THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF WORKPLACE
OH&S COMMITTEES: A FRAME OF REFERENCE

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The Role of Workplace Committees in Changing Organisations
and Labour-Management Relations: An Evaluation-Case Study.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing consensus from the 1980's onwards, among unions, management, and governments, on the need for change in Australian industrial relations. As a result reforms are now progressing on a number of fronts.

Firstly, there is a trend toward more flexible and decentralised arrangements to enhance participative practices and productivity. One model emerging is a system of enterprise agreements, with only one or two unions negotiating on behalf of employees in the workplace. Another possible model is a set of industry awards setting minimum conditions, leaving detailed negotiation of working conditions to union and management at the enterprise or workplace level.

Secondly, there is a trend toward more efficient personnel practices and cooperative approaches to improve the industrial relations climate and also productivity. The most common strategy used by management is to enhance the participative process by providing workers with membership of some sort of committee (including, a group, a board, a council, etc.). There are committees that only expand the range of tasks a worker performs, others that discuss and try to deal with operational problems more efficiently, some that seek to resolve ill-defined and complex problems, and others that are oriented toward defining policy, or improving industrial practices.

Although there are increasing instances of genuine enterprise-focused bargaining in Australia, for now, most industrial relations issues continue to be addressed within the traditional institutional arrangements of negotiation, with arbitration tribunals having the key role. However, there is a wide array of cooperative efforts occurring in workplaces. The wide spread of occupational health and safety (OH&S) committees, as a result of the introduction of Robens-type OH&S legislation throughout Australia, can be considered as attempts to fulfill the need for more cooperation and decentralisation on the OH&S issue.

One of the best examples of these attempts is provided by the New South Wales Occupational Health and Safety Act 1983, and Committees in Workplaces Regulation 1984.
On the one hand, this legislation provides a recognised process by which management and employee representatives can regularly discuss OH&S issues - the main object being to prevent and resolve OH&S problems, in a self-regulatory manner. On the other hand, this legislation is the most obvious initiative in NSW to provide a workplace focus, formal joint consultation, and closer relationships between labour and management, in other words, to foster a devolution approach in industrial relations. This is evidenced by the following.

Firstly, the recommendation of the Williams Report that the NSW OH&S legislation should provide a framework for self-regulation*, has been positive in encouraging a workplace focus. In this regard, the 1983 OH&S Act, placed general obligations upon all persons involved in the workplace, instead of prescribing rigid standards. Also, the Act offers a participative scheme (committees) to recognise and formalise dealings with OH&S at the workplace level, and in a cooperative manner.

Secondly, the legislative requirement that enterprises with twenty or more employees must, if requested by the employees, establish an OH&S committee, has given greater force to the idea of consultation^*. The Act and the Regulation enhance this idea by, inter alia, requiring that employee representatives be in a majority on committees, be elected by their fellow employees, and that one of them must be the chairperson. Also, they have the power to inspect the workplace, and to have access to information relating to the workplace, to be consulted by, and make recommendations to management, and to contribute to the production of OH&S policy and programs for workplaces. Consequently, worker participation in decision-making on OH&S can be seen as an example of what can be realised, and also as a vehicle for a devolution approach in industrial relations. This is in line with the main industrial relations policy concern of the federal and state governments in the 1990's, that is: How to refashion the industrial relations infrastructure, to better accommodate the shift to more decentralised arrangements?*

Against this background, workplace committees may have a fundamental role of solving problems, but can also create unintended effects, such as, bringing about important changes in organisational and labour-management practices. Thus, committees can, perhaps incidentally achieve other purposes than those for which they were established.
The purpose of this paper is firstly, to explore, in the light of organisational theory and the mainstream industrial relations literature, the fundamental and incidental role and impact OH&S committees can have in organisations and in the broader environment, and secondly, show how these can be evaluated, in an industrial relations reform context.

In order to meet this dual purpose, our frame of reference is comprised of two parts: the conceptual framework, and; the evaluation framework. We have worked out our terms of reference from evaluation research methodology and the inherent limits of a PH.D. thesis conducted in a NSW public hospital context (see Appendix - Thesis Material and Methods). Therefore, when discussing the role and impact of OH&S committees, we often refer to the NSW OH&S legislation, and use hospitals as a point of reference.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is a large body of literature on the study of workplace committees, and more particularly, OH&S committees*. However, on closer examination, the literature consists mostly of ad hoc experiments on various types of committees, with different histories, ways of operating, and scope. Very few attempts have been made to develop a frame of reference or a generally accepted theory, against which workplace committees could be studied. Against this background, we have built the present conceptual framework by concentrating, as far as we could, on what seemed to be a common denominator. Also, we have extracted, whenever possible, those elements from theories that can explain and analyse the working of committees, and enable us to make some prognoses.

Following from the above, we have decided to explore the fundamental/incidental role and impact of OH&S committees in line with two main approaches to the study of committees (or comparable structural interventions): the first approach sees committees as problem solving agents (the focus being on the fundamental role and impact), the second perceives committees as change agents (the focus being on the incidental role and impact). Each approach is described below in line with the dominant theoretical influences in the field, as well as, the basic lessons suggested by experience in this area. On the basis of this analysis, we have formulated empirical propositions to serve as reference points.
WORKPLACE COMMITTEES AS PROBLEM-SOLVING AGENTS

According to the problem-solving approach, committees are viewed more as temporary (i.e., used only when required), and limited to achieving specific organisational goals - often expressed in terms of solving ill-defined and complex problems - through workplace participation, and cooperation between labour and management. We found four dominant contemporary schools of organisational theory, which support this approach to the role and impact of committees: small group dynamic, organisational development, action research, and contingency theory.

Research based on organisational development theory, has shown the advantages of involving in the change process, those who will be affected by it\textsuperscript{12}. Small group dynamic theory, maintains that small participative formal structures are tools for solving problems, and that large bureaucratic structures are designed for handling well-defined, daily, operating problems, but poor at dealing with ill-defined problems\textsuperscript{10}. Contingency theory, maintains that the context in which people operate makes a difference to goal success\textsuperscript{14}. Here, organisations in an unstable environment are seen as more effective if they have more decentralisation, participation, and place less emphasis on rules and standard procedures. Also, this theory places emphasis on how the organisational context interacts with the personality and the behaviour of a leader to affect goal performance. There are several contingency theories of leadership which support this\textsuperscript{15}. Yet, action research theory, shows that a shared power and a participative approach to organisational change is more effective than when changes are simply decreed by top management\textsuperscript{16}.

Prescriptions available in the mainstream industrial relations literature - which is strictly concerned with the problem-solving role of committees - include those stating that union and management leaders must see their role in joint committees as instrumental, and that goals must be achieved early in the process\textsuperscript{17}. Both prescriptions come from the viewpoint that sees each faction as goal oriented in their own interests, and recognises the political need to achieve results in order that key constituencies continue to give support\textsuperscript{18} (viewpoint partly based on contingency theory).

For example, one of the most significant empirical studies on organisational change effort in a union-management context, has shown that in a quality of work life experiment at the Rushton Mine, U.S.A., the union participated to improve OH&S, while management was more interested in increasing productivity.
As long as the program led to the achievement of both goals, both parties remained committed to the problem-solving intervention. From this, we can derive our first proposition:

Proposition 1: Committees are more likely to survive as problem-solving agents, if both parties perceive committees as facilitating the attainment of their respective goals.

Empirical studies that have attributed a problem-solving role to committees are in a majority in the field. Most of those studies that were concerned with OH&S committees, concentrated on the impact of these committees on solving OH&S problems, since this is an explicit fundamental goal often stated in OH&S legislation. Measures most often used include: injury claims and absenteeism rates, number of solutions recommended, and number of solutions implemented.

However, most studies did not detect a significant relationship between the activities of committees and the injury claims and absenteeism rates. An important point raised in the industrial relations literature is that labour-management problem-solving takes time and such ultimate benefits (if any) can only be seen in the long run. It is often impossible to measure these benefits within a normal research time frame. Research should concentrate on more immediate measures of benefits (e.g., number of preventive measures implemented, etc.).

It is also unfortunate that the injury and absenteeism measures used in research to determine the success of committees are not the best ones. For example, the injury claims measure is only an administrative subproduct and therefore can often underestimate the real situation, since a sizeable percentage of injuries may not be declared. The absenteeism measure is often based on these claims which brings about the same bias. As an alternative measure, even the number of solutions recommended, is not a measure of committee success, but only a measure of committee activities. In fact, the solutions recommended by committees may not have been implemented in the workplace, and thus, committees may not have achieved their goal of solving problems.

Against this background, the number of solutions implemented appears to be a better predictive measure of committees' success. For more accuracy, we should combine this measure with the quality or adequacy of the solutions implemented, and when possible, establish a link with changes in injury rates or incident rates.
The failure to detect a significant relationship between committees and the above measures may also be due to the prematurity of the impact analysis. Premature evaluation is an example of misapplication of evaluation. This occurs when essential preconditions for the operation of committees, such as training, resources, power, etc., are not present.

A recent survey on the impact of OH&S committees, conducted in the manufacturing sector, in the United States\textsuperscript{23}, is an example of an evaluation that measured impact prematurely. The study did not research the degree of implementation of recently formed committees, and so failed to specify the outcomes that could be reasonably expected as a result of the amount and quality of implementation. Virtually, no effect due to OH&S committees could be detected on the number of injury claims.

Bearing this in mind, researchers can wrongly attribute effects (or lack of them), to committees, if they do not ascertain whether committees were implemented as planned, and also assess the degree of their implementation\textsuperscript{26}. The measurement of the degree of committee implementation (i.e. the efficacy) should be as important as the measurement of committee effectiveness, since attention to efficacy (i.e., the power to produce an effect) is important as part of the effectiveness (i.e., the production of the desired effect). In this regard, we can draw the following proposition.

Proposition 2: The greater the degree of implementation of committees, the more likely it is that committees will achieve their goal of solving problems.

However, the quality of implementation should be seen to be, as important as, the degree of implementation. In this respect, problem-solving oriented studies prescribe different norms and procedures, as important factors of committee implementation. Some prescriptions are seemingly based on the intention to prevent conflicts affecting the change process, such as, that expert external consultants should be retained\textsuperscript{27}, that prior antagonists should be kept out of joint meetings\textsuperscript{28}, and that traditional bargaining issues should not be discussed\textsuperscript{29}. This is because most of the studies have been conducted in countries such as, the United States and Canada, where traditional collective bargaining exists at the workplace level. Thus, committees are perceived as instruments for dealing with those ill-defined and complex problems that collective bargaining cannot solve,
either because of the long-term character of these problems, such as: How to eliminate this OH&S risk?, or because of the dangerous trade-off of human life that may be involved in traditional collective bargaining, such as: How much 'danger money' should be given in substitution for prevention? Accordingly, most conceptualisations on workplace committees support the view that committees are likely to survive, if they are divorced from collective bargaining and the administration of agreements, and only retain external consultants.

In the Australian context, the above prescriptions may be unnecessary and even ill-founded. The Australian industrial relations system is unique, and cannot be likened to the American or Canadian systems. Although there is genuine enterprise-bargaining emerging in Australia, most industrial relations issues continue to be addressed through the arbitration system. Also, even if important changes are underway toward a more enterprise-focus, the trend is not toward adversarial approaches. The main trend of the 1980's, was toward more cooperative attitudes between unions and management, and in the beginning of 1990 more important actions are being taken to replace the adversarial approach with a cooperative approach³⁰.

These prescriptions may also be ill-founded in the American and Canadian context of the 1990's. One significant argument against these prescriptions, arising from American and Canadian research, is that; divorcing collective bargaining from the committee, can generate problems of communication and coordination of activities. Also, dual representation can generate intrunion leadership struggles³¹. One significant empirical finding comes from a recent American study on parallel learning structures and quality control circles. Here, the successful plants worked at building cooperation between prior antagonists, and this fueled the change process, and; as cooperation evolved in the successful plants, bargaining issues were dealt with in cooperative ways³² - all this without the intervention of external consultants.

Other prescriptions are oriented toward developing learning, cooperation, and creative problem-solving³³. In this respect, it is often prescribed that committees should represent a 'vertical slice' of the organisation in order to optimise responsiveness (one aspect of learning), small group problem solving (propensity for creativity), and more permeability in group boundaries (propensity for cooperation). The use of joint, 'vertical slice' committees rests not only on small group dynamic theory, but also on the organisational design principle of involving those affected by a change in planning the change.
Action research projects often refer to lesser developed forms of parallel learning structures, such as OH&S committees, for the same reason. Finally, research based on contingency theory often highlights the importance of a differentiated structure for achieving specific goals.

One element of this 'vertical slice', crucial to the success of committees, is the commitment of the appropriate senior management. This should enhance the status of committees and give them a route to the top, so to speak. This does not exclude the possibility that top management become trainees themselves, but the point to make here is that if senior management confers on OH&S matters a relatively high priority, then this is likely to influence the lower levels of management to take OH&S problems, as a relatively serious matter. This has been recognised in the guidance notes for OH&S committees, written by the Rehabilitation Council of NSW:

"... Management should be represented by appropriate line and staff personnel who have such knowledge or authority that they can contribute to the effectiveness of the committee."

This has also found support in the organisational development literature, where senior management commitment is perceived as central before a change effort can be successfully initiated. However, the commitment of management's counterpart, that is the unions, has been ignored in organisational theory. This is because the reality of industrial relations has not yet been captured by organisational theory. However, the NSW legislation recognises an important role for unions in matters of OH&S. The industry level committees provided by the 1983 OH&S Act are tripartite, thus involving unions. The Act also provides an important role for unionists in constituting workplace OH&S committees. Finally, the Rehabilitation Council of NSW, has recognised the provision by some unions, of training course packages for committee members at the workplace level. However, the Act recognises employees rather than unions, as representing the interests of labour on committees, in order to ensure that the non unionised workforce has access to participation. In the industrial relations literature, there are two schools of thought regarding the presence of unions on workplace OH&S committees. One school argues that unions should not be allowed to represent the interests of labour on committees, because of the danger of jeopardising the cooperative relationship required. The other school maintains that unions should represent the interests of labour on committees, because of the danger that management representatives may dominate the committee proceedings, and thus jeopardise any real worker participation in decision-making.
Here, it seems logical that the presence of unions on committees is as important in giving employee representatives genuine power and influence, as a senior management presence on committees is important in giving committees genuine decision-making authority. However, it is not our purpose to debate this very controversial issue in this paper. What seems to be an important input to the effective working of committees is, the commitment of unions - whether present on, or absent from, workplace committees. Also what seems to be needed is sufficient delegation of authority and power for the working and success of committees.

Another important element of joint 'vertical slice' committees is to have adequate representativity of the workforce. This is also supported in the industrial relations literature\textsuperscript{44}. Here concern is expressed that representatives should constitute a microcosm of the workforce, and be elected through the democratic process\textsuperscript{45}. In matters of OH&S, attention is drawn to the balance of representation, which also needs to be related to perceived risks\textsuperscript{46}. Australian, American, and British studies have reported on the widespread under-representation of female members in their unions and in other forms of worker participation\textsuperscript{47}. Female representation has significance for democracy in its own right, since society is constituted of women and men, some of whom are migrants, aged, handicapped, unskilled, etc. In matters of OH&S, women should have greater representation on workplace committees in industries such as the health care industry, where they are a higher percentage of the workforce than men, and come from occupations with high OH&S risks (e.g., nurses)\textsuperscript{48}. Also, groups such as non-English speaking, unskilled, etc., have often been poorly represented within the ranks of trade union officials and delegates and on various kinds of industry or workplace committees\textsuperscript{49}. In matter of OH&S, these groups often constitute the population subject to a high degree of OH&S risks. Firstly, because of the language barrier (lack of communication, information, etc.) and secondly, because they are most often working in maintenance areas, which involve high safety risks\textsuperscript{50}.

Against this background, and given the complexity of both legal and technical aspects of OH&S, training courses, two way communication, and access to information are considered to be vital to workplace committee members. The implementation of a 'vertical slice' committee implies on its own the development of an effective network of communication and exchange of information. Training, is crucial for generating the learning process, and for the proper implementation of OH&S committees. The NSW OH&S legislation has already recognised the importance of such implementation factors.
One of the objectives of the OH&S Committees in Workplaces Regulation, is to provide immediate (as soon as practicable) and ongoing training to committee members so that they can begin to perform their tasks in an informed and effective manner\textsuperscript{a}. The NSW OH&S Act also gives two main powers to committee members. The first is to carry out inspections, which implies access to premises, and the second is to have access to all information kept by the employer. In the guidance notes for workplace OH&S committees issued by the Rehabilitation Council of NSW, emphasis is placed on the importance of two way communication:

"... A copy of the minutes should be sent to the most senior executive responsible for health and safety, and arrangements should be made to ensure that senior management ... is kept informed ... of the work of the committee. An adequate number of copies of the minutes should be displayed, or made available by other means, along with other information which the employer provides whether required by statute or not ... it is important that a two way information be established between the committee, management, and employees"\textsuperscript{b}.

Finally, research leads us to believe that leadership personalities play a major role in establishing workplace committees, and in getting 'things done'\textsuperscript{c}. Therefore, the presence of leadership personalities is also an important element in the implementation of OH&S committees. Theoretical bases for this role can be found in contingency theories of leadership\textsuperscript{d}. Against this background, we can derive the following proposition.

Proposition 3: Committees are more likely to be successful in solving problems, if the following elements are implemented: training courses for committee members, two way communication, access to operating information, delegation of authority and power, representation of the workforce, commitment of labour and management elites (e.g., unions, senior management, medical doctors) and presence of leadership personalities.

An important point to make here is that, most of the problem-solving oriented studies stress the need to implement those norms and procedures that foster learning, cooperation, and creative problem-solving - considering the nature of the task committees face, that is solving ill-defined and complex problems.
Accordingly, we can also draw the following proposition.

Proposition 4: Committees are more likely to solve problems, if committee members have sufficient knowledge and expertise, develop cooperative approaches, and pursue innovative ideas.

Without detracting from the above, committee arrangements need to be agreed upon by all concerned. Each enterprise or workplace is unique, and therefore prescriptive recipes cannot be imposed. Committees must develop voluntarily according to the needs of the local parties. Yet, legislated committees to be successful, require widespread consensus and community support.

Proposition 5: Committees will only be effective in solving problems, if there is support for their implementation from local management, employees, and unions.

Also, the implementation of committees should be easier, if the characteristics of the industry or enterprise are compatible with the workplace committee arrangements. A good example, can be provided within the health industry. The literature shows that the dual hierarchy of medical and administrative authority, as well as the unique character of dispersed and rotating shift workforce, in the health care industry, makes the implementation of committees in hospital contexts difficult and complex. Therefore, we can also draw the following proposition.

Proposition 6: The greater the congruency in values and arrangements between workplace committees and the broader environment (e.g., public health system, industrial relations system, etc.), the easier will be the implementation of these committees.

For industrial relations scholars, perhaps one of the most important factors, emanating from the broader environment, to be considered in the study of OH&S committees, is the nature of industrial relations in the industry or enterprise. It is quite clear that OH&S committees operate within the overall industrial relations context, and that consequently, this context could be an essential determinant of committees' success.
For one school of thought, an effective committee could best operate where the overall industrial relations environment is essentially cooperative. For another school of thought, committees will work better, where the industrial relations environment is effective, strong and stable, whether cooperative or adversarial. The common denominator here is that the more successfully labour and management handle traditional industrial relations issues, the more likely it is that commitment to committees will be maintained over time. In other words, failure to solve traditional issues, will spill over and affect the joint problem-solving behaviour expected to be found on committees. Therefore, the proposition to be made is as follows:

Proposition 7: Committees are likely to work well and be more effective in solving problems, the more successfully the industrial parties handle traditional industrial issues.

**WORKPLACE COMMITTEES AS CHANGE AGENTS**

According to the change approach, committees are viewed as permanent and evolving, and as an instrument for increasing adaptability in organisations, and even transforming them. When we apply this approach to the study of industrial relations, committees may be viewed as supporting mechanisms for either creating adaptability in, or transforming, rigid industrial relations systems. This approach to the role and impact of committees traces its roots to six dominant contemporary schools of organisational theory: organisational design, contingency, intrapreneurism, structural sociology, intergroup, and system theory (including morphogenesis, and dialectical contradiction).

Research on organisational design theory, has shown the advantages of a participative management ideology and a decentralised cooperative structure, for creating more flexibility, adaptability, and efficiency in organisations. Contingency theory has shown that, as the structure of any organisation is subjected to outside restraints, the organisation develops both formal and informal systems, which help it to adapt to the outside environment. Kanter's intrapreneurial theory, maintains that adaptability would come from the rank and file of organisations, and be supported through the establishment of decentralised arrangements - such as workplace committees. Structural sociology theory, is concerned with the efficiency of formal structures, as mechanisms for adaptive planning and learning. Intergroup theory, proposes that teamwork creates unintentional forces for transformation in interorganisational relations, by addressing most group boundaries in organisations.
Yet, system theory, sees transformation, as an artifact of innovative structures, which may or may not be of conscious intent, occurring due to osmosis between these structures, and the elements or practices of broader systems.

For the purpose of this paper, the role and impact of committees as change agents, will be considered in the immediate environment (i.e., the enterprise or workplace), and in the broader environment (i.e., the industrial relations system). Committees will also be analysed in two phases: the role of committees in creating adaptability in the environment, and in transforming the environment.

Creating Adaptability in the Environment

Under this role, OH&S committees shall stimulate adaptation in both environments - organisations and the industrial relations system - through a permanent dual-structure design. In this perspective, committees can be used to adapt each environment to a new set of conditions. Thus, in the organisational context, people will see the problems to be solved also as opportunities for adaptation. Essentially, the problem-solving role of committees becomes the preventative role of committees. In effect, when committees try to solve OH&S problems in the organisation, their task is to prevent the occurrence of work related accidents and illnesses, and incidentally foster two types of adaptation in organisations: symbolic, which includes anticipating problems and solving them satisfactorily; and behavioural, which comprises prevalence of adjustment and promptness of adjustment to change. From this, we can draw the following proposition.

Proposition 8: Committees will create adaptability in organisations by preventing the occurrence of work injuries (i.e., by solving OH&S problems).

We have discussed earlier (see pages 7-11) the main implementation factors that bear on the problem-solving success of committees. Some of these factors increase the opportunities for individuals to pursue innovative ideas, thus incidentally can create adaptability in organisations, as Kanter's intrapreneurial theory maintains. In this regard, research shows that spontaneous and innovative behaviour, amongst staff members, would facilitate the organisations' adaptation to contingencies.
We have also seen in the introduction that in response to increasing pressures from the environment, organisations are adopting strategies aimed at increasing the efficiency of their structures through what they call 'innovative' workplace committee programs. Therefore, OH&S committees shall add to organisations an adaptive capacity to change by supplementing that aspect of organisational philosophy, which facilitates the pursuit of innovative ideas, and thus the organisation's response to change.

A factor that may allow individuals, the opportunity to pursue innovative ideas, is the participative process itself that OH&S committees provide under the NSW OH&S legislation of 1983. Formal employee representation on committees shall increase individual opportunities for dealing with OH&S problems, thus increasing worker interest, involvement and effort leading to more opportunities for innovative ideas.

Two other interdependent factors are, the right of supervisors and employee representatives on OH&S committees, to have access to relevant operating information and resources, and the right to make relevant decisions - which implies delegation of authority. This may not only bring about more knowledge and understanding of the organisation (learning process), but also increase individual power and more behavioural latitude leading to innovative ideas, thus adaptability. This is reinforced by the provision of training courses under the legislation, which should give to committee members the knowledge to run their own committees.

There is also the provision under the OH&S legislation for two way information flow in the organisation on the OH&S issue. This should increase networking and linkage, and the way in which information is transmitted within the organisation, thus overcoming hierarchical barriers, and increasing the opportunities for individuals to pursue innovative ideas.

Finally, two other important factors are, the commitment of elites, and the emergence of new leadership patterns, through workplace committees. This should foster more direct, spontaneous and innovative behaviour, which should lead to organisational adaptation. In this regard, organisational theorists suggest that spontaneous and innovative behaviour goes beyond explicit behavioural prescriptions, and that a leadership style that emphasises this behaviour is essential for adaptive planning and learning in organisations.
Against this background, we have drawn the following proposition.

Proposition 9: Committees will add to organisations an adaptive capacity to change by increasing the opportunities for individuals to pursue innovative ideas, that is, by fostering creative problem-solving.

In the industrial relations context, some of the implementation factors mentioned above increase the opportunity for labour and management to adopt cooperative attitudes, thus incidentally creating adaptability in traditional industrial relations systems. In support of this, recent research has shown that collaborative relationships between labour and management, are a crucial factor in the development of innovative relationships, and thus for adapting rigid industrial relations systems. Essentially, committees should foster more cooperative relationships between labour and management, as each traditional faction learns more effective ways of working together, leading to increased adaptability in rigid industrial relations systems. Yet, the regular forum for discussion provided by committees, increases the chances that a common identity of interest between labour and management will emerge and be articulated, and could eliminate most impermeable group boundaries, leading to more cooperative attitudes and thus to adaptability in industrial relations.

Based on intergroup theory, a workplace committee embodies several groups, and each group is quite clearly delimited in the minds of people in the workplace. The main groups may consist of, senior managers, supervisors, workers, and union delegates/officials. This theory also holds that, because there is most often a difference in power amongst the different groups, the boundaries between each group are more inclined to be impermeable.

For example, a recent multiple case study of quality circles and parallel organisations within joint quality of work life projects conducted in the United States, has shown that, even though the boundary between workers and union officials appeared to be the most permeable, workers often criticized union officials and regarded them as primarily interested in their own status and power. Also, groups lower down the social totem pole tended to have a poor view of those above them, and vice versa.
In this regard, a recent survey on Australian managers found that managers want to eliminate the 'them and us' outlook between management and workers, and unions. Managers believe that there is an 'identity of interest' but workers perceive management more as an opponent. The survey highlights that a solution to the 'them and us' syndrome toward more common identity of interests, could solve most of the industrial relations problems in organisations. Following from the above, intergroup theorists, maintain that the 'cognitive distortion' that a group holds vis-a-vis another could be deemed to be a function of the differences in power and affective patterns caused by impermeable boundaries.

Against this background, we have seen that the NSW OH&S Act, provides extensive power to employee members of committees. Inter alia, employee representatives have to be in a majority on the committee, all of them have to be elected by their fellow employees, and one of them has to be the chairperson. They also have the power to inspect the workplace, and to have access to information relating to the workplace. Therefore, as power differences between management and employee representatives become evened out, the boundaries between each group should become more permeable. Also, as OH&S committees serve as a permanent meeting ground, a bridge should emerge amongst people who regularly interact, which is the territory often requiring the most cooperation. Consequently, we have also drawn the following proposition.

Proposition 10: Committees will create adaptability within the industrial relations system by eliminating most impermeable boundaries between labour and management groups, that is, by fostering cooperation.

2.2 Transforming the Environment

Under this role, OH&S committees are best viewed as transitional structures in the redesign of organisations or industrial relations systems. Essentially, committees will incidentally create pressures for transformation in the environment, because of the osmosis effect occuring between the working of these committees and the functioning of organisations, and traditional industrial relations systems. Following from the above, recent Australian and American studies pointed out that workplace committees, or comparable arrangements, often act as supplements to the collective bargaining process and dispute resolution procedures, and expand the range of issues over which workers or unions exert influence.
which should lead to a devolution approach in industrial relations:

"... The lynchpin in devolution is the triangular relationship between the employee, his or her front line supervisor and the union delegate ... It emphasises communication, supervisor involvement with employees and the efficient resolving of floor level problems through finding common ground in potentially contentious areas."74.

This argument found particular support in a recent Australian study on quality control circles75. This study shows that QCC's at Reckitt and Colman Ltd., allowed for the growth of closer informal relationships between staff and line managers, which permitted grievances to be settled at the workplace level without invoking traditional procedures.

Training is the key precondition for transformation of the industrial relations system76, in particular, for the implementation of the micro-infrastructure. Training courses for committee members as provided by the NSW OH&S legislation can firstly, act as an effective staff development technique for supervisors, etc., and secondly, generate the learning process. Transformation will occur through this learning process, since old behaviour and perceptions do not die quickly. Also, during regular committee meetings, those present can point out lapses into old patterns and reinforce new behaviour. Also, there is a general view in the Australian industrial relations literature that the role of supervisor is declining due, in particular, to an increase in specialised staff in industrial relations77. The development of the role of supervisors through committees and training courses should increase the importance of the institutional presence of supervisors, thus reducing the need for specialised staff in industrial relations.

OH&S committees, as introduced under the 1983 Act, may also create unintentional forces for transformation in bureaucratic organisations with limited workforce participation, such as public hospitals, because of the dialectical contradiction between the two modes of operation. As we have seen, OH&S committees consist of representatives of employees and employers, meeting on a regular basis to discuss and exchange views on a wide range of OH&S matters of mutual interest. Over time, and with the development of trust within the workplace, the consultation process may foster a more participative approach to decision making, which is antithetical to the autocratic-technocratic approach found in many industries, such as the health care industry78.
The management principle that may emerge is that, while management has the authority and responsibility to make decisions, employees have a right and responsibility to make considered input to those decisions. This implies the involvement of employees and their representatives in the work of managing the organisation. Such a philosophy may entail a wide range of new activities, including information sharing and consultation on decisions affecting new technology, quality and cost improvement, skills and staff development, and job design. The term also covers employee membership on other forms of participative schemes, such as boards of directors, and participation in the negotiation process to establish an enterprise agreement. Thus, OH&S committees should provide a more participative approach to decision making by fostering two-way communication between management and workers, mutual understanding, trust and respect, including the development of some shared objectives, and an orientation towards joint problem-solving and ongoing learning, with the ability of all parties to sit down with each other and talk. In other words, OH&S committees should incidentally bring about transformations in organisations by fostering a devolution approach to industrial relations management.

In the same perspective, OH&S committees may also create unintentional forces for transformation in centralised union structures because of the seepage effect between the two modes of operation. Yet, committees supplement the traditional bargaining relationship between unions and management on the OH&S issue, by decentralising the resolution of problems at the industry and workplace level. As we have seen, the Act recognises employees rather than unions as representing the interest of labour on committees. This may lead to more interest in enterprise-wide unions, since trade union operations cannot have a significant input on the operation of workplace OH&S committees, unless they are organised at a more decentralised level. OH&S committees will be used here, as supporting mechanisms toward a devolution approach in industrial relations—an approach which is seen in the mainstream industrial relations literature as a crucial element in the implementation of the industrial relations micro-infrastructure. Essentially, an effective relationship on OH&S committees should spill over and make collective bargaining, or the implementation of the industrial relations micro-infrastructure easier. Therefore, we can draw this final proposition.

Proposition 11: Committees will create unintentional forces for transformation in organisations and the industrial relations system, by fostering a devolution approach to industrial relations management.
EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

In the light of the two approaches described above, that is, committees as problem-solving agents (fundamental role and impact), and committees as change agents (incidental role and impact), we will now demonstrate how the role and impact of committees can be evaluated, in an industrial relations reform context - the stress being on the incidental role and impact.

MODEL FOR EVALUATION

Figure 1 presents our model on the role and impact of OH&S committees. It contains four sub-systems: input or philosophy, structure, process, and outcome. The input or philosophy is the statements policy makers make, as to how committees are to operate. It is the conceptual norms and procedures extracted from the legislation, such as the NSW OH&S Act, 1983, etc. However, this input or philosophy is always adapted in practice. This usually occurs during the implementation of the structure in order to meet, either the contextual demand, or broader reform context, that policy makers did not understand or fully predict. This involves identifying what evaluation methodology research calls the point of 'drastic mutation' beyond which practices can no longer be considered related to the basic legislative statements. Therefore, we need to specify in more detail than the policy makers are likely to have specified, what is intended in practice. Thus we also have to consider as part of the philosophy, some of the statements made in joint agreements or awards; green papers or reports of inquiry; OH&S committee constitutions; governmental, organisational, and trade union policies and programs; and the doctrine. One example is provided by the industrial relations policy concern of the federal and state governments in the 1990's, that is, how to refashion the industrial relations infrastructure to better accommodate the shift toward more decentralised arrangements? This concern has brought the idea of using OH&S committees as supporting mechanisms for a devolution approach in industrial relations, in order to implement the industrial relations micro-infrastructure.

The process describes the work culture ideals that arise when the philosophy has been adapted in practice. This culture should emphasise learning (e.g., correct selection of issues, understanding of OH&S problems, responsiveness, etc.) cooperation (permeability of group boundaries, combined effort, etc.) and creative problem-solving (e.g., innovative ideas, behavioural latitude, etc.).
FIGURE 1

MODEL ON THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES

Sub-System 1

INPUT OR PHILOSOPHY
(i.e., Conceptual Norms & Procedures)

Legislation & Awards
Green Papers or Reports of Inquiry
Committee Constitutions
Organisational Policy & Programs
Governmental Policy & Programs
Trade Union Policy & Programs
Doctrine

Sub-System 2

STRUCTURE
(i.e., Operating Norms & Procedures)

DUAL STRUCTURE DESIGN

PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM ↔ WORKPLACE COMMITTEE

Organisational Structure
Unions' Structure
Nature of Industrial Relations
Workforce Characteristics

Training
Regular Meetings
Delegation of Authority & Power
Access to Operating Information
Two Way Communication
Commitment of Labour & Management Elites
Leadership Personalities
Workforce Representativity

Sub-System 3

PROCESS
(i.e., Work Culture Ideals)

LEARNING

CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING
Training

PREVENTION

COOPERATION

DEVOLUTION

Sub-System 4

IMPACT

OUTCOME

NEW DESIGN → REDESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

PROCESS EVALUATION

OUTCOME EVALUATION

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The structure creates the organisational context in which the culture can develop and in which mechanisms are established to sustain the change process. Here the structure is a dual structure design, corresponding, on the one hand, to the operating norms and procedures of the NSW Public Health System (e.g., dual administrative medical authority structure, multi, and occupational based unions, stable industrial relations, limited participation and dispersed workforces, etc.) and; on the other hand, to the operating norms and procedures of the OH&S committee(s) (e.g., training, delegation of authority and power, two way communication, access to operating information, representativity of the workforce, commitment of labour and management elites, and presence of leadership personalities).

The outcome is essentially the new design and redesign situations occurring as a result of the change process. Under the new design situation, the outcome is fundamental and corresponds to prevention, as a means of solving OH&S problems. Prevention will incidentally create adaptability in organisations (e.g., anticipating problems, promptness and prevalence of adjustment to environmental pressures, etc.). Adaptability can also be created by the change process itself, for example, when committees develop cooperative attitudes by eliminating most boundaries between labour and management groups, and when they increase the opportunity for individuals to pursue innovative ideas, thus fostering learning and creative problem solving. Under the redesign situation, committees should incidentally bring about a devolution approach to industrial relations management, due to osmosis between committee operations, and the public health system functioning, and more particularly the industrial relations system. Devolution is a crucial element in transforming the environment, more particularly, in fostering the implementation of the industrial relations micro-infrastructure.

**STRATEGY FOR EVALUATION**

Our strategy for determining the success or failure of OH&S committees, is built on the idea of Suchman\(^\text{44}\), of the assessment of program failure, that is, the degree to which the implementation and impact of a program reflects the intentional model or theory. Suchman illustrated his idea with a problem of causality:

"The Challenge (is) not only to demonstrate that effect B follows program A, but also to 'prove' that effect B was really due to program A. Some administrators may argue that so long as B occurs,
it does not really matter whether A was the actual cause. This will be legitimate insofar as A is not a spurious cause of B. However, if A is spurious, one may institute an expensive broad program based on A only to find (or even worse, not to find because the evaluation is not continuous) that the desired effect no longer occurs because of a change in the 'true' cause which may have been only momentarily related to A**.

Figure 2 shows this idea behind our evaluation strategy, with three main reasons for the failure of committees - it does not show all the possible permutations. If committees are not successful, firstly, it may be that they were not adequately or completely implemented, and therefore, did not set the process in motion, which would have led to the expected outcome, whether fundamental or incidental. This is the failure of the committees. Secondly, it may be that they were implemented, and did set the process in motion, but this did not lead to the fundamental outcome. This is the failure of the theory 1 (i.e., that committees should solve OH&S problems). Thirdly, it may be that they were implemented, and did set the process in motion, but this did not lead to the incidental outcome. This is the failure of theory 2 (i.e., that committees should provide adaptation and devolution).

When transposing this idea to our model (Figure 1), in order to correctly attribute the observed impact (process and outcome) to committees, we need to have empirical evidence as to the extent to which the structural elements of committees were implemented. In effect, the philosophy of committees may not have been fully adopted in practice, and therefore, committees may fail to meet the evaluation criteria. If this occurs, we may wrongly conclude that committees have failed to make the impact, and decide that the committee program is not worth continuing. In reality, the failure would be due to the lack of implementation. Failure to investigate implementation presents a dilemma: was the committee well or poorly implemented, or was it truly effective or ineffective?

So, our strategy will be to perform a three-stage evaluation: implementation, process and outcome. The implementation evaluation will concentrate on assessing whether the philosophy has been put into practice, or adapted by committees, and whether there is really a dual structure design between workplace committees and the public health system. Questions addressed will be: Are the structural elements present, operative, and on schedule? Are the operations consistent with the philosophy?
FIGURE 2

EXAMPLE OF WORKPLACE COMMITTEE FAILURE

Successful Committee

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  STRUCTURE → Set in motion → PROCESS → Which led to OUTFORME
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Committee Failure

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  STRUCTURE → Did not set in motion → PROCESS → Which would have led to OUTFORME
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Theory 1 Failure

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  STRUCTURE → Set in motion → PROCESS → Which did not lead to FUNDAMENTAL OUTCOME
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Theory 2 Failure

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  STRUCTURE → Set in motion → PROCESS → Which did not lead to INCIDENTAL OUTCOME
```
Are there any other norms and procedures, than those planned by the philosophy, that have been adopted by committees? Are they what is needed to achieve the process and fundamental/incidental outcome, considering the operating norms and procedures of the NSW Public Health System, and more particularly, the industrial relations system?

The process evaluation will attempt to determine whether the operation of committees has produced the desired culture, and if not, which culture it has produced.

The outcome evaluation will seek to establish whether the operation of committees, and the change process, have produced the desired fundamental/incidental results. In particular, the incidental outcome evaluation is conducted in order to determine whether committees produce an impact in organisations and labour-management relations that is separate from the tasks per se.

An important point to make here is that the degree of implementation, the change process, and the fundamental/incidental outcome, all need to be measured independently. Without this distinction, we cannot say anything about the reasons for committee success or failure. In other words, it will be impossible to determine whether committees were fairly tried and did not work, or whether they might work, but were not actually or adequately tried.

Essentially, the implementation evaluation should enable us to decide when the philosophy has been sufficiently adapted by committees, and the structural elements have been sufficiently and adequately established, to warrant an impact evaluation.

Process evaluation should enable us to decide when the new culture has been sufficiently constituted by committees to justify an outcome evaluation.

Finally, the outcome evaluation, both fundamental and incidental, should enable us to propose how to make committees work better, rather than only judge them on whether they are worth continuing, given the conditions. In both cases, committees may be redesigned, either to make them work better in the achievement of their fundamental purpose, or to make them achieve other purposes.
CONCLUSION

I have endeavoured to show in this paper that, OH&S committees may have a static fundamental role of solving problems, but as dynamic structures can incidentally bring about changes in organisational and industrial relations practices. In summary, workplace OH&S committees may have three roles: solving OH&S problems, creating adaptability in the environment, and transforming the environment. The fundamental impact is in the outcome category, and can be expressed either, in terms of lower injury or incident rates, or in terms of number and quality of preventative measures implemented. The incidental impact is found firstly in the process category, and can be expressed in terms of learning, cooperation, and creative problem-solving. Secondly, it is found in the outcome category, and can be expressed in terms of prevention-adaptation, and in terms of devolution, which is a prerequisite for the implementation of the industrial relations micro-infrastructure. Therefore, to judge the usefulness of committees without false assumptions, the evaluation has to be conducted in three stages: implementation, process, and outcome. The data are presently being collated and analysed, in order to verify our propositions. The results and the discussion will be presented in a future paper.
APPENDIX

THESIS MATERIAL AND METHODS
To focus the research effort, this PH.D. thesis concentrates on workplace OH&S committees, as experienced in NSW public hospitals. We prefer to study workplace OH&S committees, rather than those committees that only expand the range of tasks a worker performs (e.g., autonomous work groups) or that focus on operational problems (e.g., quality control circles) instead of ill-defined complex problems, or those committees that are more oriented toward defining policy than improving practices (e.g., membership of boards of directors). We also prefer to focus on OH&S committees, because they are the only kind of committees in NSW, that are legislated for, which gives us a common basis for evaluation.

We also prefer to study workplace OH&S committees in a public non conventional and complex industry - here public hospitals - rather than in a private conventional and production industry. In this regard, it seems that the distinctive characteristics of public health systems, as well as their complexity, make it more difficult for public hospitals to respond to rapidly increasing environmental pressures. Obvious pressures specific to public hospitals are: deinstitutionalisation, rising expectations regarding medical care, cost containment, escalating medical costs, regulations, and new technology. On this last point, certain technological changes pose unceasing serious OH&S problems for public hospitals. The more important among these are: the introduction of new occupations, without direct relation to patient care and requiring highly qualified technical personnel, bringing an increase in OH&S risks; the introduction of new types of equipment and chemical compounds, some of which represent potential OH&S risks, and; the intensification of work processes which creates stress and more especially, mental overload. In this respect, one school of thought argues that public hospitals in particular, can benefit from experimentation with new structural interventions in the workplace in order to increase adaptation. However, another school of thought maintains that the radically different environment of the health care industry compared to the context of private, profit making organisations (e.g., dual hierarchy of medical and administrative authority, as well as the unique character of limited workforce participation, etc.), make the viability and integrity of such structural interventions in a public hospital context questionable.

Despite the wider use of workplace OH&S committee programs in NSW public hospitals, these interventions, in such contexts, have not received research attention. In this thesis we attempt to evaluate the potential usefulness of these new designs, in NSW public hospital settings.
Concerning our research design, the choice to be made was between obtaining very limited information on many committees in many hospitals or obtaining a greater amount of information on fewer committees in few hospitals. In the former case it is likely that the results will be more generalisable, but in the latter it is likely that the results will be more detailed and explainable. The trade-off was thus between generability and depth (or quality of information). The exploratory approach adopted in this thesis argues strongly for the collection of in-depth data on a limited number of committees in few public hospitals. Our solution, in short, is to restrict the research to an evaluation case-study from which information can be disseminated about committees' success or failure, and from which conclusions can be drawn about why certain committees in certain hospitals were more or less implemented than others, or had more or less impact than others.

Against this background, six public hospitals in NSW constituted the sample for this thesis. These hospitals are all located in the Metropolitan Region of Sydney. Overall, nine workplace OH&S committees are included in this thesis, involving the participation of 27 employer representatives and 38 employee representatives. The time frame of the study is 1988-1990, corresponding to a period of slowdown in economic growth, which gave us a good climate to explore cooperative efforts in workplaces.

Of the above committees, five were formed at about the same time in 1986, under the NSW Occupational Health and Safety Act 1983 and Committees in Workplace Regulation 1984, which provided us with a pool of mature structures initiated by worker members of industrial unions and that should comply with the legislation. Two other committees were established at about the same time in 1980, obviously, before the OH&S legislative reform of 1983, which gave us a pool of voluntary and more experienced structures, not necessarily complying with the legislation, and which were introduced by management and supported by some unions. Finally, two committees were formed at the starting point of our study (i.e., in 1988), which permitted us to compare events from the beginning of a committee and over time.

For each of these structural interventions, there can be gaps between the philosophy of the legislative blueprints, and actual practices. Therefore, we distinguished between de jure committees, which are those that have adopted the philosophy as it is, and de facto committees, which differed in practice from the philosophy.
At each hospital, two types of data have been collected by administering questionnaires to employer and employee representatives on workplace OH&S committees: data on how people assessed the working and impact of workplace OH&S committees (reactive evaluation); and data on how people responded to the content of the program in terms of learning, attitudes and behavioural changes (content evaluation). The complexity of some of the issues involved in this thesis could not be satisfactorily captured by questionnaires. Hence, the survey made use of observation and document analysis techniques as well as individual and group interviews with committee members, top management and union officials, in order to explain and supplement the basic data.

Finally, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis have been performed. The first method used was descriptive analysis (qualitative method), which is reflected in the case studies presented in Chapter 6 of Part Two of this thesis (see Table of Contents below). The second method consisted essentially of parametrical statistical tests (quantitative method), including mean difference tests, Pearson correlation, and multivariate techniques. These tests determined how important the differences were in the responses of two or more groups to the same question, and how strong were the associations between two data items. The results of these tests comprise numerous tables, and are presented in Chapters 7 and 8 of Part Two, which focuses on the implementation and impact evaluation of workplace OH&S committees.
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2. For more details, see NSW GREEN PAPER (1989), Ibid., 36-38.


4. According to one estimate from DIRE, OH&S committees have been established in over 1500 workplaces in NSW. For more details, see NSW GREEN PAPER (1990): Transforming Industrial Relations in New South Wales, Vol. 2, NSW Government Printer, Sydney, 65.


7. Also pointed out in NSW GREEN PAPER (1990):, op. cit., 65.


22. Ibid.


40. Also pointed out in NSW GREEN PAPER (1990): op. cit.,


42. For example, see BRETT, J. (1980): op. cit.,


45. Ibid.


52. Ibid., 14-15.


55. Also pointed out in NSW GREEN PAPER (1990): op. cit., 68.


79. For more details, see NSW GREEN PAPER (1990): op. cit., 56.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 62.


85. Ibid., 86-87.


88. Ibid., 147.

