 1984; Graham-Moore, 1983).

On the other hand, little is currently known about how higher levels of participation may be achieved in those organizations in which the gainsharing involvement systems have been less active. What is the difference between employees who contribute suggestions and those who do not contribute? Why do some employees choose to remain uninvolved?

Studies of nongainsharing participation systems (i.e., quality circles, labor-management work councils) have shown that, compared to other employees, those who get involved tend to be younger, better educated, and more ambitious (White, 1980) and believe that the system will be instrumental in solving work-related problems (Dean, 1985). Research at facilities with gainsharing plans has shown that employees are less likely to contribute suggestions if they have less knowledge about the plan (Ross & Jones, 1972) or are dissatisfied with changes in job context caused by the plan (Gray, 1971).

Because so little is currently known concerning the dynamics of gainsharing-plan involvement systems, we conducted an exploratory investigation to identify some of the factors related to an individual's decision to participate. In five organizations, we identified 115 nonmanagement employees who either had or had not contributed gainsharing suggestions and asked them to discuss the reasons for their decisions. The 34 individuals who supervised these employees were also asked to offer attributions, or explanations, for the behavior of the nonmanagement people. We hoped that their responses would lead to an understanding of how higher levels of involvement may be attained in other gainsharing implementations.

Information obtained in this manner must be interpreted cautiously, as it is known that people often show systematic biases when attempting to explain their own behavior or the behavior of others (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). However, obtaining explanations of nonmanagement employees' behavior from two groups of constituents (supervisors as well as the nonmanagement individuals themselves) provided the opportunity to obtain corroboration and made it less likely that important factors influencing suggestion making would be overlooked.

METHOD

SETTING AND SUBJECTS

The five midwestern manufacturing organizations used in the investigation were selected because they were representative of many gainsharing firms

In terms of (a) plan design, (b) success in carrying bonuses, and (c) involvement-system activity. Company A manufactured heavy truck axles and employed 150 at the time of the study. Company B produced hydraulic cylinders and employed 100. Company C had a work force of 271, and its products included predictive maintenance software and vibration meters, analyzers, and balancers. Company D employed 322 and manufactured refuse equipment, and Company E's 260 employees produced automotive exhaust systems. Of the five firms, only the employees in the latter two were represented by labor unions.

Each company had been operating under a gainsharing plan for a period ranging from 16 to 72 months. All of the firms had implemented organization-wide gainsharing plans that measured the performance of the entire facility, and none made use of individual-incentive systems.

In four firms (A, B, C, and D), bonuses could potentially be earned once each month. In company E, bonuses were possible once every 2 months. Across the five companies, the percentage of bonuses paid (the number of bonuses actually paid divided by the number of times bonuses could potentially be paid) ranged from 38% to 100%. The average bonus paid (as a percentage of wages) ranged from 2.17% to 17.63% annually.

The average number of gainsharing suggestions contributed per employee per year ranged from 1.08 to 2.40. Although this may not appear to represent a high level of activity, note that the number adds up over time: The company with the oldest plan had received 1,831 suggestions during the 6 years gainsharing had been in effect. Across the organizations, from 56% to 82% of the suggestions had actually been accepted for implementation.

Nonmanagement interviewees were selected so that the sample would include people who had participated heavily in the involvement system, as well as people who had not. We reviewed company records to determine the number of suggestions contributed by employees in each of 39 departments. In the larger work units, the employees were divided into three groups according to the number of suggestions contributed, and individuals were randomly sampled from each group. The smaller departments were divided into two groups and sampled in the same way.

Using this procedure, 121 names were selected. Of this initial group, 24 (20%) were unwilling or unable to participate and were replaced with other employees from the same departments who had contributed a similar number of suggestions. An additional 6 (5%) failed to participate and could not be replaced, resulting in a final sample of 115 nonmanagement employees. The interviewees represented between 8% and 16% of the total work force at their respective organizations. Average tenure for the nonmanagement sample was

154.43 months ($SD = 113.53$), 78% were male, 75% worked on the shop floor rather than in an office setting, and 83% worked on the first shift.

The 34 management personnel included in the study were chosen simply because they supervised the nonmanagement employees described above. All except 1 were male, and, as above, they worked primarily in the shop and on the first shift. There were, however, no supervisors representing Company A, as the 14 nonmanagement interviewees drawn from this facility worked in self-managed work teams without supervisors.

PROCEDURE

All interviewees met alone with one of two interviewers on company time. Questions were asked using a structured interview format, and after recording responses to a given question, the interviewer read his notes back to the interviewee to ensure that the comments were recorded accurately. The entire session typically lasted 30-45 min.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comments were classified into inductively derived categories by one of the authors. The same system of categories was used by a second author who concluded that no additional categories were necessary. Cohen's (1960) coefficient kappa was computed to assess the interrater reliability of the classification procedure. This coefficient represents the percentage of agreement in classifications beyond that expected due to chance. Obtained values of kappa ranged from .81 to 1.00 across the questions discussed here, suggesting good reliability. Because there was so little disagreement in this process, one of the judges was chosen at random, and only the classifications made by this judge are reported in the tables that follow.

ATTRIBUTIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

Of the 115 study participants, 94 (82%) had contributed at least one suggestion. They were asked, "What motivated you to submit the suggestion(s)?" and their responses are summarized in Table 1. Predictably, the most popular response was that they wanted to improve their own performance at work or that of the organization as a whole. Some representative comments are listed below:

TABLE 1
 Explanations of Why Some Employees Contributed Suggestions

Response	% Giving This Response	
	Nonmanagement Contributors (N = 94)	Supervisors (N = 32)
To improve individual, company performance	67	44
To make the work easier	34	25
To be more involved in work decisions	13	19
To improve the workplace environment	9	0
To earn gainsharing bonuses	8	16
To improve job security	7	16
Satisfaction with gainsharing plan	5	6
To obtain individual reward or award	4	9
Pride in work performed	3	9
Was individually encouraged to contribute	3	6
To improve cooperation, communication	2	0
Formal obligation to contribute	2	0
To obtain recognition	2	34
Other	11	6

- "I wanted to change a procedure to be more time efficient. To be more responsive to the customers."
- "I saw some things that, if changed, would cut costs labor-wise. Some cut material costs."
- "I don't like to see the company wasting money."
- "I wanted to help the company to be more competitive."

These responses were expected, because improved performance had been the primary purpose of the gainsharing plans. But, interestingly, we found many additional reasons why employees contribute ideas. As Table 1 shows, the next most popular response involved the employee's desire to make his or her job easier in some way. Note the following comments:

- "I was frustrated— I wanted to make that particular job easier."
- "I wanted to make my work detail less troublesome and more efficient."
- "To make the job easier—simplify it."

What emerges is a sense that the employees had been frustrated with some aspect of the job and had used the involvement system to change it. Fortunately, making one's job easier (by removing unnecessary steps, streamlining

operations, etc.) may also serve to improve performance, satisfying the company's objectives and employees' needs simultaneously, as was suggested by these responses:

- "When I find ways to save time, the job is less boring because it goes faster."
- "I wanted the satisfaction of improving things. It bugs me to see things done inefficiently."
- "It was the best method for performing the job and making the job easier. I want to do the job right the first time."

Table 1 lists additional attributed motivations for suggestion contribution, including the desire to be more involved in work decisions, the desire to improve the workplace environment, and other stated intentions. Note that the percentages total to more than 100% because many employees discussed more than one reason for contributing their suggestions.

To obtain a different perspective on the same issue, supervisors were asked, "With most gainsharing plans, some people get involved by contributing good suggestions to their teams. What motivates these people to contribute their ideas?" Of the 34 supervisors, 32 responded, and a summary of their comments is also presented in Table 1.

The most popular response again involved the perception that the contributors desired to improve their own performance or that of the company. Beyond this point, however, the responses of supervisors and nonmanagement contributors show an important divergence. The supervisors' next most frequently mentioned attribution indicated that suggestion contributors were motivated by the desire for recognition. Of management personnel, 34% discussed recognition as a motivation for suggestion making, compared to only 2% of nonmanagement employees. The following comments were representative:

- "For recognition—to see their suggestions in print."
- "They want to show off their knowledge."
- "They want personal recognition for their contribution."

One fourth of the supervisors indicated that the desire to make the job easier motivates many contributors, a comment also frequently made by the contributors themselves. Most of the remaining attributions were offered by a relatively small number of individuals, with none being mentioned by over 20% of the interviewees.

Taken in its entirety, Table 1 suggests that a number of factors lead to suggestion contribution and that the desire to earn gainsharing bonuses is

TABLE 2
Bonus Versus Influence as an Explanation for Contributing Suggestions

Response	% Giving This Response	
	Nonmanagement Contributors (N = 94)	Supervisors (N = 30)
Influence	68	47
Bonus	20	20
Both	10	27
Neither	7	7

only one of several motivating forces. It fails to support the position that gainsharing works by appealing exclusively to the financial interests of employees via the bonus. To bring this issue into sharper focus, we asked nonmanagement contributors, "When you submitted your suggestions, were you motivated more by the desire to earn a gainsharing bonus, or the desire to have more influence over how things are done in your work unit?" As Table 2 shows, over two thirds indicated that the opportunity to have influence was the more important stimulus. Supervisors showed the same general pattern of responses to a similar question.

Such findings are not surprising when considered in light of the immediate payoffs of suggestion contribution. Submitting an idea that will eliminate unnecessary steps in some work procedure may or may not have an impact on future bonuses, but it has a high probability of changing some frustrating aspect of the employee's immediate work experience. The following nonmanagement responses to the preceding question illustrate this:

- "The influence. The bonus is nice but it's just a plus."
- "The influence. People like to feel like they have some control."
- "The influence. Because the money reward for suggestions is poor."
- "The influence is more important. If something is wrong with our machines, we can now talk to management and have it fixed."
- "The influence. I like a pleasant place to work and having some input. Money was the main motivator in the beginning, though."

It could be argued that the employees did not attribute their suggestion making to the desire for a bonus simply because the bonuses had not been substantial enough to have a motivating effect. In support of this, bonuses had averaged only from 2% to 3% of wages at four of the five companies. In contrast, however, was Company A, where bonuses averaged 17.63% of

wages and had been earned in 100% of the potential bonus periods. The responses of employees from this organization were analyzed separately to see if they were more likely to attribute their actions to the desire for a bonus, but essentially the same pattern of responses was found: 69% indicated that the desire for influence was more important, 8% indicated the bonus, 8% indicated both, and 15% indicated neither.

ATTRIBUTIONS FOR NONPARTICIPATION

Although the preceding sheds some light on how suggestion contributors feel about their plans, it is perhaps more important to understand the attitudes of those who have chosen not to take part in the involvement system. Of the nonmanagement personnel interviewed, 21 (18%) had not contributed any suggestions. They were asked, "A lot of employees don't submit any ideas. Were there any special reasons that you didn't?" As Table 3 shows, their most common response revealed either apathy or negative attitudes concerning the gainsharing plan itself. The following comments from nonmanagement personnel were representative:

- "I'm not really interested in the gainsharing process. I see my responsibility as performing my work duty and nothing more."
- "I'm opposed to gainsharing. It hurt me financially when the company replaced individual incentives with gainsharing. Still have hard feelings about this."
- "It's just a lack of faith due to a lack of tangible financial results from gainsharing. I think the company must first prove gainsharing is beneficial to the workers, and this has yet to be proven."

In answering a similar question, supervisors also discussed negative attitudes concerning the plan as an important cause of nonparticipation. Like the nonmanagement individuals quoted above, some supervisors felt that unmet expectations concerning the bonus contributed to these attitudes. Many of them also pointed to problems with the suggestion-processing system itself, as was revealed by the following:

- "There has been a lack of responsiveness in handling suggestions. They have made suggestions and are offended when they are turned down for the wrong reasons. Sometimes it takes too long to handle suggestions."
- "They say, 'What's the use of turning in a suggestion?' because they believe management will reject their idea."

Table 3 shows that a large number of employees explained that no suggestions were recorded in their name simply because they had circumvented

TABLE 3
 Explanations of Why Some Employees Did Not Contribute Suggestions

Response	% Giving This Response	
	Nonmanagement Noncontributors (N = 21)	Supervisors (N = 24)
Negative attitudes, apathy concerning gainsharing plan	43	46
Employee circumvents gainsharing suggestion system	38	13
Negative attitudes, apathy concerning work, management, or the company	29	42
Job is too simple to generate suggestions	19	0
Not willing to take time to contribute formal suggestions	5	8
Personality attributions	0	33
Other	29	13

the gainsharing involvement system while implementing their ideas. The following responses reveal how this often occurred:

- "Instead of writing up the suggestion, I just tell others and let them write it up if they want to."
- "Our department — maintenance — is a team deal. We worked on suggestions as a team, but the senior people get the credit because they usually come up with the ideas."

Explanations for noninvolvement by employees also revealed apathy or negative attitudes concerning work, management, or the company in general. As the following statements show, the more negative attitudes often seemed to be based on events that occurred prior to the start-up of the plan:

- "Before we had the gainsharing plan, we made suggestions and they never got through to anybody. There were headaches in management who wouldn't follow through on them. Because of that, a lot of us don't want to make suggestions today."
- "I'm not really interested in the gainsharing-plan program. I've been laid off several times and I don't believe management is really concerned with making the company a better place to work."

The same sentiments were echoed by many supervisors who responded to a similar question:

- "Those people have been reprimanded in the past by the company and they are bitter toward the company."
- "They are adversarial in nature. They see themselves as against the company and vice versa. We have a history of conflict, and this gainsharing program hasn't changed their attitudes much."
- "Some people are just naturally apathetic and uninterested in any activities at work."

The last of these comments is interesting, as it suggests a global personality trait of being "naturally apathetic" as a cause of noninvolvement. Traditionally, the concept of personality traits has been somewhat controversial, and some scholars have argued that a trait approach provides an inadequate explanation of behavior (i.e., Mischel, 1977). It does, however, seem to be a meaningful approach for supervisors, as 33% interpreted nonparticipation as an outward manifestation of relatively stable underlying traits. The following attributions illustrated this:

- "No sense of responsibility."
- "They are dissatisfied with life and antisocial at work."
- "It's not part of their nature to get involved as they tend to be loners."

In summary, relatively large numbers of employees and supervisors agreed that apathy or negative attitudes concerning the gainsharing plan, work, management, or the company in general were related to an individual's decision not to contribute suggestions. Although a good number of nonmanagement personnel indicated that they were contributing but circumventing the formal involvement system itself, this response was made less frequently by supervisors. Similarly, supervisors were likely to explain noninvolvement in terms of personality factors, whereas no nonmanagement person made this attribution.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYEE SUPPORT FOR GAINSHARING

Research on gainsharing could benefit from the development of a model describing the factors that influence an employee's decision to support a plan. Such a model would have to carefully describe (a) what plan-supportive behavior is (e.g., what employees must do in order to make their plans

successful) and (b) what antecedent variables have an impact on these plan-supportive behaviors. Toward the development of such a model, our study focused on one frequently cited plan-supportive behavior—suggestion contribution—and identified a moderate number of variables that managers and nonmanagement employees viewed as being important determinants of this activity. Because there was some redundancy in the variables cited by our interviewees, it was possible to reduce this set to a smaller set of three more general factors and include these in a somewhat more parsimonious model of “employee support for gainsharing.”

The resulting model (to be discussed below) provides a tentative framework for conceptualizing the determinants of behavior under gainsharing and can be used to structure future investigations in the area. These investigations may be used to either confirm or disconfirm the relationships predicted by the model, as well as to identify additional, currently omitted, determinants of plan support.

Briefly, our model consists of one consequent variable (suggestion contribution), with three antecedent variables having direct effects on it. The antecedent variables inferred from the attributions reported here are *plan-instrumentality beliefs*, *affective organizational commitment*, and *trust*. The nature of these constructs, and the relationship between our findings and earlier research, are discussed below.

Plan-instrumentality beliefs. A large number of comments made by the interviewees suggested that employees support gainsharing when they believe that the plan will result in outcomes that they value: bonuses, recognition, a sense of involvement, control over their jobs, and other desirable outcomes. Interviewees suggested that workers refuse to get involved when they believe that the plan leads to negative outcomes, such as the loss of a lucrative individual-incentive plan. Combined, these two types of beliefs may be referred to as plan-instrumentality beliefs: perceptions that the gainsharing system either benefits or works to the detriment of a given individual's interests. Instrumentality beliefs are illustrated by statements such as “The plan pays good bonuses,” “The plan has improved my working conditions,” or “The plan will undermine the power of the union.”

Our findings suggest that gainsharing is instrumental in achieving a wide variety of work outcomes desired by the employees and that the bonus itself may not be the most valued of these outcomes. For example, Locke and Schweiger (1979) and Lawin (1968) have suggested that employee involvement in work decisions may lead to greater job satisfaction by increasing the likelihood that employees will experience greater self-expression, influence,

independence, and ego-gratification. Our results show that these are indeed among the outcomes that employees attained through their gainsharing involvement systems. This finding may help explain why gainsharing plans are often quite popular with employees, even in settings where large bonuses are not regularly paid.

Affective organizational commitment. Comments reported here show that suggestions are often contributed out of a sense of responsibility to the company and a sense of commitment toward the company's goals. Both managers and nonmanagement employees agreed that many suggestions are motivated by a desire to cut costs, improve efficiency, improve service to customers, and in other ways pursue the organization's objectives. These findings suggest that a type of psychological attachment to a firm, called affective organizational commitment (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Scholl, 1981), may also be an important determinant of plan-supportive behavior.

Briefly, employees demonstrate affective organizational commitment when they identify with and are proud to be part of the company, feel responsible for its success, and feel that their own goals and values are congruent with those of the organization (Buchanan, 1974). Comments made by (and about) the employees who did not contribute gainsharing suggestions portray many members of the group as being relatively low on affective commitment: apathetic toward the company and generally uncommitted to its goals and welfare. For these reasons, our model predicts that affective organizational commitment is positively related to suggestion making and other behaviors supportive of gainsharing plans. Such an interpretation is consistent with earlier research showing affective commitment to be related to work involvement and helpful work behaviors in nongainsharing settings (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Penley & Gould, 1988).

Trust. The third and final determinant included in the model is trust: the employees' belief that other organizational constituents are committed to the gainsharing philosophy and are actively supporting the plan. Employees trust management when, among other things, they believe that the plan includes an equitable bonus formula. They trust the involvement team representatives when they believe that their suggestions get a fair hearing and are implemented quickly. Violations of trust in these areas were often cited by noncontributors as the reason for their current lack of interest in gainsharing. It should be remembered that perceptions of trust are often formed well before the implementation of the gainsharing plan itself. Some employees

chose not to become involved because of inequitable treatment they had received years prior to the plan start-up.

A COGNITIVE MODEL OF BEHAVIOR UNDER GAINSHARING

It can be seen that all three antecedent variables included in our model—plan-instrumentally beliefs, affective organizational commitment, and trust—are *cognitive* constructs: beliefs and attitudes of the employees themselves. A conscious decision was made to include only cognitive antecedent variables within this framework so that the result would be a more general model: one that could be applied in a wide variety of settings.

This need for a general model of behavior under gainsharing is due to the wide variation in the types of gainsharing plans that are now in popular use: Some systems allow a great deal of employee involvement in work decisions, whereas others do not; some bonus formulas base bonuses on a very narrow definition of *organizational performance*, whereas others use a much broader definition. A model of behavior under gainsharing that attempted to include all of these structure and process variables as antecedent variables would be quite complex and difficult to test. On the other hand, a model that includes only cognitive antecedent variables is more parsimonious and may be applied to virtually any type of gainsharing plan. It may be applied across different types of industries (manufacturing firms versus service-sector organizations) and even across geographical settings (i.e., firms in the United States versus companies in Great Britain). Hence a model focusing on employee cognitions is presented here as a useful starting place for research on how employees respond to gainsharing.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In our study, subject attributions were used to identify the determinants of employee support for a gainsharing plan. The use of this method presents some difficulties of interpretation, as research on attribution theory has shown that individuals demonstrate systematic biases when attempting to explain their own behavior or the behavior of other people. For example, when attempting to explain why they engaged in some undesirable behavior, subjects typically make external attributions, attributing their actions to external, situational circumstances largely beyond their control (Lau & Russell, 1980). They are less likely to make an internal attribution of blaming the behavior on their own personality traits or other personal characteristics.

Because the refusal to contribute gainsharing suggestions is generally viewed as a undesirable choice for an employee to make, it follows that noncontributing employees should be biased toward making external rather than internal attributions for their actions. In fact, the results presented in Table 3 are quite consistent with this pattern: Noncontributors tended to blame their lack of involvement on problems with the gainsharing plan, problems with management, the simplicity of their jobs, or other external sources, and tended not to attribute their behavior to their personalities. Supervisors, on the other hand, frequently cited personality as a reason for employee noninvolvement.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that when explaining the behavior of others, observers tend to overestimate the importance of internal variables (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). It is in this light that one must interpret the willingness of supervisors to attribute the behavior of the noncontributors to their apathetic or adversarial personalities.

As a result of these potential biases, our results must be interpreted with caution. The model presented here should be viewed as tentative, and the relationships proposed by the model should be tested by using confirmatory research methods that do not rely on subject attributions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

By indicating why employees choose to support or oppose gainsharing plans, our results have implications for how the plans may be better managed. Below, we discuss some specific issues and problem areas that managers and gainsharing consultants may focus on to promote greater support for a plan.

Diagnosing conditions for gainsharing. Two of the antecedent variables identified here— affective organizational commitment and trust—are attitudes that exist at one level or another well before the gainsharing plan is implemented. Because commitment and trust appear to be related to employee support for the plan, it is generally wise to assess these attitudes both before and after plan implementation. The use of interviews and surveys prior to plan start-up can identify potential problem areas, whereas follow-up surveys administered after implementation may be used to gauge the firm's progress in developing more positive perceptions. A number of gainsharing references are available to guide the organization in this process of self-assessment (e.g., Moore & Ross, 1978).

Providing recognition. According to the supervisors, the desire for individualized recognition is one of the most important reasons that employees contribute ideas. Many organizations acknowledge this and develop specific mechanisms to provide recognition for the employees who get involved. Below are some of the more effective ideas that we have observed in organizations with active, successful involvement systems:

- Many organizations regularly post suggestions, along with the cost savings due to the suggestions, in a public location.
- At one firm, the plant manager or another high-ranking manager regularly visits with employees at their work stations to thank them personally for contributions.
- In another company, the names of all employees contributing ideas that month are placed in a drum. During the monthly plantwide meeting, one name is drawn for a prize.
- In one manufacturing firm, brightly colored stickers are placed at locations on the shop floor where performance-improving suggestions were implemented. This provides recognition and also reminds employees that the opportunities for ideas exist on almost every job.

Maintaining trust and perceptions of plan instrumentality. Finally, these results indicate that individuals are most likely to support a gainsharing plan actively when they believe that the plan helps them attain valued outcomes and when they believe that other organizational constituents are committed to the philosophy and goals of the plan. In developing these perceptions of plan instrumentality and trust, nonmanagement employees will look for concrete evidence that management either is acting in good faith or is simply trying to impose an inequitable and exploitative bonus system. The following areas are among the most important ones to address when attempting to establish trust and positive attitudes:

- If an individual-incentive plan is to be terminated at the same time that the gainsharing plan begins, care must be taken to arrive at an equitable system for ending the individually oriented plan. Case studies show that this can be done in such a way as to minimize hard feeling among employees who had earned high wages under individual incentives (e.g., Ross, Hatcher, & Ross, 1989).
- Although this study suggests that the bonus is only one of many desirable outcomes that employees associate with the plan, it nevertheless remains a highly visible symbol of management's commitment to deal fairly with nonmanagement. Among other things, the gainsharing formula must be constructed so that employees can see some relationship between their work performance and the earning of bonuses. A carefully developed formula can do much to maintain both trust and perceptions of plan instrumentality.

— The failure to process a gainsharing suggestion correctly was perhaps the most frequently cited reason for negative attitudes among employees. Employees had faith in their gainsharing plans only when they saw that their suggestions were taken seriously, were adequately researched, were implemented in a timely manner when they were accepted, and were declined only with good justification. Companies with more successful plans realized that effective involvement system teams do not just happen but instead require training, monitoring, and recognition for their work. In these companies, the payoff is an active involvement system that employees view as legitimate and effective.

CONCLUSION

In their review of the literature, Bullock and Lawler (1984) noted that theory and research regarding gainsharing plans have not kept pace with practice in the area. This exploratory study was intended to stimulate interest among researchers and practitioners and to provide a foundation for later investigations. If the attributions reported here are confirmed, then a complete model of gainsharing processes will have to acknowledge that a variety of factors influence the decision to contribute suggestions: variables as diverse as the employees' desire to help the company, to improve their own working conditions, and to obtain recognition. The model will also have to acknowledge that such attributes as organizational commitment and trust also affect the level of support shown for the plan. It is hoped that the findings and model presented here will be useful in guiding the subsequent research that will lead to a better understanding of how gainsharing plans work.

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