



Quality and Participation

Profound change at work

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Thriving Through Teamwork : Using Crises and Teams to "Turn On" a System

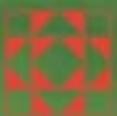
—Jim Rough

Making Teams Work

—Richard Axelrod

Fitting Teamwork into the Grand
Scheme of Things

—Pat Townsend



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—Pat Townsend

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How to Lead a Fast, Simple Work-Out—When You've Never Done It Before

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General Electric's and Jack Welch's Work-Out process is credited with being a core reason for GE's outstanding success over the past decade.

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The Team Approach to ISO 9000:2000 at Standard Aero Alliance

—Leon P. Dodd, Jr.

Some mistakenly believe that ISO 9000 makes quality management somewhat "automatic" or that teams can't add value to the ISO 9000 process. Leon Dodd's success rate with smooth implementations of ISO 9000 using teams tells another story—one that you will want to read.

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My Path of Service and a Talk with My Dad

—Barry Heermann

Finding your way, your path in life, is never easy when done alone. Sharing your ideas and really being listened to makes a difference.

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Consider the Context

—Rick Maurer

Life at work might seem easier if there was just one set of rules or expectations but context is what gives form and substance to what is possible.

4 Using Crises and Teams to "Turn On" a System

Jim Rough

Thriving through teamwork is where you want to be, right? There have to be many different roads or paths to prosperity, success for your organization—also correct, right? Too often, though, the first steps taken are what we think are safe ones, ones that won't have dire consequences for us. The result? The corporate landscape is littered with thousands of pilot projects that never went any further. There is a way that is riskier, uses crises, and is, as Canadians say, "safer than a known way." Jim Rough shares with us how he has used crises to "turn on" teams and the work system.

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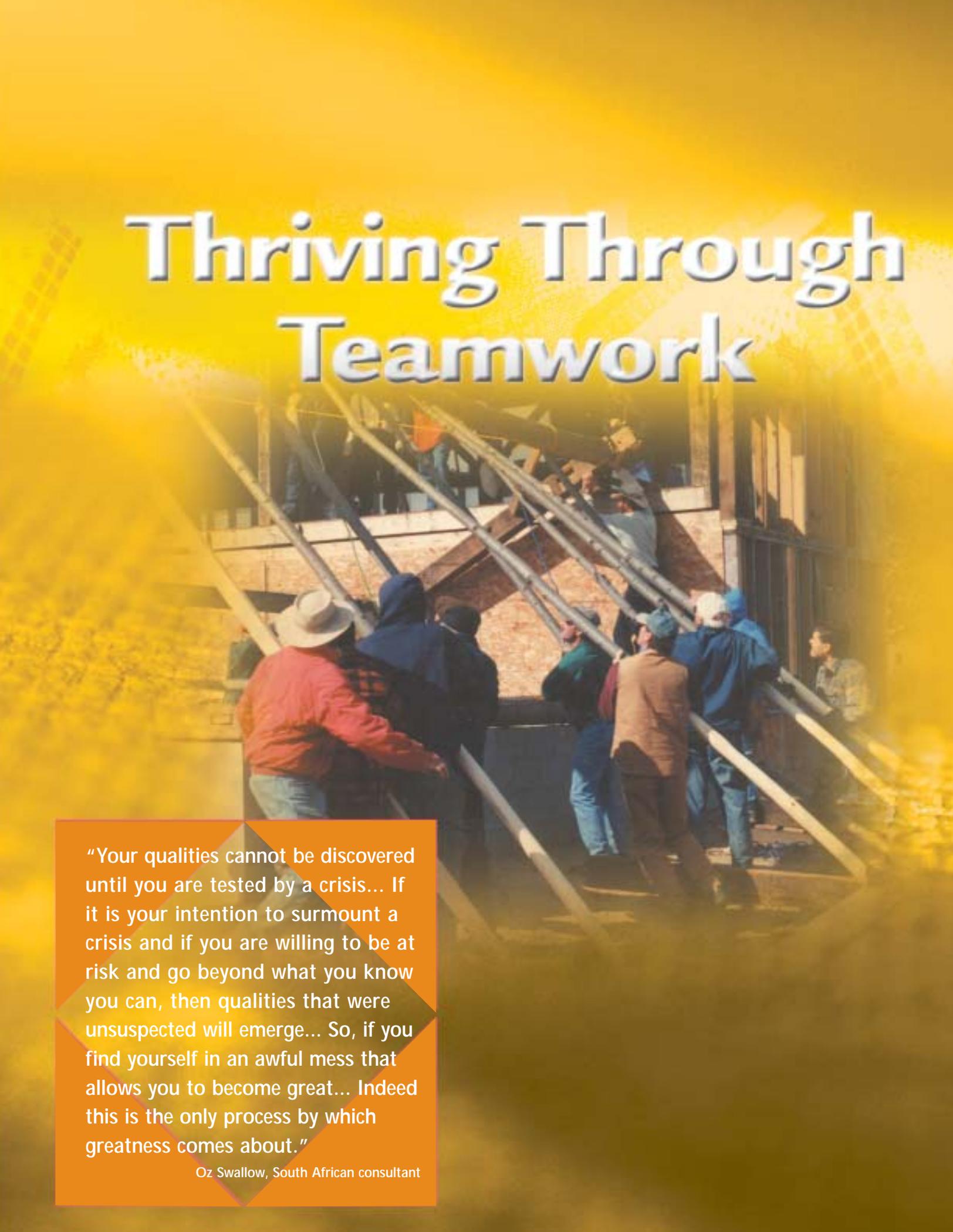
Milestones, Waypoints, and Tollgates

—Eric K. Hatch

Before one can ask perhaps the largest life question, "why am I here?" you need to know where "here" is. Eric Hatch shares some useful ways to find where "here" is.

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Thriving Through Teamwork



“Your qualities cannot be discovered until you are tested by a crisis... If it is your intention to surmount a crisis and if you are willing to be at risk and go beyond what you know you can, then qualities that were unsuspected will emerge... So, if you find yourself in an awful mess that allows you to become great... Indeed this is the only process by which greatness comes about.”

Oz Swallow, South African consultant

Jim Rough shares with us how teams can use the power of crises by identifying and working really urgent issues.

Using Crises and Teams to “Turn On” a System

OFTENTIMES, TOO OFTEN, THE IMPORTANT PROBLEMS WE FACE GO UNATTENDED, AND OUR TRUE POTENTIAL REMAINS UNTAPPED UNTIL ONE OR MORE ISSUES WE FACE REACH CRISIS PROPORTIONS. THEN, SOMETIMES BUT NOT ALWAYS, WE “TURN ON,” PULL TOGETHER, GET CREATIVE, AND OVERCOME THE CRISIS. ALL OF US HAVE SEEN THIS HAPPEN WITH SPORTS TEAMS, COMPANIES, OR EVEN WHOLE COUNTRIES. DURING WORLD WAR II, OR SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, FOR INSTANCE, WE HAVE ALL SEEN HOW PEOPLE CAN PULL TOGETHER IN EXTRAORDINARY WAYS. BUT, TOO OFTEN WE AVOID ISSUES, AND STAY “TURNED OFF” BY IMPLEMENTING STOPGAP MEASURES.

Crises are a time of wrenching trauma...and they offer the possibility of releasing vast hidden potential.

Crisis as a creative tool

A sense of urgency, a crisis, is required to turn on latent energy. When I was an inexperienced new employee of a timber company, I suggested an idea to the manager of a redwood plywood mill—it was then the last plywood mill in operation. I proposed using fir or hemlock—cheaper grades of wood—for

the inner portions of the plywood. The manager smiled and patiently explained why it wouldn't work; there were different expansion properties of these woods and the glue couldn't hold them together. About two years later the mill was in grave financial straits. At a meeting I heard the manager's boss ask him if there would be any problem using fir for the inner portions of the plywood. "No," he said, "We can do that."

The second time the situation was dire. It forced this manager to open his mind to new possibilities and develop new options. In the end it worked, but by then it was too late. The mill closed shortly thereafter.

Teams can use the power of crises by identifying and working really urgent issues. If the rest of the system participates vicariously, paying attention to what the team determines, then the whole organization may turn on as well.

Turning on an organization

In the early 1980s, I helped a large sawmill turn on using a team empowerment process. As with most manufacturing plants at that time, it had two types of employees: hourly and salaried. Salaried employees were

part of the company, mostly supervisors. They were paid whether the mill was operating or not. On the other hand, hourly employees were only paid when the mill was operating. They were a cost of production, part of the machinery of the mill, and supposed to just do their job and not complain.

In theory, this was a prescription for disaster. Without management involvement or employee training, our program was doomed. But in fact, it worked much better than other programs. It transformed the employees, management, and the productivity of the mill.

This arrangement was breaking down; times were changing—supervisors were now limited in how they could discipline employees. One supervisor complained that when it came to disciplining employees, the company no longer backed him.

It was during this time that I proposed we experiment with a new group process called quality circles. The circles promised higher productivity, better quality, and happier employees. Management only liked the part that would

result in less trouble from employees. They did not want to be involved themselves, nor did they approve any training. They just wanted employees to feel better about their jobs so problems with discipline would decline.

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Two employee teams were formed, one for each shift. No supervisors were interested in attending, but I facilitated the meetings anyway while the rest of the mill was aware, interested, and curious to see what would happen.

I started the first meeting by asking, "What are some of the issues we might work on?" We made a list of issues. In the beginning it was difficult for the employees to think this freely. They had been taught over the years to only do what they were told. On the few previous occasions where they went to meetings, management would talk at them and they were supposed to just listen. But here it was different. Employees were not being told anything, not even what to work on. They were just asked what they cared about and chose what that was.

At first, the group got into negative-toned, impossible issues, like getting the foreman fired. However, as the dialogue unfolded, the issue changed. Someone said, "You know, the foreman isn't really that bad if you get to know him outside of work." Then, they would talk about that and grow in their understanding of what the pressures on the foreman must be like. Anger subsided and a new problem statement came up that had more interest for them, such as "management doesn't respect people." In the end, both groups decided that the real problem was a lack of trust between management and employees. So they started working on this issue.

Just by choosing this issue they started relating better to the supervisor and to management. They made improvements to the equipment and to the methods. They began asking the supervisors for help on projects and this made the supervisors feel good.

Others in the mill could see these changed attitudes and it rubbed off and they participated as well. Before long, without realizing it, the two groups had addressed and solved the most important issue they faced: the lack of trust in the mill. They shifted their way of thinking and turned on. And the rest of the employees and management were going along with them.

Before long, without realizing it, the two groups had addressed and solved the most important issue they faced: the lack of trust in the mill.

Interestingly, it was hard for them to appreciate the extent of the changes they were making. The environment became different, but they had also become different, so the changes didn't seem so great to them. At one

point, someone complained, "We haven't made any progress in these meetings." The charts from the first meeting were presented to them. There was silence because people almost didn't recognize their own words. Finally, someone said, "That is ancient history." The group didn't want to go back there.

Turning on the people

Before the meetings, hourly employees were just putting in time. But the meetings started people talking. Through them the real and pressing issues were addressed and the door was opened for all to be themselves and to participate. No one wanted to be wasteful or inefficient, everyone wanted a safe environment, they liked providing quality service to others, and they felt pride in their products.

Here is one employee's turned-on moment—For many years, the senior employee on day shift seemed "too old" to run the most important piece of equipment in the mill. All logs that came into the mill funneled through his machine, but he ran it inefficiently. Because of his seniority and union rules, it was his right to stay in that position and, as a result, production for the whole shift suffered.

He had always considered himself a good employee because he did what he was told. But one day, during a meeting of his group, they looked at a chart of mill production. He suddenly stood up and exclaimed, "That's not right!" In that instant, though he had seen the chart many times, he realized that it was his machine that was causing problems. From that moment on, the production gap disappeared. It was a transformation inside one man's mind where, because

of the atmosphere in the meeting, he caught fire. It had dramatic results for the mill.

These meetings flipped an invisible switch in the minds of most everyone in the mill. The whole dynamic of the mill changed from the bottom up, even affecting management higher than the plant superintendent:

- Workers started recognizing how much they cared and many started taking more responsibility.
- They became experts on their machines and supervised repairs.
- They made friends with one another and with management.

One day a vice president from headquarters was touring the mill and noticed some new behaviors. It upset him that people had so much freedom. He saw one employee adjust his own machine and told him to leave the controls to his foreman. Then he rebuked the foreman for shirking his duties. He was also upset at the superintendent for his lax style.

The mill's new self-management felt threatening to this manager. His outburst deeply hurt the employee to whom he first spoke. This person wanted to resume his old attitude. He told himself, "Why should I care? I get paid the same either way. I'll just go back to my old ways, take no responsibility, and do what I'm told." But it wasn't so easy to stuff those feelings anymore because now he knew he cared.

Later they invited the vice president to come to one of their meetings and, later yet, to one of their presentations. The hourly employees began exercising leadership on the whole system.

The spreading change was a redefinition of real life. At first, the

meetings were just a break from the normal workday. That is, real life was normal work and the meetings were an interlude. But over time things switched around. The authentic conversation in the meetings became real life and work seemed like the interlude. This new authenticity extended beyond the meetings to the whole organization.

He had always considered himself a good employee because he did what he was told. But one day, during a meeting of his group, they were looking at a chart of mill production. He suddenly stood up and exclaimed, "That's not right!" "

Occasionally, meetings would stop because things got too busy or because of scheduling problems. If this went on too long the system would begin to revert to the old ways. The most important function of the meetings, even more important than the decisions and innovations that resulted, was the different dynamic that they sparked in the mill. It was their ability to

turn on the mill that was making the big difference. When that happened, productivity soared, quality went up, management-union relations improved, everyone became happier, people grew in capabilities, and the employees brought many of these changes home with them. Often I heard people say

“I didn’t know these people could be like this.” He felt remorse for how he had treated them before. He had changed and they had changed.

that what they learned from the meetings affected how they talked to their spouses and their children.

The changes came via the process, facing crises with others in a way that encouraged all to be creative. And even though most people were not part of the meetings at first, the issues and concerns that were raised interested everyone. At the end of the first year of meetings, all the foremen met to determine whether they would officially support the meeting process and become involved or not. Before they decided, I asked one supervisor how he felt about it. He waited before he answered and then tears formed in his eyes. He said, “I didn’t know these people could be like this.” He felt remorse for how he had treated them before. He had changed and they had changed. All foremen decided to support the process and get involved.

Once the employees started thinking creatively, every machine and every function in the mill started improving. One group of 12 maintenance workers had been unanimously adamant about needing an additional full-time person to oil machinery. Once they started thinking creatively, they developed a plan that more than solved the problem without the additional person. Part of the solution was inventing a new oiling device that saved about 20 hours a week—which is like hiring

a person half time. They also changed lubricant types, made new job classifications, and established a new training program that the state eventually funded.

No one in management imagined the overall impact there would be on the mill and the people. Their intent was for hourly employees to cause less trouble. Instead, workers took on management responsibility and sparked substantial productivity and quality increases, as well as changes in their personal lives.

The wisdom council strategy

Since this experience, I’ve developed the approach further into a way to turn on any large system. I call it the wisdom council. Essentially, what happens is:

...every three months or so, a lottery is held and 12 to 16 members of an organization are randomly selected to form a wisdom council. They meet for a day and a half with a facilitator who is specially trained to help them to engage in high quality dialogue and develop statements that capture what everyone feels or thinks. The statements are then presented to the whole organization in a new ceremony. Everyone is encouraged to gather briefly to hear the statements and to share dialogue in small groups. Over time this process establishes a conversation among the whole population that builds community and generates real consensus viewpoints.

There are 12 components to a wisdom council and to transforming a large system in this way.

1. The people of the system charter the wisdom council by voting whether or not to do it.
2. Wisdom council members are randomly selected from the organization. They are a microcosm of the whole.
3. The wisdom council selects the issues that it addresses.
4. Wisdom council members are chosen in a public way, such as a lottery.
5. The process is non-coercive. No one is forced to serve on a wisdom council and the results have no official power.
6. It operates in a fishbowl so the larger audience can identify with those chosen and the topics discussed.
7. It is facilitated dynamically so that the conversation is dialogue not discussion. A step-by-step approach should not be used.
8. The results of the wisdom council are unanimous, with the full support of each member.
9. There is a short ceremony where the results of the wisdom council, the statements of the people of the organization, are presented back to the organization.

10. Everyone is invited to participate in short, small group dialogues to consider the statements.
11. The process is ongoing, every quarter, month, or year.
12. The process operates in parallel with the normal governing process.

The wisdom council places a group of ordinary people on center stage and structures a way for all, through them, to identify and face crises. It is a new way to turn on a system of people so that they are empowered, individually and collectively. (For more information see www.wisedemocracy.org.)

*Adapted from Chapter 12 of Jim Rough's book, *Society's Breakthrough! Releasing Essential Wisdom and Virtue in All the People*, (1st Books, available in April 2002).



Jim Rough is the originator and principal seminar leader for Dynamic Facilitation Skills. He has been leading and evolving the concepts of dynamic facilitation skills and choice creating for more than 10 years. Prior to founding Jim Rough and Associates, Inc. in 1985, he worked as an internal consultant within Boeing, Xerox, and Simpson Timber Company. His education includes a bachelor's degree in physics from Occidental College, as well as two master's degrees from Columbia University. Rough may be contacted at 360-385-7118, by fax 360-385-6216, or by e-mail at jim@ToBe.net.

More From This Author

Additional Jim Rough articles available from AQP's Information Center

Contact AQP's Information Center at 1-800-733-3310 for information on obtaining other articles he has written for *The Journal for Quality and Participation*.

- "Choice Creating, How to Solve Impossible Problems," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Sept. 1991.
- "Slaying Dragons...a Facilitative Leadership Skill, Leaders Slay Dragons, Don't They?" *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, July/Aug. 1992.
- "How the New Science and its Paradigm Affect Training... Measuring Training From a New Science Perspective," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Oct./Nov. 1994.
- "Empowering Public Agencies...The Wisdom Council and Responsible Leadership," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, December 1996.
- "There's Training and Then There's Dynamic Facilitation and the Magic of Self-Organizing Change," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, June 1997.
- "Plain Talk," with Ned Hamson, Robert Crow, Rob Austin, Myron Tribus, and Jerry Wienberg, *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Nov./Dec. 1997.