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Tandem Computers "town meeting" : an interpretive and descriptive analysis of organizational voice

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descriptive analysis of organizational voice**

Perry, Kenneth Lee, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1993

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TANDEM COMPUTERS "TOWN MEETING": AN INTERPRETIVE AND
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of
Communication Studies
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts

By

Kenneth L. Perry

May, 1993

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ABSTRACT

TANDEM COMPUTERS "TOWN MEETING": AN INTERPRETIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

by Kenneth L. Perry

Work place democracy and employee permission to dissent are studied, using the "Town Meeting" program at Tandem Computers as a research model. A two-fold analysis is given: first, a descriptive approach provides a detailed blueprint of the program's organizational details and how the Town Meeting is utilized and enforced; second, an account analysis is incorporated to understand the meanings employees hold for the Town Meeting.

Five conclusions are drawn: (1) The Town Meeting is an integrating vehicle for employees; (2) The Town Meeting provides for "voice," or corrective feedback, for upper management; (3) The Town Meeting encourages dissent, which enables Tandem to meet many of the standards associated with organizational democracy; (4) The five premises for organizational action, which explain employees' participation in the Town Meeting, are access, impact, morale, responsible management, and a sense of obligation; and (5) The structure of the Town Meeting is worth emulating at other organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When contemplating all those to whom I would like to express my gratitude for helping to make this thesis possible, I discovered that the acknowledgements would be greater in length than the research itself. Although I cannot mention all those who made this possible, there are those who must be mentioned.

I would be remiss not to first acknowledge Jimmy Treybig, CEO of Tandem Computers, who is a visionary, in my opinion, and who allowed me to conduct this research. Also of Tandem Computers, JoAnn Fairbanks, manager of the Town Meeting program, has been gracious and unending in her assistance throughout the last two years of research. The two of them are largely responsible for the Town Meeting being so successful. I will forever be grateful to them.

My thesis committee has given me a tremendous amount of time, guidance, and support. Tim Hegstrom, my thesis advisor, deserves much of the credit for the success of this thesis because of his guidance. I've appreciated his genuine concern for this project as well as his concern for me personally. Dennis Jaehne has given me a new appreciation for clarity and sensitivity to words and writing. I am grateful for his expertise which this research needed. James Stull rounded out this thesis committee with his insight from the academic world of business and communication. I am thankful for his technical direction and encouraging words. I am thankful to each of these three men for their unique knowledge and talents that they brought to this project.

To my editor and wife Janet, I am thankful for all the love, support, and patience she has shown during these years. Her ability to teach me to love learning has changed my life.

There are those silent supporters who have sacrificed so much for my academic advancement. To these individuals I dedicate this work. First, to my parents who have given me the latitude to seek my ambitions and who have supported all my endeavors, I am eternally grateful. Also to my children Bryan, KaRynn, and Craig, who were not born when I started work on this degree, I say thank you. Thank you for reminding me that giants can still be conquered and for showing me how.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Silicon Valley is not a city or a county but is a place geographically located in the southern part of the San Francisco Bay Area. This area is appropriately named the Silicon Valley because of the high density of computer companies found there. In the early 1980s the Silicon Valley was a place where jobs were easily found and new computer companies were frequently started. However, in the early 1990s the Silicon Valley has become an area where massive layoffs are commonplace. While working in the Silicon Valley in the early 80s, employees saw the future as bright and hopeful; however, the future for employees in the early 90s is dark and painful because of corporate restructuring.

In its early years, the Silicon Valley enticed many employees because it was the location of some of the best companies to work for nationwide. However, recently only four Silicon Valley computer companies are among the best places to work in America, according to Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz (1993). These four companies are Advanced Micro Devices, Hewlett Packard, IBM, and Tandem Computers. These four companies were chosen on the basis of six criteria: Pay/Benefits, Opportunities, Job Security, Pride in Work/Company, Openness/Fairness, and Camaraderie/Friendliness. In the book *The 100 Best Companies to Work For in America*, a five-star rating system (with five being the highest) indicates how companies rank in each of these six areas.

Levering and Moskowitz define the category of Openness/Fairness as the following:

Top executives are accessible to everyone. The company has two-way communication vehicles that not only keep employees informed about what's going on but can transmit suggestions, criticisms, and complaints from employees to upper-level managers. And such critiques can be offered without fear of reprisal. The company has an explicit grievance system through which employees can challenge actions taken against them. Special perks for executives either don't exist or are held to a minimum (p. xviii).

The openness/fairness rating is similar for all four Silicon Valley companies: Advanced Micro Devices and IBM received three stars and Hewlett Packard and Tandem Computers received four stars. Each of the four companies was highlighted for its openness to communication, having similar communication programs such as beer busts, breakfast meetings with top executives, and electronic conferencing. While each of these companies is similarly successful in caring for employees and providing them with a good work environment, only Tandem has a program different from that of any of the others in the valley and in the nation.

As the Tandem manager stood before the gathering of some 300 employees, I could hear some discontented employees directly behind me. One finally stood and questioned the manager regarding the facilities in which they worked. The manager's response was that he was unaware of the problem and would get back to the employee. After the meeting I turned to the group of frustrated employees and asked what they thought of the meeting and the response of the manager. A few moments passed until one spoke up and said:

If this is the only way we can bring attention to our problems to those in upper management, then it is a good thing and we need to continue these meetings.

The event in question was a "Town Meeting" held at Tandem Computers in Cupertino, California.

The Town Meeting program was first initiated at Tandem in the early 1980s by Chief Executive Officer Jimmy Treybig. Town Meetings are conducted approximately every six to nine months in each location. The meeting is conducted by the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Operations Officer, with Vice Presidents or Directors of a division. At the introduction of each gathering, JoAnn Fairbanks, manager of feedback programs (such as Pipeline, Town Meetings) makes the following statement:

Town Meetings is a corporate program designed to foster communication between senior management and employees. Town Meetings are about protecting Tandem's values: open communication, quality products, a healthy place to work, and a successful company. Town Meetings are also about measuring our success and exercising those values.

Tandem's Town Meetings have been identified as one type of organizational forum that signals permission to dissent. Such permission may be central to the integration of the individual and the organization (Hegstrom, 1990). Tandem requires that top managers answer questions. Hegstrom suggests that Tandem's Town Meeting is analogous to "Question Time" in the British House of Commons and makes top managers

responsive to an employee constituency, thus encouraging organizational democracy.

This study focuses on the Tandem Town Meeting, an organized arena for dissent for the employees at Tandem Computers. I conducted the study with two intentions: to describe how the Town Meetings are organized and used at Tandem, and to study the accounts of those in attendance at the various meetings.

In this thesis I do the following: (a) review the literature pertaining to organizational dissent, (b) relate the project to the literature on organizational democracy, (c) provide a rationale for studying Tandem Town Meetings, (d) describe the program of research and findings, and (e) give conclusions and a summary of this work.

Literature on Organizational Dissent

At least two traditions of research deal with organizational dissent: (a) whistle-blowing and boat-rocking, and (b) voice. Whistle-blowing and boat-rocking became themes of research at Purdue University under Professor Charles Redding. Redding brought organizational dissent to the minds of researchers through a 1985 article written to teachers of speech communication. He was motivated to write this editorial because corporations were allegedly looking for individuals to meet their "strong culture," but were actually looking for those individuals who would "commit themselves to the company philosophy." According to Redding, "boat-rockers need not apply" in such corporations, and the prevailing value was "if you want to get along, go along" (p. 245). In his article, Redding urged that speech

communication instructors become "consciousness raisers," and encourage students to identify those organizational situations that might require boat-rocking or whistle-blowing.

Redding cites O'Day's discussion of the typical organizational response to protest (1974). O'Day based his study on intimidation rituals used by managers to suppress protest. Indirect and direct intimidation were cited as the two phases of intimidation rituals. Indirect intimidation consists of nullifying the reformers' views as incorrect and then isolating the individual from his peers, whereas direct intimidation uses defamation tactics to impugn character and motives when reformers do not remain silent. If these three means of silencing reformers are not effective and they do not resign, then the hierarchy resorts to expulsion.

Sprague and Ruud (1988) conducted a study of boat-rocking in the high-technology culture. Using account analysis, they conducted in-depth interviews of individuals within the high-tech industry. Then, upon completion of the interviews, they coded the responses to boat-rocking. The researchers found that "employees were aware of the organization's 'receptiveness' to boatrockers." The employee then made the choice whether or not to dissent. They found that once individuals made the decision to dissent, the action was made to their bosses face-to-face and in private. This differs from the Tandem Town Meetings, which provide a different forum for dissent.

Whistle-blowing has been reported more frequently, although researchers have been slow to focus on determinants, forms, or outcomes (Stewart, 1980). Stewart analyzed 51 reports of actual whistle-blowing

incidents to derive a model of the whistle-blowing process. Miceli, Roach, and Near (1988) used surveys of 8500 federal employees to identify motivations for whistle-blowing. This literature provides a variety of insights into the whistle-blowing individual as well as into the process. Perhaps because of the public nature of whistle-blowing there has been more empirical research reported on it than on boat-rocking (internal dissent).

The second strain of literature dealing with dissent uses the term "employee voice" (Hirschman, 1970). Although Hirschman is an economist, and in spite of the fact that economists are usually concerned with measuring "exit" (market share, turnover, sales figures) from an organization, he attempts to explain economic behavior in part by analyzing political "communication behavior," or "voice." Hirschman defines voice as:

any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion (p. 30).

Because the objector wants to change rather than escape unfavorable circumstances, voice is typically used when the individual believes that change can come from within; therefore, the individual must stick with the deteriorating firm (p. 38).

Spencer (1986) reports the correlations between the number of opportunities to voice dissatisfaction and voluntary turnover of nurses. Spencer's hypotheses were: (a) There would be a significant and negative

relationship between the total number of voice mechanisms for employees that an organization had and the voluntary turnover rate among the organization's employees; and (b) a higher number of employee voice mechanisms would be positively related to high expectancies of problem resolution among employees as well as high levels of effectiveness for the organization's problem-resolution procedures.

The first hypothesis deals with the amount of opportunity for voice and not with the quality of that opportunity. The second examines the relationship between the number of mechanisms offering employees the option of voice in an organization and employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Spencer found significant support for both hypotheses.

Gorden, Infante, and Izzo (1988) relate Hirschman's "voice" construct to their work on argumentativeness. In their study of superior satisfaction with subordinates, they find that supervisors view the subordinates with whom they were most satisfied as being "higher in argumentativeness, lower in verbal aggressiveness, and as having a [more] constructive disagreement style" compared to those subordinates with whom the superiors are not satisfied (p. 18). The supervisors view the latter group of subordinates as complainers.

In 1989, Gorden and Infante proposed and studied a communication model of organizational commitment. Using a questionnaire containing five items of perceived freedom of speech and five items on the extent to which speech should be free, they studied 253 employees from a variety of organizations. The findings of their study indicate that:

the less perceived freedom of speech [is] in the work place, the less that employees have organizational commitment [to] and satisfaction with their work and supervisor, and the organization is perceived less favorably in several ways (p. 2).

Also, the study concludes that the dominant organizational ideology in America still is that "management knows best," which demands total loyalty and avoidance of dissent on the employee's part.

Literature on Organizational Democracy

Literature dealing with organizational democracy is spirited in nature in that it advocates a cause, similar to discourse urging political democracy. Participation, self-management, and worker control were strategies developed to contribute to the humanization and democratization of the work place (Schienstock, 1989). Yet authors suggest disparity between the freedom we enjoy as citizens and that we enjoy as employees.

David Ewing (1977) suggests that there is a "spectacular inconsistency" in our society. He says:

Our literature promotes the crucial role of emotional health, belonging, integrity, and dignity for members of organizations. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent every year on programs to assure these qualities--to enrich jobs, improve communications, develop understanding, and increase confidence and self-esteem. All the while that these millions are being spent on training materials and fringe benefits, we keep the subject employees, stripped of the kinds of

rights that our socio-political culture calls essential to human dignity (p. 229-230).

If democracy is, in fact, "an ideology opposed to silence," as Ewing proposes, then we must acknowledge the great discrepancy between socio-political democracy and work place democracy.

This growing concern about providing a forum for organizational dissent is theoretically related to the literature about organizational democracy. Organizational democracy is not unique to the United States but is also a strong area of emphasis in Europe and Canada. George Korey, president of the Canadian School of Management in Toronto, stated that "the information explosion is forcing the senior executive to rely more and more on his/her subordinates" (1985). Furthermore, this reliance causes:

the rapidly accelerating democratization of society that has opened opportunities of advancement for people of ability, people who increasingly insist on and enjoy the right of participation in basic decision-making. The result has been a demand, voiced loud and clear by middle management, for a meaningful role in company planning and a real opportunity to contribute in an important way to that decision-making (p. 7).

According to Lammers and Szell (1989), most of the research conducted cited the "functional requirements" of the fast development of complex organizations as the chief motivation for democracy in the work place (p. 1).

Finally, seeing that work place democracy was not only important but absolutely essential to a smooth running organization, Paul Bernstein (1976) took his research one step further. By contrasting case literature on the

subject, he was able to identify six specific components minimally necessary for work place democracy: (a) participation in decision making, (b) economic return to the participants based on the surplus they produce, (c) sharing of management-level information with employees, (d) guaranteed individual rights, (e) an independent appeals system, and (f) a complex participatory/democratic consciousness (p. 116). The absence of any one of these components makes it difficult to maintain the employees' willingness to participate. Of all the six critical elements, the democratic consciousness of the employees was the most essential in creating a truly democratic work place environment (p. 117).

Rationale

Clearly, there is a growing strain of literature that expands our theories and extends our research concerning organizational dissent and democracy. What then would be the contributions of another study? This case study will concentrate on how dissent at Tandem Computers contributes to our understanding in four ways.

First, conducting this research at Tandem Computers allows us to look at an organization that encourages dissent. Dissent literature thus far has alluded to organizations that encourage dissent, but there has hardly been an in-depth analysis of the structure itself that encourages dissent. For example, Daniel Spencer (1986) compared the quantity of available means of dissent to the turnover rate among nurses but did not look at the organization, organizational processes, or quality of the means of voicing dissent. Other researchers have focused on individuals rather than on the organization.

This study provides a missing piece of research in the field of dissent: the organization that implemented a program that encourages dissent.

Second, Tandem's Town Meetings is an established, successful program that allows employees to voice their dissent in a unique forum. This research describes this structure, thereby allowing others to review the program and, perhaps, implement similar programs. Such a description is more than a trivial contribution. It furnishes readers with the opportunity to understand and use the program.

Third, a study of employee accounts reveals the integration effects of the Town Meetings. Hegstrom (1990) states:

Permission to dissent balances organizational and individual values and needs. It may be the only hope for integration of the individual with the organization (p. 9).

The narratives allow investigation of the individuals' reasons for participation from which one might infer whether individual needs and values are accommodated. At minimum, the narratives indicate whether the participants see the Town Meeting as responding to organizational needs, individual needs, or both.

Fourth, an account analysis helps us make sense of the meanings that employees have for the Town Meetings forum. We have insight into "premises" used by the employees. Tompkins and Cheney (1983), speaking about account analysis, say:

The accounts that are elicited will consist of the meanings or interpretations actors assign to items in their environment and the

rules (or, as we prefer, premises) that they follow in monitoring their social behavior (p.129).

It is important to understand how participation in the Town Meetings affects the individual in the organization. Thus, the two primary research questions are (a) What structure and procedures has Tandem created in order to implement its Town Meeting program? and (b) How do employees account for their participation in Town Meetings?

Chapter 2

METHODOLOGY

Program of Research

I gained access to Tandem Computers by writing Jimmy Treybig, CEO of Tandem Computers, and asking for permission to conduct the study. He gave his support to the idea and referred me to the Corporate Communications office. JoAnn Fairbanks, manager of the Town Meetings, took an interest in the project and was very supportive. Before commencing the data gathering, I attended two Town Meetings and conducted interviews to get some background on the program as well as to learn more about Tandem's corporate culture.

Data Gathering

I attended a total of 12 Town Meetings at various locations mostly within the Bay Area, each having different employees with different types of responsibilities. I made detailed notes dealing with the procedures and proceedings of each meeting. Additional information about the Town Meetings was provided by the program manager by means of an in-depth interview. I then used these notes to write a description section on the Town Meetings. The description section of this thesis provides a nuts-and-bolts explanation of the program that can be used by other organizations considering implementing a similar process.

I conducted 29 in-depth interviews with Tandem employees who attended the Town Meetings, including 17 women and 12 men, ranging from 30 to 67 years old and representing several ethnic groups. Job descriptions

were diverse and broad, but job titles included technical engineers, secretaries, assembly line workers, technical writers, software managers, and financial analysts, to name a few. Each interviewee was asked four primary questions:

- (a) Why did you choose to participate in the Town Meeting?
- (b) What do you think are the expectations that management has for the Town Meeting?
- (c) What are your expectations?
- (d) What do you think will be the outcome of this meeting?

Additional probing questions followed in order to gather more information and insight into the individual. Each interview began with descriptive questions such as number of years the employee had been with the company, job title, and age. This information was not to be used in the research, but it did provide those being interviewed a chance to become at ease while being interviewed.

I conducted all 29 interviews immediately following the Town Meeting on the job site, or by telephone the following week. Those I solicited to participate in the research I approached directly following the Town Meeting.

Town Meetings are held periodically (every six to nine months) at each Tandem site. Tandem holds Town Meetings at a frequency of two to three meetings a month throughout the United States. All meetings I attended were held in the San Francisco Bay Area with the exception of one, which was located in Watsonville, California.

Data Analysis

In a review of interpretive approaches to Organizational Communication studies, Mary Strine and Michael Pacanowsky (1985) state:

Ten years ago, perhaps no other area in communication was as determinedly positivistic or functionalistic as "org comm." Today, perhaps no other area is as agonizingly self-conscious about the pitfalls of a narrowed conception of scholarship and the potentials of alternative views. While ten years ago the dominant metaphor for organization was the "rational system," today organizational communication scholars think about organizations as "cultures." While ten years ago the overwhelmingly preferred methodology for scholarly work in organizational communication was the quantified survey or experiment, today some organizational communication scholars employ fieldwork, conversation analysis, and rhetorical criticism (p. 283-284).

This study, consistent with the research objectives noted above, has both descriptive and interpretive components to it. The descriptive analysis concentrates on the history of the Town Meeting at Tandem and the processes followed at the Town Meetings. The descriptive part of the study attempts to give a straightforward statement of (a) how the "Town Meeting" evolved, (b) what occurs at a typical meeting and in what order, (c) how the organization structurally supports the meetings and follows up, (d) where the meetings are held and under what physical conditions, (e) when they are held and according to what schedule, (f) who the principal participants are, and (g) what topics occur in the Town Meeting.

The interpretive component of the study employs account analysis as suggested by Harre and Secord (1973). They view those being studied as "actors," whose words are termed "accounts." They further state "the things that people say about themselves and other people should be taken seriously as reports of data relevant to phenomena that really exist and which are relevant to the explanation of behavior" (p. 7). Tompkins and Cheney go on further to describe the process as follows: "The accounts that are elicited will consist of the meanings or interpretations actors assign to items in their environment and the rules (or, as we prefer, premises) that they follow in monitoring their social behavior" (p. 129). I interpreted the accounts in terms of the premises revealed by Tandem employees as they gave their reasons for participating in the Town Meetings and by their expressed predictions about the difference they think participation makes.

I recorded the responses given in interviews through copious note-taking both during the interview and also immediately afterward to avoid loss of pertinent detail. This procedure was in accordance with a mandate by Tandem Computers' legal staff which forbade tape recordings.

The detailed notes were then typed, and the accounts from the interviews were then categorized according to the questions asked. Key words or sentiments were analyzed and sorted. The grouping of responses continued until a pattern of rules, principles, and meanings were uncovered. Upon completing the groupings, I put back the statements or accounts into the original interview text to ensure that the account was not misinterpreted. Five major premises emerged from the account analysis.

Chapter 3

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The following analysis provides a detailed description of the Town Meeting program. Included is a step-by-step description of the Town Meeting system and how it is implemented at Tandem Computers. Most of the information was provided by the program manager JoAnn Fairbanks. Observations of the meetings themselves validated her account of the procedures.

Intent

The intent of Town Meetings is to establish a regularly scheduled meeting to foster communication between members of the executive staff and employees at a selected location. The following is Tandem's communication plan for the Town Meeting:

Town Meetings fit into the overall employee communication plan by fostering the following three types of communication:

- (a) top-down communication through executive staff presentations
and post-meeting socialization
- (b) bottom-up communication through question-and-answer sessions
and post-meeting socialization
- (c) lateral communication through socialization with different
divisions/groups/departments

The Town Meeting program is managed by the Employee Feedback Programs Manager under the organizational umbrella of Corporate Communications. To assist in understanding the Program Manager's role in

the company hierarchy, Tandem's organizational chart is included. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Organizational Hierarchy Chart for Tandem Computers

Source: Tandem Computers, 1993.

Agenda

The following is the standard agenda used by Tandem Computers:

1. Welcome by Corporate Communications
2. Introduction of program and hosts by Corporate Communications
3. Short (5 to 7 minute) talks or comments by hosts, time permitting
4. Response to pre-submitted questions
5. Response to questions from the floor

6. Statement of conclusion and follow-up by host
7. Beer bust/Social gathering

Welcome by Corporate Communications

The program manager, who is a member of Corporate Communications, stands in front of the employees and, speaking through a microphone, conducts the welcome by addressing those in attendance. The welcome by Corporate Communications consists of affirming the protection of Tandem's values such as open communication, quality products, a healthy place to work, and a successful company. Also, a brief explanation is given, stating that the Town Meeting is a corporate meeting allowing the company to exercise its values and to measure its success. Finally, a "guidelines" statement explains that participants should be "open and respectful of people, their diversity, and individuality."

Short Talks or Comments by Hosts

When time is appropriated at the beginning of the Town Meetings, co-hosts may address the employees. According to Corporate Communications these comments are to last no longer than 5 to 7 minutes. When this research first began, the presentations were rarely given and, when they were, the comments were more directed to the state of the department. Employee surveys showed that employees preferred going directly to questions and answers rather than having opening presentations. Since the "restructuring" or layoffs at Tandem, Corporate Communications suggested "the warm up" be reinstated to help provide information to the employees. Senior

management approved this decision. The following list of appropriate topics was developed by Corporate Communications:

1. Current events at Tandem
2. Overview of divisional operations, objectives, goals
3. Interesting technology or developmental activities
4. Successes in addressing quality at Tandem
5. Divisional or group "hand-in" the "Tandem Core Values"
6. Divisional fit with the "Tandem Vision"
7. Individual contributions or achievements

Most managers stayed within the time allotted. However, some used this time to explain the status of their particular units, going well beyond the allotted time. This was usually the case among small groups in isolated Tandem locations. Although these managers did not follow the scheduled time frame, employees seemed genuinely interested in the information they provided.

Response to Pre-submitted Questions

The questions are submitted through electronic mail and are collected by Corporate Communications. Once the time period for submitting questions has lapsed, the anonymous questions are distributed to the hosts "who are responsible for researching answers," according to JoAnn Fairbanks, the program manager. The questions, which are stripped of names, are also sent to the CEO, COO, and the Vice President of Human Resources. When possible, Corporate Communications will direct a question within Tandem to those who can assist the host with answering the submitted question. Also available to assist the hosts is the Human Resource Generalist for the hosts'

particular location. If a question cannot be answered because of confidentiality or because of its personal nature, the hosts are to acknowledge the question in general terms then mention that it will be addressed "off-line." These questions are still tracked to conclusions by the manager of the employee feedback programs.

Printed Questions

At each meeting, copies of the meeting's agenda are placed randomly throughout the seating area. The agenda includes names of the moderator and the co-hosts as well as the tentative time schedule for the meeting proceedings. None of the questions submitted are published for the employees to view.

For Tandem's protection I was required to sign a confidentiality agreement beforehand. Then, at the beginning of each meeting, I was given the same questions distributed to the meeting's hosts to help me better understand both the questions and the responses. I was instructed to return all lists of questions to my escort at the end of each Town Meeting. So, in other words, I could use the question lists during the Town Meetings, but I was required to return them before leaving the meeting place. Tandem does not distribute these same question lists to the employees because apparently some managers go on "fishing trips" to find out who submitted a particular question. This behavior causes employee participation to decrease. So, in order to protect anonymity and to avoid proliferations of the questions, lists of the questions are not made available to employees.

Tandem's Corporate Communications department began a program of "identifying trends in questions" generated from Town Meetings. The program's design was not completed during the study, although the categories for Tandem's database had been established.

In 7 of the 13 Town Meetings I attended, I coded a total of 98 questions using this category system. Below and to the right of the column is the number of questions that were asked at the Town Meeting. If a category was not addressed, then it is not included in the table. Table 1 presents a summary of these data. A more elaborate breakdown which includes sub-categories is presented in Appendix A. It should be noted that these trends in questions change with time. After completing my research I received reports from Tandem that questions involving of quality as well as strategy have increased.

Table 1

Categories of Questions Submitted for Tandem Town Meetings

Compensations and Benefits	17
Customer Support	0
Finance	6
Management	32
Products	10
Quality	6
Strategy	13
Training and Development	6
Work Environment	8
Other	<u>0</u>
Total	98

Conclusion and Follow-ups

A member of Corporate Communications and/or the local Human Resources Generalist will attend each meeting to record action items or follow-up items that might occur at the Town Meeting. Following the Town Meeting, the hosts receive the list of action items with an identified time for them to respond to Corporate Communications. The CEO, COO, and Vice President of Human Resources also receive a copy of the action item list.

JoAnn Fairbanks said:

Corporate Communications maintains files for follow-up on the meeting's commitments. As follow-up information is received by Corporate Communications, it is forwarded via electronic mail to site employees and senior management.

No Town Meeting site file is closed until all follow-up items are addressed. These definitive reports practically guarantee that employees know that they are listened to. The expectation is that action will be taken if an issue is raised by the employees at a Town Meeting.

Beer Bust/Social Gathering

Immediately following the Town Meeting, drinks, chips, and a variety of other snacks are offered. This period is referred to as the "Beer Bust." All refreshments are provided by Tandem and are also available during the meeting. Employees and upper management are all encouraged to participate in the refreshments throughout the meeting. Then upper management, as part of their function, stay and mingle with the the Town Meeting

participants after the meeting. Employees mentioned that they notice when a particular host or co-host does not stay to mingle. Indeed, employees expect them to stay for at least part of the Beer Bust.

Duration

Town Meetings begin at 3:00 p.m. and continue until approximately 4:30 p.m. This time schedule was not altered during my observations, but the length of the meeting varied from 60 to 90 minutes. All Town Meetings were held on Fridays during the course of this study.

Location

The Town Meetings are held at the work site of the group attending, usually in a large meeting room or in the cafeteria. The group is "all citizens at a particular 'Loc' (location) or building." This is the same location for the Beer Bust that follows the Town Meeting. The refreshments are located at the rear of the meeting room.

Notification

A total of three messages are sent by electronic mail to each employee prior to the Town Meeting. These messages notify employees how to submit questions for the Town Meeting and the time, date, and location of the meeting. The first message (sent two weeks in advance) announces the Town Meeting, lists the host line up, and elicits questions. The second message serves as a reminder and elicits questions as well. It is the same in content as the first, but reworded. The third message is sent on the day of the Town

Meeting as a last minute reminder. The total time period for submitting questions ranges from two to five days.

Host-Participants/Calendar

Executive staff and vice presidents are required to participate as co-hosts at the Town Meetings for which they have direct managerial responsibility. Schedules are published six months in advance. It is then their responsibility to arrange their schedules to ensure their presence at the meetings. If a conflict arises, the vice presidents are responsible for having an appropriate replacement. It should be noted that each Senior VP has direct managerial responsibility over a specific Tandem division; therefore, no VPs are exempt from attending a Town Meeting.

Host/Moderator

The host/moderator is either the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Operations Officer, Vice President of Human Resources, or a designee. The host is to be accompanied by one or two members of the executive staff who preside over employees who work at the site of the Town Meeting.

Management of Meetings/Expectations

Upper management understands that the purpose of the Town Meeting is to foster open communication and that certain behaviors on their part encourage this type of atmosphere. The following list of ten suggestions for managers was prepared by the Corporate Communication department for managers:

1. Be prepared and begin the meeting on time.
2. Wear Tandem name tags for easy identification.
3. Establish a friendly, informal environment.
4. Encourage dialogue among participants.
5. Whenever possible, give specific rather than general answers.
6. Offer personal insight or opinions, where appropriate.
7. Demonstrate openness by willingness to discuss tough issues or disappointments.
8. Inquire, when appropriate, as to the overall perception of a group on a particular issue.
9. Identify action items and/or follow-up dates when issues or questions are raised that require further research, as well as identify an individual responsible for the follow up.
10. Ensure that no one person or issue dominates the meeting to exclude other participants or concerns.

Management Coordination

Once the presubmitted questions for the Town Meeting are received and distributed by Corporate Communications, all participants (hosts and co-hosts) meet together to discuss who will be responsible for which questions and the various parts of the Town Meeting.

Employee Feedback Manager

The primary responsibility of the Manager of Employee Feedback Programs, JoAnn Fairbanks, is to see that the Town Meeting program functions and delivers as promised by the corporation. She is in the difficult position of being supportive and helpful to upper management while policing and tracking action items from the Town Meeting. These dual responsibilities put her in awkward and difficult situations with management. She said of her job:

There is some resistance from the VPs. They have a job that takes a lot of time and this [the Town Meeting] can be burdensome. If you ask them if they supported the program, they would say they did. My suspicion is that a number of them would rather not. It may be that if Jimmy left they would have a different opinion of work place democracy than they have now.

The employee feedback manager supports senior management by briefing them prior to each meeting. She routes presubmitted questions to those who might assist upper management in answering them. With respect to upper management, she recognizes the problem of juggling time commitments and is not unreasonable with demands. She said:

I understand their [upper management's] schedules so I remain open as to how to help them in ways to work in the program. I have a 6-month rolling calendar for scheduling the Town Meeting. Twice a year they see when they work in the Town Meeting. If they can't participate they need to let me know who will take their place.

The important theme in the last comment by the feedback manager is that of "help them in ways to work in the program." She is firm about ensuring that management works within the program, not the reverse. For example, during one interview, she related a story about a new senior vice president joining Tandem. The vice president did not feel comfortable within the program and had various suggestions as to how to modify the program to fit him better. After struggling with the vice president, she had to make it clear to him that Corporate Communications and the philosophy and goals of communication with employees "drive this program, and he needed to go along with the ride."

Working with upper management is a constant part of the feedback manager's job. Training and retraining management to understand the program is continual. JoAnn Fairbanks said of her job:

I am constantly training VPs on how the program works. Some of the VPs want me to be responsible for their work. They think someone should do the work for them because they are so busy. I also provide them with the "Town Meeting Summary," which reminds them of the philosophy and guides their behavior. They get this twice a year.

Another critical task of the program manager is monitoring the questions and their follow-up through the action items list. To do this, the Employee Feedback Manager must be in direct contact with those who received the comments from the Town Meeting. She monitors the action item information on a computer, and she checks and updates those items which are outstanding from the Town Meeting.

At times it seems necessary to exclude a submitted question from the Town Meeting agenda. An example was a question regarding hiring temporaries. At the time, only one temporary employee was at the site and it would have been awkward to discuss the question openly in the meeting. The manager of the feedback program prefers to address this type of question individually with the employee who submitted it rather than before the large group because of its inappropriateness. She uses the "Pipeline," which is direct electronic communication, to discuss these issues. The manager acknowledges the question in general terms at the Town Meeting and informs the participants that it will be further discussed through the Pipeline.

Chapter 4

INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

Linda Putnam (1983) says of interpretivists:

Interpretivists treat meanings as the essence of organizational communication, but meanings are enacted from verbal and nonverbal messages. They evolve from interaction processes and from the ways individuals make sense of their talk (p. 45).

Hence, this research illustrates the shared meanings of Tandem employees. In this section results are based on texts of the interviews with employees and management at Tandem.

From the Town Meeting interviews, five different categories of premises became the focus: Access, Impact, Morale, Responsible Management, and Sense of Obligation. The meanings employees hold are not particularly universal. For example, while one segment of the organization may share one meaning for the Town Meeting, another segment may have a different interpretation of the Town Meeting. Although most employees have a serious and important meaning for the Town Meeting, one faction attends the meetings for amusement.

I arranged interviews by soliciting help from employees who attended the Town Meetings, conducting them immediately following the meeting or later by telephone the following week. I asked the following four questions of each person interviewed: (a) "Why did you choose to participate in the Town Meeting?" (b) "What do you think are the expectations that management has for the Town Meeting?" (c) "What are your expectations?" and (d) "What do you think will be the outcome of this meeting?" I used these questions about

choice, expectation, and outcome in order to obtain a fuller sense of the meaning of the "Town Meeting." Consistent with a "shared meaning" definition of organizational communication, it is assumed that "meaning" is not explained solely by what is intended or by what is received. For this reason, I interviewed organization executives as well as meeting attendees. Responses to these questions I often pursued by further probing. In a two-year period, 31 different I conducted interviews yielding a total of 248 responses to the four standard interview questions. Responses to the more probing questions are not included in the numbered 248 standardized responses.

In order to create categories for interpretation, I sorted and resorted individual answers according to the meaning or premises participants seemed to be assigning to their Town Meeting experience. In initial sorting of the responses more than 60 groupings were made. After the initial grouping eight premises emerged. The first eight were "information," "access," "sense of obligation," "access to a platform," "impact," "the right thing," "morale" and "responsible management." At that point it appeared that some of these areas overlapped and should be combined. To ensure that the assigned premise made sense, I reread their comments in context. Five major categories seemed to emerge from my interpretation of these accounts.

ACCESS

Access to Information

"Messages and information sent from top management to subordinates comprise the downward flow. On organizational charts the flow normally follows the formal lines of authority downward from position to position"

(Rasberry & Lemoine, 1986, p. 89). Rasberry and Lemoine suggest that downward communication is the strongest of the three forms of formal communication, the other two being lateral and upward communication.

Rasberry and Lemoine (1986) quote the following study by Towers, Perrin, Forster, and Crosby that defines what employees want to hear from their company:

The kinds of things that modern, multi-faceted people want to know about reflect an awareness that they and their jobs are parts of larger things. They want to know how their firm is doing financially, what profits mean and how they relate to the economy as a whole; why layoffs occur; what their organization's product or service means to consumers, the environment, and the economy; what the firm is doing about equal treatment for different age, sex and racial groups; how pay is determined; why improved productivity is important to them; and how to respond when their firm is attacked by outsiders (p. 89).

The desire to both receive and give information is the most predominant meaning assigned to the Town Meetings. More specifically, according to Tandem employees, the main purpose of the Town Meeting is for information interchange between management and employees and among employees themselves.

Furthermore, accuracy of information is paramount in the minds of employees. When asked why they attended the Town Meeting, one employee said:

I want to hear relatively honest answers.

And another said:

The Town Meeting is different because management has to go into more depth when answering the questions because it is in front of all the people.

These comments reflect the employees' view that upper management is usually brief in its communication, whether it be in memo form or communicating downward through the employees' manager, who would appropriately or inappropriately eliminate some information. Such elimination is a classic case of what is termed as faulty transmission of information. Phillip Lewis (1987) states that:

faulty transmission of information may occur because of the careless use of words, reliance on wrong words to convey a meaning, or receiver-sender deficiencies. Regardless of the direction in which it may flow, it is extremely susceptible to distortions and disruption. In fact, often less than 30 percent of the original message will remain (p. 139).

The exactness and the honesty in the information is critical to Tandem employees. The employees come to the Town Meeting with the expectation that the meeting will be informative and that the information will further expand their understanding of their job, their organization and their role at Tandem. This is information they might not be receiving from their immediate managers.

Included in information-gathering is the opportunity for employees to understand the goals as well as the direction of the company. One employee said:

I like to hear what the executive staff looks at--goals, where we're going, and the key things they are working on. My goals are to learn what's going on in the company and see how we are doing and get answers and have them get back to us if the question was not answered.

Another said:

I wanted to have a better understanding of where the company was heading. I wanted to understand the philosophy of management.

Why would it be important for employees to find out what upper management's goals are? The answer is two-fold. First, employees find it helpful to understand management so they can use the information in their decisions regarding their work. Second, by knowing upper management's goals, employees can better integrate themselves into the company and become part of the corporate community. Jane Gibson and Richard Hodgetts (1986) suggest that:

one of the foremost reasons that employees do not identify more closely with their companies is that they are not apprised of its goals and objectives. Simply understanding where their jobs fit within the overall plan often can be very motivational. Understanding the direction of the company both in the short-run and the long-run helps the employee identify with a meaningful job (p. 394).

As mentioned before, the employees' need for information is not limited to the information given solely from upper management. At the Town Meetings employees look to their coworkers to gather additional

information and to hear what concerns they have within the corporation. For example, one employee said:

I would want to hear issues of the plant . . . and also keep aware of what others' concerns are.

Another said:

[I come] to know what is going on and what other people think. I had questions but didn't ask them, but other people asked.

And a third employee said:

I like to hear the questions other people have. I didn't have any questions, but I like to hear the questions and how they were answered and the outcomes from the questions.

Allowing employees to hear concerns from their fellow coworkers gives them a sense of company thinking or corporate culture. This sense is derived both from employees and from upper management voicing their concerns, clarifying, reasoning, and resolving problems. Thus, the "information" sought by employees goes beyond task-related data to nuances of expression and the kind of sense-making that comes from listening to others' interpretations of data.

The question may then arise: Does this sense of solidarity between employees equate with information-gathering? At Tandem it is through the information channel or specifically, the Town Meeting, that this sense of corporate culture or solidarity is established. It is important to remember that employees at Tandem are "multi-faceted people" with a real awareness of the company and its role in the environment as well as in their own lives. The meetings are lighthearted in many ways, yet the information shared is

seriously listened to. Those involved with the Town Meeting treat this information very seriously.

Access to Management

While the acquisition of information was utmost in importance to many employees, another important premise was "access to management." Employees seem to value access both because it brings them into contact with management personalities and because it gives them a channel to reach upper management with their concerns.

Many employees welcome the opportunity to meet with the CEO or the other top managers. Because employees come into direct contact with them, they make judgments about the personalities of the top managers. Jimmy Treybig, Chief Executive Officer of Tandem, is characterized by many of his employees as a "good ole' boy." This endearing term is used by Tandem employees for "Jimmy," whose southern accent and quick wit keeps his employees laughing and entertained. Access to his personality and to those of other upper management is an important reason employees give for attending the Town Meetings. One person said, speaking of the CEO as though he knew him personally:

It's always good to hear Jimmy Treybig and to hear his views. So, the Town Meeting has personalized the CEO among employees; he is not a faceless manager. Like most companies in the Silicon Valley, Tandem is made up of people who have come from other computer companies. Such employees made comments like:

I worked for five years with HP [Hewlett Packard] before and never saw a VP or upper management, so I looked forward to it [the Town Meeting].

Another said:

For me to see upper management and to have them field concerns is most appealing to me and not to give us a snow job.

For some, seeing management was a sufficient reason for attending the meeting. For example, one employee said:

If nothing [else] comes out of the meeting, it is good to see VPs.

So, gaining access to upper management personalities was not an uncommon reason for attending the meeting. Jimmy Treybig said:

Maybe it's a value for employees to see the leaders come to meetings. It allows them to see management. If that is the only thing that comes from the meeting, then I think it is worthwhile.

The second aspect of access to management is that of giving "voice" to concerns. The opportunity to communicate upwardly is essential in empowering employees. Allowing them a voice in the company gives them a sense of supporting the company by providing information that helps key decision-makers. Also, communicating directly with upper management eases employees' doubts because they can see that they are truly being heard and that their messages are actually reaching the proper authority. A Tandem employee said:

There is satisfaction for the employee when the upper management knows about it. It's not the same to send a letter or mail message.

They have secretaries who sort out their mail. So you get a feeling

when there is no response [that] you don't know if they got it. At the meeting if they don't respond you can go back and ask again.

Another employee states:

It's an opportunity to ask and find out answers to questions you usually don't get to hear elsewhere. It is an easier way to ask questions and get a direct reply from the CEO.

So, these meetings provide clear and direct information from upper management to the employees. Since the Town Meeting is based on two-way communication, it also allows employees to ask for more clarification, thereby eliminating doubts that management might not be receiving information from employees. It became very evident that employees were satisfying their need for direct access to upper management through the Town Meeting program.

"Breakfast Meeting" is another Tandem program designed to give employees access to upper management. In this case, randomly chosen employees have breakfast with Jimmy Treybig, who considers the program a huge success. Its main weakness, however, is that it does not reach all employees. So, although the Town Meetings do not allow for private interaction with Jimmy, they do provide access and direct face-to-face contact with upper management, including the CEO.

Empowering the employees was most graphically illustrated in a Town Meeting at a packaging warehouse. An employee asked CEO Jimmy Treybig a question about quality that he had raised two years before and that had still not been resolved. The CEO became angry at the employee's manager for not correcting a problem that had already been addressed some two years prior.

The CEO left the front of the meeting to go face-to-face with the manager and to express loudly his concern in front of everyone attending the Town Meeting. Consequently, the employee was praised by the CEO for voicing the problem and was guaranteed that his suggestion for improving quality would be addressed. This same type of anger was never witnessed again in any of the Town Meetings I attended, but this type of commitment to acting on concerns by empowering lower echelon employees was not uncommon. Immediately following the meeting, the CEO sought out the rebuked manager, shook his hand, and conversed briefly with him. Perhaps the CEO was clarifying the issue and mending some fences.

Jimmy Treybig stated in an interview:

I'm sure some of the managers don't like the program. They think I am more concerned about the employee. But that is not true. I am more interested in whoever is right.

Whether the employee is more "right" than the manager will remain an open question. What is clear is that one effect of access to management at these meetings is that it empowers the employees at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Whereas receiving information was the single most common reason for employee attendance, the second highest response was to have access to management. Yet, in spite of the various means employees are given to submit questions anonymously, some are still fearful to ask questions. Some employees simply felt empowered by being seen in large numbers rather than being represented individually. One employee said:

I never like to ask questions, but some of the questions asked I have usually thought about.

Another commented:

There is good interaction with managers. The support of the whole company around you allows you to ask questions and it makes it a little easier.

The study took two years to complete. In the beginning of the study, the recession in the United States was also just beginning. Tandem managers were confident they would successfully endure the recession without any layoffs. Unfortunately, however, this was not the case. Toward the end of the study, layoffs appeared imminent and upper management observed that fewer questions were submitted than had been historically. For example, at one Town Meeting the presiding official jokingly commented on the scarcity of questions, asking:

What is it? Are you all scared to death?

In response to this joke, one engineer sitting behind me quietly said to two fellow workers:

You're darn right.

Following this same meeting I asked several interviewees if they felt scared to voice their opinions. One such response was:

They haven't gotten to the employees. The comment of "Are you all scared to death?" is probably true.

As the layoffs became more and more inevitable, the employee "voice" became quieter. In other words, when job security was a concern, individuals

did not want to be noticed even though they were in the same masses that before had empowered them.

Many of the interviewees termed themselves the "worker bees" or "little guys," which made it clear that the employees understood the hierarchy. Most of the time for these employees, it wasn't a matter of "us" versus "them" but rather it was "our company." One employee said:

I have a stake in this company and I want my concerns addressed. It seems that when an employee sees his/her interest linked to those of the company, he/she identifies more with management. Another employee said:

I think it [the Town Meeting] is productive and it makes a difference for VIPs to mingle with the worker bees.

Having access to those in top management positions begins to flatten the hierarchy psychologically and status differentials are reduced.

Tandem Computers is a large international company having offices throughout the world. Therefore, the Town Meeting allows employees to physically stay in touch with upper management that they would not normally see because of distance. Even though all the sites I visited were in the San Francisco Bay Area, many employees felt somewhat isolated from corporate headquarters. One said:

Very few times do we have contact with management because we're 8 to 10 minutes away from the offices.

Lewis (1987) suggests that a "general lack of understanding about the organization may result because of the physical distance between organizational groups" (p. 138). The Town Meeting reduces psychological distance. The resulting access to upper management helps eliminate what

Lewis terms "lack of understanding of the organization" and further strengthens identification with the corporation.

Not all those who attend the Town Meeting see it as a means of voicing dissent but rather as an arena to complain. One such employee called the Town Meeting a "bitch session." When interviewing Jimmy Treybig, I asked what his impression was to this description. He responded strongly:

It is not a bitch session! If managers were smart they would do it (hold Town Meetings) themselves.

In other words, Mr. Treybig was suggesting that if managers used the Town Meeting as a format for gauging dissent within their own groups, employees would see the program as a valued means of providing corrective feedback rather than a "bitch session."

Access to a Platform

In a company as large as Tandem Computers, it is easy for employees to get lost in the crowd. Town Meetings provide a way for employees to get attention, to be noticed, or to have access to a platform. Some say being noticed is a self-promoting agenda, but often those who want to be noticed actually want to promote a particular product or idea as well as themselves. As one employee said:

I went in to the meeting with an agenda. I went in to get management assistance for a new product. I want some publicity for the new product.

Another said:

I came to hear the answer to my question. I wanted to see to whom the question was directed and who would be the appropriate contact in order to make myself available to be used.

These individuals may have used the Town Meeting in hope that their managers would notice that upper management supported their views. An employee said:

I received a statement before "God" that they will use it [the product]. They [lower management] said a year ago that it would be used, but it wasn't happening. Now that it was said in front of the VPs, there is more commitment.

IMPACT

Most outsiders may see the Town Meeting as a great program in theory but want to know whether the employees believe that their attendance at these meetings will make a real difference. Responses were mixed, but the majority were certain that action would, indeed, be taken on the items discussed at the Town Meeting. One person said:

I've seen change when people feel strongly about something. Not everything gets changed, but some things do.

Another said:

Everything will be answered and looked into. Everything is always resolved.

Not all the employees interviewed agreed, however. Because management makes a real effort to publish the action items on the electronic

mail and to follow the items until they are complete, some employees feel the meeting is a publicity act. One employee said:

I don't believe anything will come of it [Town Meeting].

Another said:

Some [managers] asked specific questions but much of the decisions are already made, although I did voice my concern.

This last response raises concern that some employees do not believe the program allows them to make significant change because of pre-existing decision making by the executives. One person complained:

They gave a lot of pat answers and sometimes didn't answer the question. The [purpose of] Town Meetings is more imparting of information rather than changing anything.

The Town Meetings take place at various Tandem work sites, so in the same given meeting a wide range of employees can be represented. For example, in one particular meeting I interviewed both programmers and assembly workers. Therefore, topics discussed at the Town Meeting can range broadly. Some questions are pertinent to some employees and not to others. It is probably to be expected that some expectations will go unmet. However, most of those interviewed believed that Town Meeting participants could make a significant contribution to the company.

The Town Meeting also serves as an arena for Jimmy Treybig to grapple with the issues introduced by employees and to make changes. One employee said:

Jimmy wants the crap.

At some Town Meetings decisions are made immediately in response to questions asked. It was not uncommon for Jimmy to ask for a "straw vote" by having employees raise their hands. One employee said:

You could see from the meeting that some wanted the Beer Bust back in our building where we always had good attendance. Jimmy asked to vote on it there at the meeting. He's very much like that and effective in making a decision. Nothing is pushed under the rug in these meetings.

My impression was that, whenever possible, Treybig tried to come to a decision at the Town Meetings. What employees probably do not realize is that once an item from the Town Meeting becomes an action item, Treybig does not follow it. JoAnn Fairbanks, manager of the Town Meetings, on the other hand, follows the action items extremely closely. An action item is an item not resolved at the meeting which is placed on a list that includes who is addressing the item and when it is to be completed. The action item stays on the list for all employees to see until it is completed. When asked if he followed the action items, Treybig said:

Not really. JoAnn [Fairbanks] is in charge of that, and she seems to be religious about it. She really keeps track of it and follows it. She is really involved with it.

Thus, the Tandem employees know that the Town Meeting is often a place where issues will be acted upon either immediately or in the near future.

MORALE

Morale is often tied to company communication programs. When asked what management's expectations were for the Town Meetings, one employee said:

In my opinion, [management wants] to get a feeling of how morale is at the location and if there are any problems.

Morale was one area employees saw management striving to improve. Employees determined that management needed to address the morale of the company. One employee said:

There are a lot of morale problems around here.

As the months drew closer to the layoffs, morale became a greater issue.

Another employee said:

I don't believe anyone's morale was lifted, but it [the Town Meeting] did keep it from plummeting.

After the interviews were completed and I began to analyze my notes, I was contacted by JoAnn Fairbanks to attend one last Town Meeting. This final meeting took place shortly after the layoffs began. In contrast to earlier meetings, at this meeting I was instructed to observe only and not to contact any employee or to ask any questions. I was told that the morale of the company was very low. Bitter feelings and jokes of "Jimmy's 700 Club" (700 employees were to be laid off) were circulating. Although no specific mention of low morale was ever discussed at the Town Meeting, management was clearly very sensitive to the morale of the company. They tried to protect their employees by asking me not to interview the employees. Before the layoffs

Town Meetings were a place for employees to voice their feelings openly with me; now the Town Meetings were a place for me to observe only.

In the months following this meeting, the San Jose Mercury News, a local newspaper, stated they had obtained an "internal survey" from Tandem which showed that "Morale is down and many employees have doubts about the firm's future" (July 20, 1992). According to this article, Tandem was grappling with low morale due to the layoffs. However, open communication and honesty with information about the layoffs through the Town Meeting and other communication means had had a positive effect. The Mercury News article concluded that the challenge for management would be to keep employees' faith.

RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT

The Town Meeting also provides an opportunity for employees to have more contact with their own managers. The program is set to encourage managers to be both responsive and responsible to their departments. The following comment was typical of those interviewed:

You can always tell when a Town Meeting is coming up because weeks before, you get a lot more communication from your manager. They (managers) do this so no one will say, "Hey, I haven't seen you in six months. Where have you been?"

Managers tend to make themselves more visible in their departments and tend to schedule more meetings in order to clear up any lingering issues that might reflect poorly on them in the Town Meetings. Managers do this because they do not want anything negative about them discussed before

upper management at Town Meetings, which are held every six to nine months at each Tandem work site.

At one Town Meeting an employee asked why so many managers were being hired from another company and not from within Tandem. Being removed from those types of decisions, upper management asked for a raise of hands of all those managers who were hired from the other company. After seeing that several had indeed been hired from the other company, upper management agreed that Tandem needed to change direction. After this particular Town Meeting, an employee said:

Management doesn't realize that they are in a groove. The hiring of mostly Xerox management is an example of this. Day in and day out it is the same information. The meeting gives another aspect of new ideas and views from outside the situation.

Allowing for this type of interaction from employees gives employees a sense of power and a feeling that they can encourage their managers to respond to mistakes and oversights in their managerial responsibilities. This contributes to good management.

The Town Meeting allows executives to model behavior they expect from lower-level managers. Jimmy Treybig said of this:

If managers were smart, they would do it (seek Town Meeting-type of feedback) themselves. Another benefit of the program is that it pushes management.

Judging from the interview responses, a lot of managers have not caught on to the program. The program, however, encourages dialogue

between employees and management; it is the embodiment of Tandem's open communication philosophy.

This program also keeps managers responsible to employees because questions can be asked anonymously. One employee described attending the Town Meeting as:

Being at the best place at the best time to say something to my boss without having to be reprimanded or concerned or worried that my review is coming up and he'll be pissed at me.

In addition to providing an opportunity for employees to submit questions anonymously, the Town Meeting creates a way for employees to publicly question management. Either way, the program is supposed to protect employees from what Tandem euphemistically calls "career-limiting experiences." Tandem is protecting those employees who voice dissent in order to encourage the managers to make necessary changes.

The Right Thing

As management theory has evolved into what Gibson and Hodgetts (1986) refer to as "The Human Resources Management Era" (p. 30), a management style termed "participative management" has emerged. The key to participative management is open communication between supervisors and employees. Techniques of this management style include using an "open-door" policy, brainstorming, and group decision making. These techniques are very well known to employees at Tandem.

The Human Resources approach values effective relationships as well as task accomplishment (Blake & Mouton Managerial Grid, 1985). In other

words, there is a sense that employees should be listened to and treated fairly because it is "the right thing" to do. It has value in and of itself. Tandem is often cited in the press for its effective people programs, including the "Town Meeting" (Mitchell, 1989). My impression after attending Town Meetings and interviewing employees is that there is substance to the claim.

I first contacted Tandem Computers by a letter to the CEO, Jimmy Treybig, expressing my desire to conduct a study. Shortly thereafter I received a phone call from the head of Corporate Communications offering to meet with me. Between the time of our initial contact and my scheduled meeting with the head of Corporate Communications, however, Tandem attorneys had denied me access to Tandem in order to preserve the company's confidentiality. I found out later that the Corporate Communications department notified Treybig of the situation. He, in turn, informed the corporate attorneys that this study would still be conducted because studying the effectiveness of their program was "the right thing to do." Later in employee interviews, employees said many times that Treybig respects the intelligence of employees and that he believes they deserve to hear information about the company. In short, he thinks information makes employees better able to make intelligent decisions.

Douglas McGregor classified management styles into two categories: Theory X and Theory Y. When discussing Treybig, it becomes obvious that he views his employees from a Theory-Y perspective. The following are some of the assumptions that McGregor and Treybig share:

1. The average worker is not lazy.

2. The average worker is not by nature passive or resistant to organizational needs.
3. The capacity to accept responsibility and work toward organizational goals is present in all workers.
4. Managers must seek to develop the total potential of the employees.
5. Managers must arrange work conditions so that the employees can achieve their personal goals while also attaining organizational objectives.

(See Gibson and Hogdetts, 1986, p. 32).

This expressed value "to do the right thing" seems to be widely accepted at Tandem. A sentiment that pervades employees' thinking is that Town Meetings are the right thing to promote because they allow employees to hear the issues at hand. Furthermore, Town Meetings enable both upper management and employees to have better information. As one employee said:

I can ask my manager anything because of the open door policy. Giving the employees the Town Meeting gives them the sense that upper management cares about and respects them as intelligent beings. An employee shared his opinion of why he thinks management holds Town Meetings:

I think they see it as a way to show they care as to what is going on around Tandem. Employees really [give] input to the company officers. There is nothing like personal interaction to get direct answers. Communication is really what it is all about. Tandem has the best corporate communication. No where [else] do the executives come out

of their ivory towers and answer concerns and questions the employees have.

When questioned on management's expectations for the Town meeting, Treybig said he didn't know what management's expectations were. But his own expectations of the Town Meetings are:

to have a better feel for the employees' concerns or what is making them happy and to have closer contact with employees. I think that Town Meetings can be really helpful if there are problems, and if there are not many problems, then that's OK.

The idea of encouraging a meeting which is directed at getting a "better feel for employees' concerns" and "what is making them happy" is unusual in corporate America. Thus, there is a "values" component to the meaning of Town Meetings shared by many Tandem employees. Socialized from the beginning of their Tandem employment, they believe that the kind of employee communication promoted in Town Meetings is "the right thing to do." As it turns out, it doesn't hurt morale either.

Managerial Commitment

Managerial commitment to the Town Meeting became evident in the latter part of the research. Even though this program is well entrenched in the Tandem culture, it was almost discontinued at one point largely because of the following incident.

At one Town Meeting an employee asked a difficult question of upper management. The manager responding did not handle the situation delicately, and soon the employee's question became part of a comic

conversation among managers who were in the presence of the employees. After the meeting upper management received complaints regarding the disrespect and lack of seriousness given to the sensitive question. Consequently, upper management became frustrated with the pervading feeling that Tandem employees lacked appreciation for management. Upper management felt this way, in part, because of a backlash of unfavorable comments regarding the layoffs.

As a result of these negative feelings, top-level Tandem executives discussed discontinuing the Town Meeting program. Managers present for the discussion expressed surprise that the idea to drop the program was being considered. Nevertheless, it was decided that the program needed to be continued because of the benefits it yielded to Tandem employees and to the company itself.

The most interesting part of this situation is that most of those involved in the discussion the senior vice presidents had the most to gain by discontinuing the program because it would free their time and resources. Yet, it was those same VPs who fought to keep the program. Upper management remained committed to the program because of the benefits to employees and to Tandem.

A SENSE OF OBLIGATION

In an interview with the manager of the Town Meeting, I asked if attendance at the Town Meeting was mandatory, to which she responded with an emphatic "No!" The manager said that she tries to make it clear to managers that this is strictly a voluntary meeting for employees. Most

employees did not state they attended the Town Meetings because it was required. However, 3 out of the 29 interviewees said their primary reason for attending was because their managers made attendance at the Town Meeting a requirement.

Similarly, some employees believe that most managers attend the meetings out of obligation. For example, one employee said:

This particular meeting was [held] out of obligation rather than out of sincerity.

And, when asked what expectations management has for the Town Meeting, one respondent said:

To get through it.

This particular program at Tandem is called by many a "Jimmy program." In other words, many employees believe managers require attendance at the Town Meetings because Jimmy believes in the program, even though the managers themselves may not subscribe to the idea. One employee said:

I fear the day when Jimmy moves on because the other management will not continue the program. They fulfill the commitment but they don't believe in the philosophies as Jimmy does.

In summary, employees not only feel that their managers participate in Town Meetings out of obligation to the CEO but also that the Town Meeting program continues primarily because the CEO believes in the program.

When asked if the the Town Meeting would continue if he were to leave Tandem, Jimmy Treybig replied:

Well, first it would depend on who the new president would be. I know I have people around me who believe in the program, and there

are some who don't. I believe it will continue because it is a philosophy here. Again, it will depend on the president and the head of Human Resources. All people programs are hard, so the president needs to believe in them. It depends on if the new people think they are worthwhile programs.

This issue, then, goes beyond whether employees feel that this program is mandatory for management. The issue includes the perception that Jimmy Treybig is the sole reason the Town Meeting program continues. A new president would have to believe that this particular "people program" was worth the effort.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

Upon reading an article in a local newspaper referring to the Town Meeting, I was introduced to the Town Meeting program. It was pointed out to me that this program was unique and might be worth studying. When I first contacted Tandem Computers, I was unaware of their products, their company makeup, as well as their Town Meeting program details. Later, however, when I was introduced into the community of Tandem employees, I became acutely aware that Tandem was an unusual corporation because of the pervasive openness, the tolerance of dissent, and the freedom to communication channels.

Premises for Participation in the Town Meeting

The following five premises emerged directly from the interpretive research of accounts given by Tandem employees: (a) access, (b) impact, (c) morale, (d) responsible management, and (e) a sense of obligation. Tompkins and Cheney (1989) call these "meanings or interpretations that actors assign to items in their environment" (p. 129). In this case the Tandem employee is the actor assigning meaning to the Town Meeting. These interpretations and meanings are the rules or "premises" that the employees use to "monitor their social behavior" (Tompkins & Cheney, p. 129). These categories are premises for organizational action. Therefore, the premise can be described as people acting within an organization based on how they believe they will benefit. For example, if I believe I will get information from upper management at the Town Meeting, then I will attend and participate in the

Town Meeting. In this case, the premise is that I will receive information from management, and my organizational action is attending and participating in the Town Meeting. By means of account analysis, "both rules and premises are criteria for choice as viewed by the decision maker: they are, in effect, values and facts that suggest action" (Tompkins & Cheney, p.131).

These premises for the Town Meeting are, in part, a function of the condition statement mentioned above. That is, "If X, then Y," or, "If I get information, then I will attend." According to the Tandem employees, meanings are the basis for participation. These antecedent conditions are as follows:

Access - If employees receive information about the company's goals and status and they have the ability to see and address management, then they will participate in the Town Meetings.

Impact - If employees are able to see that their Town Meeting contributions result in change or clarify issues for upper management, then the employees will participate.

Morale - If employees are uplifted by the Town Meeting or believe the meeting promotes morale, then they will participate in the Town Meeting.

Responsible Management - If employees' contributions result in their being treated more fairly and listened to, then they will participate in the meeting.

Obligation - If employees believe that they and management are obligated to attend the Town Meeting because it is a "Jimmy program," then they will participate in the Town Meetings.

Through these five premises the organizational values were articulated and identified. This interpretive research shows that having access to information and to upper management, having responsible management, and having management deal with morale issues are clearly the values that Tandem Computers holds. Once the organizational action was observed, the value makeup of the organization was then noted and identified.

Dissent

The intent of this thesis was two-fold: (a) to describe how the Town Meetings are organized and used at Tandem and (b) to study the accounts of those in attendance at the various meetings. The premises mentioned above were identified by studying the accounts of those in attendance at the Town Meeting. But what do these premises say about dissent and democracy?

Dissent was identified in Chapter 1 as a means of expressing dissatisfaction through whistle-blowing, boat-rocking, or employee voice. In Albert Hirschman's terms, dissent is any attempt to change an objectionable state rather than exit. While dissent can occur without democracy, democracy cannot occur without dissent. That is, for a democratic organization to function, dissent conditions must be present. The five premises identified through the interpretive research are the five conditions that promote dissent in a democratic work place. These premises are conditions of dissent or subsets of dissent and dissent is a subset of democracy. Therefore, if the premise exists, then dissent is encouraged and democracy is promoted.

First, in a democratic society participation in the democratic process is optional. An individual may or may not vote if they so choose. In a

democratic organization the employee may choose not to participate in the process of offering suggestions, concerns, or insight into the organization. However, it is imperative that upper management attend and receive the messages of dissent. If a true democracy is to exist, then the leader or manager must be available to organizational members or employees.

Second, organizational members must have the ability to have access to management for an exchange of information to gauge successes, failures, and future conditions of the organization. By having access to information and upper management, the employee or organizational member better understands his/her role and contributions to the organization. The ability for dissent or "corrective feedback" to flow upward, downward and laterally is basic for organizational democracy to exist.

Third, dissent in a democratic organization must also demonstrate to the organizational members that change is possible. It is one thing to allow dissent in an organization, but without distinguishable change there is little purpose in dissent. Employees must be able to make an impact on their organization. Demonstrating to employees that their dissent can have an impact on the organization empowers the employee. Empowerment for the common man, stemming from the Greek "demos," is what democracy means. The political saying, "power to the people," stands true for the democratic organization. When an organization allows dissent to be heard and acts upon it, the employees are then empowered.

Fourth, although the employees are empowered when dissent is heard, organizational democracy is different from political democracy. It is different because an organization will probably not be ruled by employee voice.

Ultimately, the decision rules are determined by the executive staff. Providing a channel for dissent, however, is empowering to the employee because it makes management responsible to the employees. Middle management wants to keep problem issues from upper management. By having a dissent channel, the middle manager is more inclined to resolve problem issues on his/her level rather than have the problem brought to the attention of upper management.

The last premise identified as necessary for organizational democracy is morale. Morale is partly a product of the opportunity to be heard, to be part of the network. Allowing dissent to be voiced upward and laterally in an organization causes solidarity among members of an organization. Solidarity builds morale. This was reflected in the employee statements that they participated to enhance morale. Employees interested in morale are thinking in terms of solidarity, "us" rather than "me." The opportunity for employees to voice dissent has been offered as the reason that morale at Tandem did not plummet during the cutbacks.

It became clear in this research that these five premises are the conditions necessary for dissent. Therefore, if democracy is to be present within an organization, these five conditions mentioned above must be present for an effective channel of dissent.

Voice

In review, Albert Hirschman defines voice as "any attempt at all to change rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in

charge" (p. 30). Perhaps employees always must believe that change can occur and will occur if they voice dissent. The Town Meeting functions as one avenue for "voice" that Hirschman refers to. That is, it provides corrective feedback for the organization. Both employees and Jimmy Treybig suggest that the Town Meeting gives them a way of showing they care about the organization. The employees give input to the company officers and make them aware of problems within the organization. The Town Meeting provides the voice for management to hear "employee concerns," which in turn creates the possibility for change.

Because employees have access to management, they come to the Town Meetings with an agenda not only to present ideas to management but also to rally support for change from other members of the organization. Management, then, supports such petitions for change by publishing follow-up action items. By doing so, management indicates that change is, in fact, possible. Because of the Town Meeting program, Tandem employees have confidence that they need not "exit" the organization because of objections but, instead, feel that their petitions for change will not fall on deaf ears.

An example of change occurring due to "voice" was noticed when a packaging plant employee questioned the quality of the packaging and its lack of change since the last Town Meeting. Apparently, the employee was not able to make a change with his immediate managers, but he believed that a change should occur and said so at the meeting. The employee and the other members of the plant could see action occurring immediately as Jimmy loudly questioned the manager for not seeing to the concern for improvement earlier as the employee had suggested.

At another meeting an employee expressed concern that not enough advancement occurred within the Tandem organization for those already working for the company; more management positions were being filled by outside individuals. It was decided at that meeting that this was a valid concern and that the next group of managers to be promoted would come from within Tandem.

These are only two of many examples where employees chose to voice their concerns rather than to leave the organization. These examples clearly illustrate that the ability to voice concerns and dissent without having to worry about management reacting negatively is freeing in and of itself. It is this type of freedom of speech that results in substantive organizational change.

Organizational Democracy

Throughout this research I observed that Tandem Computers was providing an arena for dissent through the Town Meeting program. In so doing, Tandem has been able to meet the standards that would be associated with organizational democracy. Consider each of the six Bernstein criteria listed in Chapter 1.

Participation in decision making. On-site observation makes it obvious that Tandem employees have a part in providing ideas and comments for running the company. Comments about programs or quality control (such as the line worker reporting the problems in packaging) were many times scheduled for implementation at the Town Meeting itself. Further, it was not uncommon in the Town Meetings for management to take a "straw vote" or

vote by the raise of hands on issues that were presented in the meeting. However, this spontaneous resolution of issues minimizes deliberation even as it signals that lower level employees are being empowered. Town Meetings are not characterized by thorough discussion. It is clear, too, that the decision rule is the judgment of the CEO. Still Bernstein's criterion is met. Participation is encouraged, if not mandated, by the Tandem culture.

Economic return to the participants based on the surplus they produce.

During one of the first interviews I conducted at Tandem, a woman stated that she attended the Town Meetings because she had a vested interest in the company and she wanted to know how the company was doing. At Tandem Computers the employees have an opportunity to invest in Tandem stock. Hence, employees can earn additional funds according to the success of the company. Not only do employees gather information about the stock and the state of the company from reports, but they also use the Town Meeting as a vehicle for obtaining this information.

Tandem has three official programs for employees to enjoy the economic success of the company. One program is called "Employee Stock Purchasing Plan" or ESPP. This program allows employees to have a percentage of their paycheck extracted and put toward purchasing stock in the company. The stock is not offered at a special rate, but the stock-buying program is convenient for the employees. A second stock-purchasing program at Tandem is considered a retirement plan. In this case employees may purchase stock while Tandem matches in stock options a percentage of the employees' purchase. A third investment program available to Tandem employees is the 401(K) plan in which employees have a percentage of their

pay go into an investing program, and Tandem also pays a percentage into that account.

Sharing management-level information with employees. In order to do what is right for employees and for the company, management-level information was always introduced in the Town Meeting. Making this type of information available to employees was said to allow employees to make more intelligent decisions. Several said that Jimmy Treybig respects the intelligence of the employees and that he believes employees can handle the management-level information. In Chapter 3 this kind of trust was identified with Douglas McGregor's Theory-Y style manager. As noted in Chapter 2, the unique structure of the Town Meeting allows employees to (a) submit planned questions to management and (b) ask spontaneous questions of upper management. Therefore, Tandem meets the criterion distribution of management-level information.

Guaranteed individual rights. At the beginning of each of the Town Meetings, the Town Meeting manager reminded the audience of the differences within the organization and asked that those differences of individuals be respected. This is a graphic illustration of the organizational culture embracing individual rights. In a larger sense, the safeguards of the Town Meeting program seek to allow the freedom to speak without fear of a "career-limiting experience."

An independent appeals system. An appeal system never surfaced in the descriptive or in the interpretive research, but it was confirmed that an appeal system is available to employees at Tandem. The program is not an official program at Tandem but is nevertheless used by employees. It has been

identified as an employee escalation program, bringing grievances to upper management in a speedy manner. Though it is an informal program, Human Resources and upper management have participated in this system. The Town Meeting program itself is a venue for appeals of one kind.

A complex participatory/democratic consciousness. In my opinion, the Town Meeting program would be sufficient enough to satisfy this category with its process of submitting questions, asking questions from the floor, hearing responses by upper management and reporting results. In addition, Tandem has both a "Pipeline" program for asking anonymous questions by electronic mail and an open-door policy with management.

During the 1992 United States Presidential race, then governor and Democratic presidential nominee, Bill Clinton, visited Tandem Computers. This was not a typical campaign tour of a business. At Tandem Mr. Clinton addressed the employees in an electronic Town Meeting. Broadcasted throughout Tandem Computers work sites, the meeting allowed Tandem employees to ask questions of Clinton and to hear his responses as they do those of their own executives. In allowing Clinton to use the Town Meeting program, Tandem showed the commitment it has to seeking information and encouraging a democratic consciousness.

Therefore, after review of Bernstein's standards for democracy, Tandem Computers is an organization where work place democracy is embraced.

Integration

Does providing a place for dissent to be expressed, as in the Town Meeting, help to integrate individuals and the organization? According to Hegstrom (1990) perhaps the only hope for integrating individuals into the organization is to provide an environment where dissent can be voiced. Hegstrom also says dissent is a way to balance the needs and values of the individual and the organization. The reason for this is that dissent can be used as corrective feedback or "voice" to rectify intolerable situations. Integration can occur by having the individual listened to. Although change may not occur, just having the employee listened to can cause the individual to feel a part of the organization. If change does occur due to dissent, the organization is moved more in line with the personal goals and needs of the individual who dissented.

When questioned, the employees espouse the importance of the Town Meeting, especially as it relates to the area of access to information. Employees often verbalize their need to hear the company goals so they can identify with the company's thinking. Also, they identify with Tandem's thinking because the concerns, opinions, and ideas of their fellow coworkers were being expressed at the meetings. Therefore, as stated in Chapter 4, solidarity of thinking is definitely a product of the Town Meeting process which is, in turn, an integrating force for employees.

According to the interviews cited above, employees feel that they can create change within their organization because of the presence of the dissent factor. Also distinguishing Tandem employees is their ability to access upper management and discuss their ideas with them. Further, knowing that

management is responsible to them for Town Meeting action items and that all questions, whether presubmitted or asked from the floor, will be addressed makes Tandem employees unique. To the extent that employee feedback is used to change the organization, the Town Meeting may be said to have an integrative function.

Chapter 1 cites Charles Redding (1985) as saying that companies want employees to fit into the company mold, promoting the feeling that "If you want to get along, go along" (p. 245). Tandem has a strong identity, so strong that the company values are printed on one-and-a-half by three-inch cards for employees to carry in their pockets or wallets. As a result, Tandem managers as well as other employees are often quoted as using the same language or phrases. How, then, is Tandem different from what Redding suggests as a company opposed to dissent and democracy?

What has emerged from this study are two types of integration. The one type of integration is the type that Charles Redding suggests. That is, the company is looking for an individual that will go along with the company thinking and not make waves. A second type of integration identified here is that in which an organization encourages unity but also promotes individual values, interests, and ideas. This type of integration stems from corrective feedback which aligns the organization better with individual values and goals, strengthens the organization through corrective feedback, and maintains employee integrity while doing the work of the organization.

Organizational Framework

If an organization is interested in providing a means for dissent and fostering organizational democracy, the Town Meeting program is worth emulating. The purpose of the description (found in Chapter 3) is to provide a bare-bones framework for the Town Meeting and a view of how it operates. Discussed below are critical elements that must be considered when implementing the Town Meeting.

The program will not and can not work unless the top management of the corporation believes in and supports the Town Meeting program. The Town Meeting is founded on the assumption that employees are intelligent individuals and can understand all information from management regarding the company. If upper management does not act on the items brought up in the Town Meeting, employees will see the lack of sincerity and support, which will lead to lower morale in employees as well as to lack of confidence in the program.

Having a manager working to protect the Town Meeting program's integrity is vital. My observation is that it is a delicate balancing act for the manager of the Town Meeting to protect employees from "career-limiting experiences" while still assisting and supporting upper management in solving the issues at hand. Also, the Town Meeting manager must maintain strict confidentiality to establish and maintain trust. Implementing the Town Meeting program in a small organization could be difficult because confidentiality is typically harder to protect in smaller groups. Many times the very nature of a question can reveal who is asking the question.

Cost is another hindrance for a small company. Tandem Computers has a full-time employee to handle the Town Meeting program and the Pipeline program, whereas smaller organizations might not be able to afford a full-time program manager. Another financial consideration is the time allowed for employees to attend meetings rather than to work on their assigned duties. However the benefits of Town Meetings may outweigh many of the financial objections because of the benefits resulting from Town Meeting discussions (e.g., better quality control, improved design, or better morale).

Also vital to the program is the systematic scheduling of the Town Meetings. The continual use of the program reinforces Tandem's commitment because it emphasizes that opinions and dissent are welcome and encouraged by the company.

A written follow-up of action items keeps management responsible for promises made to the employees at the Town Meeting. Interestingly, upper management reports back to the employee feedback manager on how and when the action items are completed. This seems to turn the hierarchy upside-down and encourages management responsiveness to employee concerns.

Finally, as noted in Chapter 4, upper management must be aware that they may receive undue criticism. As was the case at Tandem, the program can be jeopardized when managers see themselves as being attacked unfairly. One difficulty of this program is that untrained managers are in front of employees for public scrutiny. And because these managers may not be skilled speakers, they can easily make statements which can hurt both their own

image as well as that of the corporation. Much caution and tact must be demonstrated by upper management when addressing employees and employee-related issues.

Summary

The Town Meeting has been described in detail for those who wish to incorporate the program for themselves. The complexity of the program lies in the human side of the program. The need to take care of "people problems" from preparing executives to ensuring confidentiality can be quite complex. However, the Town Meeting works logistically and can be used successfully.

The interpretation of the interviews and the organizational premises that surfaced from this research have given insight into individual and corporate employees at Tandem. One employee said, quoting George B. Shaw:

The best test of democracy is the right of dissent elements to be heard. Tandem Computers of Cupertino, California, seems to pass this test.

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Appendix A

FREQUENCY OF TOPICS RAISED BY TOWN MEETING QUESTIONS

1990 - 1992

COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

salary.....	3
insurance coverage.....	0
benefits.....	9
stock options.....	0
non-salary compensation.....	0
picnics.....	3
beer busts.....	1
performance reviews.....	1
(also under Management)	
dependent care.....	0
TOTAL	17

CUSTOMER SUPPORT

resources.....	0
quality of . . .	0
strategy of . . .	0
Support Engineers (SEs).....	0
Customer Engineers (CEs).....	0
customer situations.....	0
Customer Support Hotline.....	0
TOTAL	0

FINANCIAL

. . . results.....	0
. . . strategy.....	2
expenses.....	1
expense reports.....	0
headcount issues.....	0
stock price.....	0
Tandem profit.....	1
budgeting.....	2
TOTAL	6

MANAGEMENT

practices and policies.....	20
Human Resource policies.....	0

morale.....	1
recognition.....	3
-Tops.....	0
-creativity forum.....	0
Tandem Temp policy.....	0
... philosophy and values.....	2
dress codes.....	0
... strategy.....	0
communication	
- teleconferences.....	0
- creativity forum.....	0
- Town Meetings.....	1
- Pipeline.....	0
- President's Opinion Survey.....	0
quality of	5
TOTAL	32

PRODUCTS

... quality.....	0
software (tools; development).....	5
new products.....	5
System Security.....	0
hardware.....	0
TOTAL	10

QUALITY

product	2
hardware.	0
software.	0
commitment to	3
... program	0
(Quality Improvement Center [QIC]).....	1
resources.....	0
... customer support.....	0
TOTAL	6

STRATEGY

business	5
product	0
marketing	8
TOTAL	13

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

resources.....	6
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career planning.....	0
educational TV.....	0
quality of	0
technical	0
new employee	0
personal	0
management	0
TOTAL	6

WORK ENVIRONMENT

office space issues.....	0
parking.....	0
facilities.....	7
people related . . . issues.....	0
building security.....	1
recycling.....	0
corporate library.....	0
smoking.....	0
work tools.....	0
- e mail.....	0
- voice mail.....	0
- Tele.....	0
discrimination (racial, gender).....	0
TOTAL	8

OTHER..... 0

GRAND TOTAL 98