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"THE WEDNESDAY GROUP"

In 1959 the University of Leeds, through its Department of Extra-mural Studies, and the Education Department of the Co-operative Union Ltd., established a programme of courses specifically for chief executive officers, for departmental managers, for mixed groups of directors and managers and for managers who were considered to have development potential. In some cases the students were all drawn from one society; in others they came from a number of societies. The courses lasted from one to three years and in some cases went on much longer, for example, in one society the whole of the top management with its supporting management attended courses lasting eight years. This broadly-based programme lasted until the late 1960s when other commitments arising out of a change of post for me made it necessary to cut back on the programme.

The "Wednesday" group was founded in 1959 as part of this original programme and has continued without a break for the last eighteen years. For twenty-four weeks of the year the group meets on university premises on a Wednesday afternoon and for two hours chief executives and senior managers come together to discuss issues relevant to their own personal development, the development of their own societies and of the wider Co-operative Movement. The members of the group have, over the years, come from a wide geographical spread extending from Scarborough in the east to Todmorden in the west. In reverse members of the group have spread throughout the length and breadth of the Movement.

When the course started it was arranged on a one year basis but, after the initial experience, the benefits of long-term schemes of work became apparent. One factor in this acceptance of the longer course was the recognition by the group members of the interaction between the weekly meetings and the short and long-term problems of management. The analysis undertaken in the class was seen to have relevance to and application in the working situation. After the first year, the Leeds group committed itself to courses lasting for three years and over the years one three-year course has been succeeded by another three-year course. A strong central core of permanent members has developed and they have gone on from one three-year spell to the next, while at the beginning of each new three-year spell new members join to take the place of those who have moved on.

The aim of the group is to meet, as far as possible, a basic aim of education in this field, i.e., to develop analytical ability, to train executives to analyse problems, to prepare proposals that are both realistic and imaginative and that take into account the interdependent nature of problems. Management techniques are seen in context, as tools to help managers and not as ends in themselves.

The course centres round organisational and management studies and is based on a systems approach which sees the core activities of management as the achievement of objectives; the development of appropriate processes and structures for the achievement of those objectives; and the adaptation of objectives, processes and structures to environmental change. The approach is interdisciplinary and this meets the needs of the group which brings issues and problems that are themselves interdisciplinary. The problems of management in a democratic organisation are not exclusively economic, psychological or political but a mixture of these and more. Thus the problems that are examined are rarely 'pure', and while it may be necessary to isolate a given issue and discuss it within the framework of a specific discipline, it has ultimately to be set within the total context.

Given that some of the members of the group have national commitments, that all have to travel some distance and in many cases give up free time to attend, it is evident that the pattern that has been developed meets the needs of those who attend. They clearly feel that they get something out of the enterprise, indeed it would be true to say that we all get something out of the enterprise which is fundamentally a joint activity between myself and the group. If we examine some aspects of the group's activities we will find reasons for its survival.

Reasons for Survival

First, the members of the group get away from the work situation for an afternoon and in the 'neutral' atmosphere of the university they can discuss activities and issues that are significant to them. They have time to think through issues that they would not otherwise have time to consider adequately. They are able to discuss, to exchange views, to unfreeze their ideas and think creatively with other practitioners. Here the value of a long-term commitment is important as it gives the group members the opportunity to develop understanding of each other to an extent that they are able to explore their thoughts and put forward information about aspects of society operations that would normally be held back. This is absolutely crucial to the development of the group as a problem-solving enterprise, for a very large part of the basic group activity is founded upon the inputs provided by members themselves.

This brings us to the second factor, the roles of the tutor and the students. I see the tutor performing a number of functions, first, as a provider of a framework of ideas and approaches and of data that is not directly available to the group. Within the framework the group members can explore issues and indeed develop the framework in such a way as to examine problems of their own choosing. Second, the material put forward by myself and the group is challenged by all involved and I see a special function of the tutor to be that of

challenging ideas from an outside source. In this capacity one is engaged in asking discerning questions about the proposals and problems raised within the group. The aim is to establish a forum for the analysis of issues through the sharing of ideas and experience. The student brings to the course three contributions of particular importance to the success of the course: problems that are work-oriented; managerial experience at the top level; and attitudes which are specific to the Co-operative Movement. In the group he is able to share these with others with similar but not identical problems and backgrounds and it is part of the task of the tutor to bring out the inordinately valuable material that the students bring to the meetings, to indicate the differences and generally to build on this material the matters of interest which are central to the group's deliberations.

A third reason for the long life of the group has been the fact that the discussion leads to different forms of activity. Members go back to their place of work and reflect on the significance of the discussion in relation to their own society and find that it may lead to some action within the society or to new ways of looking at present problems.

Over the years the group has been involved in spreading ideas beyond the Wednesday group, individual members have written articles arising out of work within the group, and the group itself has produced articles and papers which have had wide circulation. For example, a series of articles on the functions of the Board and top management, a College Paper on 'Dividend', and a number of my own publications arose out of the inspiration of the group. The group has been very productive over the years and this has been a contribution to its success.

Each year a bound edition of the notes of the year is produced and distributed to the members. A different student each week is made responsible for the notes of the discussion, these are typed into the year book and at the end of the year a member of the

group undertakes to get the notes transcribed and bound. In total these books provide a guide to the main pre-occupations of chief executives over the last eighteen years.

A fourth contribution has undoubtedly been the flexible development of the course over a given year. At the commencement of the year there is a formal syllabus which gives guidance to the direction of the course but within it there is flexibility as to the length of time which is spent on any topic and as to the bringing in of issues that emerge within the group's activities.

Recurrent Themes

Over the years there have been a number of themes to which the group keeps returning, these include the objectives of Co-operative societies and the problems that they pose for management; the relationship of professional management to the Board and the general question of the nature of Co-operative democracy; the structure of Co-operative societies; the development of Regional Societies, structures for Regional Societies and the problems of bringing a Regional Society into being; the relationship of retail societies to national organisations, in particular to the C.W.S.; the performance of retail societies and the development of inter-society comparisons (this was a topic which the group considered in 1961 and has returned to from time to time, indeed it is re-examining its ideas in this area in the light of recent developments); the problems of management development and staffing problems; the problems of dividend and stamps and the more general question of society financing; corporate society strategy and the problems of developing such strategy in the changing retail situation. All of these have been discussed directly and realistically in relation to the societies represented in the group. Within these themes, of which the above are a sample, the group has from time to time concentrated on different aspects of them and come up with fresh ideas and viewpoints. Within a coherent approach there has been

scope for a variety of rethinking and for new developments. This has been one of the great features of the group, it has provided the opportunity for its members to rethink long-term problems, it has enabled them to get away from ideas that have become too fixed. Over the years the members' position on different issues has changed as new material has come forth, as new situations have developed and as new experience has emerged. I am sometimes asked how on earth we find new material on which to keep going, but the new material is there within the Co-operative situation and it is this which provides a challenge and satisfaction.

The Wednesday group has tackled many issues, has had many disagreements and has remained a constructive force in a particular area of the Co-operative Movement. As tutor to the group for eighteen years it has been an experience rich with character and full of highlights. I think we have all learnt a great deal and I would hope that there will be a Wednesday group at Leeds for many years to come.