Micropolitics in workplace innovation:

Lessons from case studies

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Abstract
Recent critical reviews on workplace innovation studies have shown the importance of power and political processes affecting organizational innovation and learning processes. However, in empirical research, these issues have been mainly neglected. Drawing insights from industrial sociology, this paper examines how factory micropolitics facilitates, hinders and modifies organizational innovation processes.

The analysis is based on two case studies carried out in Finnish tyre and window (wood product) factories. In the tyre factory, the focus lies on the change processes from the Fordist to process-oriented production model. The window factory case examines attempts to introduce multiskilling at the shop-floor level.

The results show how political processes largely define the extent to which an aim can be reached in attempts to introduce organizational innovation. The different practices, interests and power positions of the factory departments, groups and individuals surfaced in the course of the change processes and showed as silent and as more or less open resistance, on the one hand, and as support for initiatives and working on them actively, on the other. Thus, factors linked to
organizational or micropolitics did have a significant effect on how the change processes advanced and what kind of innovations could be reached.

**Keywords**
Micropolitics, workplace innovation, case-studies, multiskilling, cross-departmental problem-solving

**Introduction: the concepts of organizational innovation and politics**
Several authors have pointed out, that the existing literature on organizational innovation is voluminous, diverse and fragmented, different strands of research have remained separate and there is no single coherent conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of organizational innovation. Different researchers have used the term to describe different aspects of the relationships between organization and innovation and the concept has been used in a rather loose and slippery manner in many writings (see Slappendel 1996; Coriat 2001; Edquist, Hommen & McKelvey 2001; Schienstock & Hämäläinen 2001; Pettigrew et al. 2003; Lam 2004).

Some authors highlight structural changes characteristic of organizational innovation. Coriat (2001, 201; 212) defines organizational innovation consisting of a series of interrelated changes affecting the division of labour and the modes of co-ordination that prevail within a given organization (or between several organizations), these very patterns possessing the triple dimension and content of information, knowledge and interests. Organizational innovations impact on both cost and non-cost dimensions of firms' competitiveness.

Wengel et. al (2000) divide organizational innovation in two dimensions. Structural innovation encompass responsibilities, accountability, command lines and information flows. They change the number of hierarchical levels, the divisional structure of functions (development, production, etc) or the separation between line and support functions. Managerial innovations affect the operations and procedures of the enterprise such as the specifications of the responsibilities, the contents of commands and of information flows and the way they are dealt with. They concern speed and flexibility of production and the reliability of products and production processes.

The particular forms of organizational innovations may be multiple. Knights and McCabe (1998, 169) treat organizational innovation as an overarching classification within which may be included the fairly limited experiments with quality circles in the 1980s, on the one hand, contrasted with the huge, resource-intensive programmes on total quality management (TQM) and business process re-engineering (BPR) of the 1990s, on the other. In between there are innovations such as customer care, team working, delayering, customer service or simply customer satisfaction surveys. There also exists various understandings whether elements such as teamworking, empowerment, flatter hierarchies and customer orientation should each be considered a specific organizational innovation or whether they together constitute a broader concept, such as BPR or lean production (Knights and McCabe 1998, 764).

Although the concept of organizational innovation seems to refer to a group of diverse and multidimensional organizational changes, one may identify some consistency in definitions. Namely, most of them are in a way or another concerned with “positive” changes in the forms, practices and principles of the utilization of labour power. This kind of loose definition is appropriate for the purposes of our paper and analysis of empirical cases.

Concerning the concept of organizational politics, it has been argued, that within the management and organizational literature it remains a relatively neglected and somewhat marginal field of
research (see. Newell, Robertson & Swan 2001; Buchanan & Badham 1999; Knights & McCabe 1998). Politics is viewed as an aberration or even 'pathological' because it induces conflict and subverts management strategies. For example Senge, (1990, 273) one of the main gurus of the concept of the learning organization (1990) denigrates organizational politics as 'such a perversion of truth and honesty that most organizations reek with its odour'.

In contrast, some commentators argue that organizational politics are central to a theoretical understanding of change and to practical intervention in the change process. The basic message of these commentators highlights politics as a natural and inherent phenomenon of organizational life and as such it is seen to deserve a central place in organizational analysis. (e.g. Buchanan & Badham 1999; Coopey & Burgoyne 2000; Bratton 2001; Findlay et al. 2001; Knights & MaCabe 2003).

According to Buchanan (2007, 2-3) the absence of a common definition of organization politics is a long-standing concern, and commentators continue to note the lack of agreement. However, there exists some definitions of organizational politics which we adopt as guiding conceptualizations for our research. One strand of research relates politics to those 'activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes' (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 7). Politics and power are closely interrelated. According to Buchanan & Badham (1999, 611) power is conventionally defined as the capacity of individuals to exert their will over others. Politics, therefore, is the practical domain of power in action, worked out through the use of techniques of influence and other tactics.

Knights & McCabe (1998; 1999; 2003) outline three different traditions what comes to the question, how politics is viewed and interpreted as an element in organizational life. These are functionalistic, processual and critical approaches. The functional approach adopts a unitarist belief that organizations can attain a single consensual goal in a rational and apolitical manner. The goal is defined by the management or the entrepreneur. Politics is anything other than an aberration which hinders the smooth functioning of the organization, and resistance tends to be seen as a strictly peripheral activity and is attributed to fear or misunderstanding, rather than to any fundamental conflict of interests.

A more politically sensitive approach towards understanding politics in organizations is advanced by the processual school (e.g. Mintzberg 1994). The representatives of the processual perspective identify how organizational change tends to be characterized by political machinations between diverse interest groups. Showing how these often serve to subvert management's intended strategic designs, their work represents a break with traditional management theory. However, although in processual approach management is steeped in politics, it reduces politics to conflict and to treat it as essentially pathological - something to be understood only for purposes of bringing about its eradication.

In sharp contrast to functional and processual approaches Knights and McCabe identify the third approach, which they label as a critical approach. A representative of this strand is labour process theory, where themes of power, interests and conflicts have remained at the core since Braverman's (1974) classical contribution. In terms of labour process debate the concept of micropolitics became known by Burawoy's (1985) seminal texts. The contribution of Burawoy was to "bring workers back in", which means that management is not the only agent at the workplace thus implying that workers are also assigned active roles and voices in the management processes and in the making of an institutional frame of interpretation regarding political options. Burawoy shows that management, even under Tayloristic working conditions depends on the employees' consent. Accordingly, a politics in production is opened up where the workers' own practice - described as games - and through the establishment of an internal labour
market become a way of safeguarding a certain autonomy and control over their own work, despite management exercise of authority. Clausen & Olsen (2000) make an important complement to this argument by saying, that besides politics and games characteristic to management-labour relations, it is reasonable to assume the existence of diverging layers and interests within management and within workers at the workplace.

In line with the critical views on the non-political approaches to organizations, we take organizational politics seriously putting it in the core of our analysis while analyzing organizational innovations. Our aim is to provide a contribution to innovation studies by showing, what kind of role organizational politics plays in organizational innovation processes and outcomes.

**Case studies**

Our empirical analysis is based on two case studies carried out in Finnish tyre and window (wood product) factories. In the tyre factory, the focus lies on the change processes from the Fordist to process-oriented production model. The window factory case examines attempts to introduce multiskilling at the shop-floor level.

Our case studies are based on participatory observation and action research. We have spent nearly 400 hours with the employees when practicing development activities at the window factory during the winter 2005-2006. In the tyre factory the researcher attended 25 problem-solving meetings in 2001-2002 and the discussions were tape-recorded. In addition ten personal interviews were made. We have also made some surveys for the employees in both cases.

**The tyre factory and the launching of "innovation project"**

The tyre company develops and manufactures summer and winter tyres for cars and bicycles as well as tyres for a range of heavy machinery. The company's product development, administration and marketing functions as well as the majority of production are located in Finland. In 2005, the company booked net sales of EUR 690 million and employed some 3200 people. Its passenger car production unit – the site of the research project - employs more than seven hundred people working in 55 production teams and produces more than 5 million tyres per year.

The tyre manufacturing process consist of the following phases: compound mixing, component manufacturing, tyre building, curing and finally inspection One of the most striking characteristic is a strict division of labour between the phases of the production process and departments. This means that duties within one's own area of responsibility are always performed as planned regardless of how the other links of the process might perform. Among other things, it means also that communication between department and shifts is difficult. This was considered as a major problem in attempts to achieve a better smoothing production process, a transformation from functional organization towards process -organization.

For this major transformation, a three-year development programme was launched. The key development method was the establishing of an inter-departmental problem-solving forum, were employee representatives from different production phases participated. The two-hours lasting problem-solving sessions were led by a consultant or the shift superior. Sometimes also technicians or other experts took part in the meetings, as the problem-solving needed their special expertise. The problems were put forward by the employees themselves, not by the
management. However, as the aim was to improve communication between departments, it was usually assumed that problems to be resolved were not concern of a single department.

**Micropolitics and new organizational practices in the tyre factory**

Several examples of the micropolitics and its effects on the implementation of organizational innovation and new practices are presented in the following chapters. Extracts derive from individual interviews as well as tape-recorded group discussion during the course of inter-departmental problem-solving sessions. The presentation aims at illuminating the feature of factory politics from various sides. Emphasis is put on to present an empirically rich illustration to show how the sphere of micropolitics and games surfaces and makes an impact on organizational learning and innovation processes in the contexts of cross-functional group problem solving processes.

In the following is described a problem-solving case related to the development of a new practice concerning the interplay between the arriving shift and the leaving shift. To understand the formation of the new practice, some background information is presented. The work of the factory is organized according to the five-shift system, working eight hours each. Formally the leaving shift should wait, until the arriving shift has entered the machines. Furthermore the shifts are expected to change information about the functioning of the machines and other potentially important things. In the real world this rarely takes place, instead there exist different practices depending on the production phase and department. The following excerpt of a problem-solving meeting illustrates the problems related to the existing way of operation between shifts.

**Worker, component manufacturing:** Now, there seems to be tightened control of working hours.

**HRD-manager:** Right, there seems to be a plenty of disregard at the moment. Some workers leave their machines prematurely and there also exists a lot of overdues. In some cases this is the same person, which means that he works 7,5 hours instead of 8 hours. There will follow warnings for these persons.

**Worker, component manufacturing:** We all know, that in certain machines you can leave a little bit earlier. So far this has been accepted.

**HRD-manager:** The complaint of the present situation was made by a group of workers in tyre building, not from the management.

**Worker, curing:** In our work station it is impossible to leave until the next worker comes. I think everyone should work 8 hours.

**Worker, component manufacturing:** Yes, but there has to be some flexibility, strict instructions are ridiculous.

**Worker, tyre building:** We have our own practice, which ensures there is always the changing of information during the shift change.

Another factor affecting the problem-solving process lays in the transformation process of organization in 1990's. The most important change concerning the production and labour process was the introduction of teamworking. It was first introduced in 1994 as a pilot project and it was extended to the whole organization in 1997 and 1998. Teamleaders replaced foremen, who were given a totally new role as workshoptechicians and some of their responsibilities were delegated to teams. This was not unproblematic in foremens' opinions.

"After the old order was broken up, there was a time, when no one knew who was responsible for what. Teamleaders’ authority was not accepted by team members and there soon emerged at least minor conflicts. Besides our authority was taken away, but
not responsibilities. In this kind of situation you can not find any role in there. There is now an impression of some kind of frustration among us.” (workshoptechician).

However, during the course of the teamworking implementation process, there occurred serious production problems. The ability to react to emerging faults or changes in production was lost in the absence of decision-makers. Soon some of the previous responsibilities were restored to workshoptechnicians. During the development programme the tension between these previous foremen and teams were present. Workshoptechnicians were not interested in participating in development sessions despite requests.

In the beginning of another problem-solving session the question of interaction between shifts was taken on the agenda again.

**Shiftsupervisor:** So, the flow of information seems to be one of our biggest problems. Should we consider it between departments or shifts? Both are of the highest importance. Between departments it is about what information should be given out, to whom and how. But what about between shifts?

**Worker, component manufacturing:** Let’s first take it between shifts. It would be important to know, whether materials for production has been ordered or whether there are some problems with the machine. Now this information is missing.

The first suggestion for the solution was made by the worker from tyre building. However, it was immediately rejected by the truck-drivers, who are the only group of workers able to move around in the factory and not having the necessity to stay close to any machine.

**Worker, tyre building:** Because you drive around delivering materials to machines, could there be a notebook somewhere in your trucks?

**Truckdriver:** Why is it always the truckdrivers? We are not the ones who are running the machines. I guess the teamleaders should be responsible for this.

**Workshoptechnician:** Yes, teamleaders should wait and change information. But, how it is now, how do you change information?

**Worker, tyre building:** Near machines we have large white boards and we have also notebooks there. But I don’t know, whether anyone uses it. I think everyone has his own way to inform, or not to inform. I think teamleaders should take care of the flow of information.

Still, the shiftsupervisor sticks to the idea of the notebook close to each machine, to be used by the operator. He suggests the listing of issues to be included in the book. The three workers representing tyre building are reluctant to the idea. This is because they are not willing to change their informal way to any standardized mode of operation.

**Worker 1, tyre building:** I think we don’t have to do this, we have a good practice now.

**Worker 2, tyre building:** Yes, I agree, there is no need to change.

**Worker 3, tyre building:** Right, there is no need for any lists. Our teamleader takes much responsibility for informing.

The resistance of tyre builders did not encourage the shiftsupervisor to continue with the preparing of lists in that session. However, with some operators and workshoptechnician, for the next session he had prepared lists for each machine. In the meeting the lists were checked by the participants. The shiftsupervisor had also asked workshoptechnicians to comment on the lists.
Shiftsupervisor: I sent the lists also to workshoptechnicians for comments, but I have not received any comments. There is total silence there. It is always the same with them.

Worker, tyre building: Why don't they participate in these meetings? We have asked them to attend, but anyone never comes.

HRD-person: I have always informed them about these meetings, times and places.

Worker, curing: It seems they are not interested a bit.

Shiftsupervisor: Right, also this time I sent invitations, they are not uninformed, they are well aware of these sessions.

During the next week lists were completed and to support the new practice the decision was made to integrate it in a very short morning meetings among teamleader, workshoptechnicians, shiftsupervisor and some operators. The new practice was introduced first as a pilot and later on to be widely used. The first trials of the morning meetings failed in the absence of the involvement of the workshoptechnicians.

In the next session, there was a discussion how to activate workshoptechnicians to be involved. The shiftsupervisor sees how this could be possible with the help of foremen of the workshoptechnicians.

Shiftsupervisor: Now, how can we make use of our lists. I think we have to collect all the lists and give them to operators for checking and become acquainted with.

Worker, tyre building: That's good. But how can we activate workshoptechnicians? Should we go and discuss with them directly, how to use these?

Shiftsupervisor: I think we could bring this new practice to upper management levels for discussion. They can use their authority to activate. It is easier to drop it down than to try to pull it up from "downstairs".

To conclude, it can easily be identified, how micropolitics affected the problem-solving process in the tyre-factory. The aim was to standardize actions during the change of shifts. From the very beginning this subject was politically loaded, as some workers or groups resisted this accusing the management for tightening of the control. However, the initiative for this came originally from the worker side to equalize the amount of working hours. During the course of the actual problem-solving various worker groups presented their rejection from the perspective of their group-interests. In the case of truck-drivers the suggested solution was interpreted to mean unpaid extrawork. Tyre building workers for their part were reluctant to another suggestion, because they had developed their own unofficial practice, and they wanted to keep control on this. However, perhaps the most forceful resistance to the development of the new practice was silent in nature. Workshoptechnicians didn't participate in problem-solving sessions, and they didn't comment on any suggestions. This prolonged the problem-solving process, as they had their important role in organizing daily work activities, and thus also changing these activities. Finally, the solution found was flawed, as workshoptechnicians did not attend the meetings. The roots for their behaviour laid in the near factory history, having its origin in the process of the changing social order of the factory.

The window factory and its production process

The window factory produces windows with frames for different kind of houses. Windows are made of wood and aluminum. The glasses needed for windows are bought from subcontractors. The factory employs about 200 people and is one of the largest window factories in Finland.

The window factory has a quite tayloristic work organization. It consists of six departments between of which there are intermediate storages. Windows are produced during their way
through the factory building although one can not speak of an assembly line, instead there can be found many lines and different kind of machines. They don’t have official team organization and management has not paid a lot of attention to the organization of the work process. Still the employees are working in unofficial groups and these groups are very strong in their social nature. There can be found limited job rotation in some of these groups.

The aluminum department is quite different from the other departments. It is located outside the process and behind doors. In that department employees can be said to constitute “a real team” in which the employees are more multiskilled. All the employees there are men and these men don’t allow women to come to their territory. There is a strong social borderline between the aluminum department and the others. Between all departments can be found socially and physically constituted borderlines and strong lines exist also between the two shifts of the factory but the aluminum department is said to constitute “its own world”. It is very difficult to move an employee across the barriers to another group, department or shift. Moving of an aluminum employee to some other place is even more difficult and it is impossible to move an employee to the aluminum department from another department of the window factory.

The skills of the workers are somewhat specialized and fragmented but that doesn’t hinder the job rotation or moving of the workers as much as does these social borderlines. Many of the people work with machines but there are some parts of the process that have to be done manually, for example puttying. That is also the most unpopular part of the work process. The puttying is very accuracy demanding job because one has to make the coat of the wood clean-cut and especially large window frames get easily dents during the process. The employees working with the puttying are typically women; some of them are foreigners and their salary is the lowest in the factory. So it is not easy to move any worker to the puttying department; many explain that they can’t learn the job because it demands so much dexterity.

About ten percent of the employees are multiskilled. There can be found two different kind of multiskilled employee groups. One consists of people that have worked in different parts of the production process and have learned a couple of jobs. These people typically work in some “ordinary” part of the process and are asked to change job when needed. The manager of the factory calls them “trusty players”. The other group consists of people who work in some kind of special job, as truck drivers or with claims. These two groups of employees have a better understanding of the work process than the others. They also have larger networks than the rest of the employees who typically know only the members of their own group and some of the clerical employees. It can be said that these people have better work process knowledge (Boreham et al. 2002). The managers would like to see all of the workers multiskilled and trusty players but that’s very difficult because of the strong barriers between the employee groupings.

Behind the strong barriers can be found the payroll system of the window factory. It has been designed to arouse competition between the departments and the shifts. Although the system has been partly changed for some years ago the internal competition is still part of the culture. It is there partly because management anyway measures and compares the effectiveness of the shifts and different groups. The competition culture makes the cooperation between the employees difficult. All groups try to optimize the productivity of their own parts and that makes the production process very unstable.

Micropolitics and new organizational practices in the window factory
In order to make the production process more fluent, constant and efficient the managers of the window factory have decided to develop multiskilling of the employees. They think that it is
through the development of the employees’ skills and competencies that job rotation and all kinds of employee moves and transfers could become possible. The target of the managers is that all the employees would become trusty players and that they would identify themselves as “window workers”, not as aluminum workers or as puttying workers, for example. There have been some training operations at the factory some of which have been carried out by professional trainers and some by the employees of the factory. Nothing has changed. There exists no open resistance but the silent resistance is durable. Employees don’t practice job rotation more than earlier and they are not more eager to change jobs when there happens to be need for temporary changes. The organizational innovation process is stuck.

In that situation the research was carried out at the factory during the winter 2005-2006. The reasons why multiskilling has become such a dilemma in that factory were analyzed. Why did the employees counteract multiskilling which has by many researchers been described as a way to make work richer and more meaningful? The method used was action research. The purpose of the actions was trying to clarify the situation and to develop the cooperation in the factory. There were plenty of meetings with the employees and the managers and a survey was made, too. The findings reported in this article are mainly based on qualitative material. (More about the research Järvensivu 2007.)

We found that the employees practiced many kinds of “factory games”. Factory games could be defined as unofficial practices that are used in order to advance the interests of some groups of workers. At general level the unofficial practices of the workers can have negative or positive influences to the production process and the window factory. Some of them are quite essential for the process to keep it going. But we label factory games such practices that serve the interests of some workers opposed to the interests of some other groups, for example other groups of workers or managers. The interests that are advanced by factory games usually have something to do with control. They could be said to be linked to the goals and the control strategies of the employer. Playing factory games gives the players more control or sense of control over the work process. (Järvensivu 2007.)

Some of the games played at the window factory helped the employees to show other employees and managers that they were professionals, some games helped to practice control over their own labor force and the amount of work, while others were suitable for choosing jobs and thus practice control over the job. For example putting workers change the numbers of frames to be puttyied so that they don’t have to putty large frames. Large frames are difficult and drawn-out to putty and that is why workers would like to leave them to the other shift. So their own shift gets better results than the other. Moreover some groups return difficult frames back in line very easily claiming that there exists something to fix in them so that these frames would not come to their department until the shift has changed. That is naturally frustrating for these to whom the frames are returned in order to be fixed and that is why workers don’t always trust in the quality assessments of the other groups.

The window workers have many practices to win some free time. One is to work harder when there is a broken machine in the next department. That boosts storage after the own department and sometimes workers can go home in these situations or at least they get an extra pause.

These kinds of games and the strong competition between different groups made the production process unstable. None of the games challenged directly the main goal of the factory introduced to the employees, namely the amount of the products. But that was the situation only when looked at the level of single employees or their groups. When looked at the factory level the games
hampered the fluent production process. The games could be seen as a resistance and as consent. It is clear that these control practices irritated managers and were interpreted as irrational.

The launching of fluent production process and multiskilling as targets was the managers’ counterstrategy to the games of the employees. If it were possible to move the employees to places where needed or if they even changed their jobs independently the production would flow more fluently and effectively. But that kind of change would take the feeling of control over the production and labour process away from the employees. For example, it would mean more work and all kind of work for all of the employees: also the aluminum men should change jobs with the women in the puttying department when needed. The change would make people to work harder and have fewer pauses: every worker would become responsible for all jobs. It would destroy the unofficial groups, communities of practice so to say, too.

From that perspective multiskilling was neither in line with the political atmosphere and practices of the window factory, nor was it the way to “good work” for the employees. Multiskilling would destroy the employee’s feeling of somewhat balanced exchange and control relationship between the employee and the employer. For these reasons the employees didn’t accept multiskilling and that’s why they practiced silent counteracts to the training attempts of the managers.

From the case of the window factory can be learned that the political situation at the workplace sets conditions to organizational changes or innovations and the whole innovation process is political in nature. Launching an innovation can even be interpreted to be a (control) strategic operation in the micro political game of the workplace. In our opinion more fluent production process and multiskilling can only become the practice of the window factory if it would be negotiated, restructured and accepted in the micropolitics of the factory. It is important that the employees can see multiskilling as a part of the fair exchange relationship between the workers and the employer, and that they can maintain a feeling of some control over the work process. Only after that come the questions about the skills and competencies and how they can be learned.

Conclusions

Our aim was to provide a contribution to innovation studies by showing empirically, what kind of role organizational politics plays in organizational innovation processes and outcomes. We researched organizational innovations and micropolitics in two factories, tyre and window factories. Our research method was case study and action research.

According to our study it seems that organizational innovations are negotiated and shaped in political processes and they can even be one tactical operation in the game of power and control. The conversations in the tyre factory demonstrated that the different practices, interests and power positions of the factory departments, groups and individuals surfaced in the course of the change processes. They showed as silence and as more or less open resistance, on the one hand, and as support for initiatives and working on them actively, on the other. In the window factory launching an organizational innovation (flexibility through multiskilling) could even be interpreted to present a political tactic striving to get better control on the production process. That’s why the workers of the factory had opposed multiskilling for years. In this case we found, how all the changes launched by managers are to be restructured at the workplace level to innovations that can be accepted by different kind of employee groups.

We have noticed that politics is not only used to resist management and power relations are not exhaustively 'top-down'. From the standpoint of this study it becomes evident, that the research on organizational innovations should consider micropolitics and put important emphasis on
divergent strategies and interests within and between organizational actors. For workers these refer to occupational sub-cultures, departmental contradictions, borderlines between skilled and unskilled labour-force, for example. As to management, there might be layers of management, which pursue their own strategies differing from the official top management's strategy.

The research also refers to the fact, that politics can not be managed or controlled in any simple manner. This is because politics is not just another dimension to be understood by management in their attempts to neutralize or eradicate any of its negative or disruptive effects, but politics are at the centre of events and practices within organizations; they are both a condition and consequence of any organizational discourse and practice (Knights and McCabe 1998, 773). Organizations and practices there are inherently political in nature which means that one can not operate successfully without taken politics into account. It could be claimed that the best organizational innovations are carefully negotiated and developed with the members of the organization. Different interests have to be mobilized and groups enrolled before they can be adopted. It must entail ensuring the conformance or control of employees to deliver the goal set.

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