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Twenty Years of Experience: Lessons From the Rohm and Haas Bayport Plant

By [Bill Harris](#)

Summary: Do advanced work systems stand the test of time? Discover the lessons the Rohm and Haas plant in Bayport has learned over the past two decades as it pushed the envelope of participative work system design.

More than twenty years ago, [Rohm and Haas](#) broke ground on their Bayport specialty chemical plant near Houston, with Bob Gilbert as plant manager. In a 1969 strike, Gilbert had seen a plant function better under salaried personnel than it ever had. Rather than attributing that to supervisory skill, he believed that a group of good, dedicated people operating with limited supervision in a team structure could surpass traditional organizations.

He and others created a 100-employee organization at Bayport that reflects the concept of "participatory management." The organization had a plant manager and three area managers, one per business unit. Each area manager has four technician teams and a technical team of chemists and engineers. The technicians are multi-skilled, able to work on the control board, in the quality lab, and outside on the "rack"; they typically rotate through these positions every two days.

There are no assistant area managers or shift foremen; their roles were given to the technicians. Technicians order material, allocate people to tasks, run the process, decide if and when they need engineering or maintenance resources, and ship the product. They hire and, if necessary, fire technicians, and they collaborate with the rest of the plant in designing the organization. As Sharon Kemper, a technician at Bayport for 17 years, says, "We're in charge of the process."

Is it a success? Gilbert, now retired, certainly thinks so. "It was successful in cost reduction, in employee productivity, and in reducing turnover." They excelled in quality. A customer doing supplier evaluations "rated us as the best plant they'd ever seen anywhere."

"You get better ownership, you get better performance out of a plant under that work system," says Steve Rauscher, vice president of Rohm and Haas, and a member of the original Bayport team.

"This kind of a work system/culture (participative management) is extremely rewarding. It's challenging in part because we have to learn how it works. But, seeing the system work well is so rewarding to all involved that we accept the hard work that comes with it," says Sheila Donnelly, the current plant manager.

Area manager Rick Ewan highlights the company's focus on learning, not punishment, when people make poor decisions: "We try to understand why that poor decision was made, not jump down somebody's throat. Was there information you didn't have? What do

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we need to do differently in the future? Should we share this with other teams?"

What are the secrets to Bayport's success? Kemper says, "It has to start at the top. Management has to believe it. They have to want it, encourage it, and model it."

Kevin Sokora, utilities manager, notes, "Gilbert really did everything he could to make the technicians understand that they had a lot of clout, a lot of responsibility, that they were to speak up, and that they were going to be listened to."

Sokora continues, "His perspective was that the work system was not on trial; it was not a test. This was the right way to run this plant. That perspective makes a difference."

To be successful as a plant manager, "You really have to get in and understand the culture and understand how things operate here," says Donnelly. "It's always easier to give orders. It's much more difficult to make sure others have all the information they need and then to let them make the decisions."

The second key is a focus on sustainability. As Sokora says, "The work system requires maintenance like anything else."

A few years ago, technicians and managers recognized problems developing in who was making decisions, and they worked together with the engineers to address them in what became an all-volunteer Renewal Program. "It was simply taking a look at where we started, where we are now, and where do we want to go," says Kemper.

They've clarified their vision and goals, and they've revised policies. They've documented everyone's roles and responsibilities to ease personnel transitions. While the Renewal Program is almost over, Donnelly says the emphasis on sustaining the work system will go on.

The third key is training. Donnelly emphasizes that "technicians are trained in the different pieces of the process, so they understand what can impact what." They've also restarted interpersonal training, which had languished in recent years.

The decision-making process is especially important. Kemper says, "If you're going to empower your work force, it really has to be involved in the decision-making process. It goes 100 times faster and better if you can get the people who are impacted involved from the beginning."


For managers starting a similar organization, Rauscher counsels:

- Pick people to manage who are committed to the system;
- Hire people who will blossom in that kind of environment; and
- Resist temptation to throw in the towel. Resist the temptation to blame everything that goes wrong on the work system.

Kemper advises new employees: "Have the courage to sit down at the table with management and peers, and be open and honest. Be flexible. Find ways to manage stress."

Is it worth it? Rauscher says, "If we were going to build another plant in my organization in the United States, I'd do it in a minute." Does it benefit the company? "Absolutely!"




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