



Work as a Human Activity

How well do you balance these three workplace essentials?

By Terrence Fernsler

Employment With a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice

By John W. Budd. 279 pages. Softcover. Cornell University Press (www.cornellpress.cornell.edu).

Employment is often viewed as a purely economic relationship. But for most employees, work is a human activity. We commonly identify with it (“What do you do?”). We spend more time at work than most, if not all, other activities, even sleep.

Achieving economic prosperity, human dignity, and appreciation for human rights requires that we balance efficiency with equity (fair treatment) and voice (employee input). The question is how to govern the workplace to achieve this vital balance. In most workplaces, employment is an economic transaction, with employees and employers considered equals in the labor market. In reality, we know they’re not equals, because property rights are still favored over labor rights, and because employers typically have far greater resources.

Unions and government regulations are supposed to equalize the power between workers and management. Indeed, classical labor relations studies rely on unions to provide equity and voice in the workplace. Unions in the United States concentrate on making organizations efficient while providing equity, but their focus has narrowed to obtaining decent working conditions and a fair share of the profits. That’s perhaps why few nonprofits have unions — profits aren’t a motivator in nonprofit organizations, and equity is often achieved through other

means. Unions tend to be inflexible in a rapidly changing environment. Sometimes they actually remove employee decision making. Today, according to John W. Budd, unions represent only about 10% of workers, shifting the focus of many workplaces toward efficiency at the expense of not only voice but equity as well.

Budd examines various systems of employee relations, and how each fares with efficiency, equity, and voice. He indicates the appropriate system toward which an organization might shift if there’s a need for greater efficiency, equity, or voice.

These three essentials – efficiency, equity, and voice — are often in conflict. But if we believe in democracy, adding equity and voice to the human activity of work is important. Doing so is supported by major philosophies and religions, as Budd demonstrates. Balancing equity and voice with efficiency is what most nonprofits work for; indeed, it is the purpose of many.

As the need for greater equity and voice becomes increasingly recognized, our organizations can be role models for adding a human face to employment. Employee satisfaction and participation have always been important in the nonprofit sector, and fairness and participation have long been viewed as vital parts of our workplaces. This is an area where we’ll be looked to as leaders, so it’s important that we understand how to balance efficiency, equity, and voice in our workplaces, and this book shows us how. ■

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Nonprofit briefs

🗨️ The Only Thing Constant Is Change

Change happens. Whatever the challenge, people must commit themselves to it if it is to be successful.

According to *The Change Cycle* by Ann Salerno and Lillie Brock (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, www.berrettkoehler.com), people react to change in a sequence of six predictable stages. **Stage 1: Loss.** People feel fearful. Their thoughts are cautious. Their behavior is paralyzed. **Stage 2: Doubt.** People feel resentful. Their thoughts are skeptical. Their behavior is resistant. **Stage 3: Discomfort.** People feel anxious. Their thoughts are confused. Their behavior is unproductive. **Stage 4: Discovery.** People feel enthusiastic. Their thoughts are resourceful. Their behavior is energized. **Stage 5: Understanding.** People feel confident. Their thoughts are pragmatic. Their behavior is productive. **Stage 6: Integration.** People feel satisfaction. Their thoughts are focused. They behave with generosity and a heightened sense of togetherness.

Everyone experiencing change goes through each stage in order. Some get stuck at one stage; others move through the stages quickly.

Understanding each stage gives us a panoramic view of the change and helps us progress from one stage to the next. Keeping a sense of humor and communicating openly are also keys. Change isn’t optional, but we can learn from it, and learn how to move through it more effectively. Our success, fulfillment, and well-being depend on it. 🗨️

– reviewed by Terrence Fernsler