

RESEARCH AND
HARBOR

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MILWAUKEE

GROWTH OF
AN EMPLOYEE RELATIONS
RESEARCH STUDY



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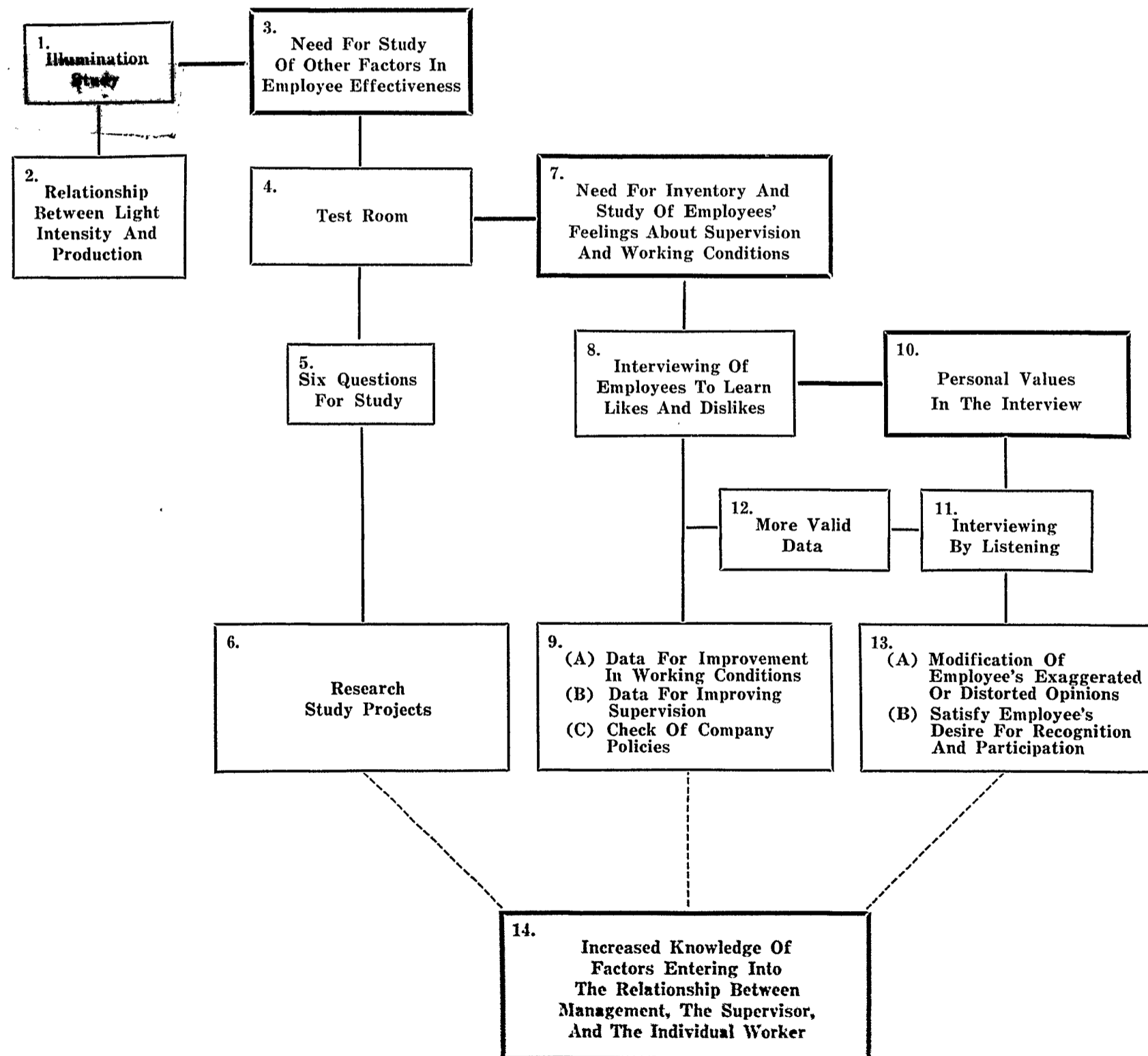
Growth of An Employee Relations Research Study

IT has been characteristic of many quests for knowledge to open up new fields for further experimentation quite different from the original objective. This has been true of the present studies in employee relations being conducted at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company. The accompanying chart depicts the development of these studies and shows their scope after six years' growth. In the following brief description the figures in parenthesis refer to divisions in the chart.

Beginning in 1924 with a study of illumination (1) to determine the effect of the intensity of light on production (2), the story is one of unexpected findings and an enlarging area of study. Although

the illumination study failed to reveal adequate answers to the questions asked, it served to show that studies in human relations could not be conducted by the "single variable technique" that is commonly used in the more exact sciences, and that some method must be used which allows for the simultaneous study of all variables.

These thoughts led to the first by-product (3), which was the realization that all of the factors in the effectiveness of employees should be studied, and that the study should be made by what has been called a "multiple free variable" method. It was therefore decided to establish a test room (4) where as many as possible of the human variables entering



into the work situation could be simultaneously observed and where single variables in conditions could be introduced. In the test room were five women operators engaged in repetitive assembly work. There were also devices for recording their productivity and variation in work. The original objective (5) was to find the answers to six questions, namely:

- Do employees actually get tired out?
- Are rest pauses desirable?
- Is a shorter working day desirable?
- What is the attitude of employees toward their work and toward the Company?
- What is the effect of changing the type of working equipment?
- Why does production fall off in the afternoon?

In conducting the studies certain variables were introduced independently such as altered pay incentive, new supervision, rest periods, lunches, five-day week, and shorter working days. As a check on the effects of these variables, some of the changes were repeated from time to time.

The original list of six questions has grown and at present the objectives are in the form of problems which are called research study projects (6). Each of these projects contains questions for study.

The second by-product (7) arose directly from the conclusions and results of the test room experience. Perhaps the most amazing result was the steady increase in each individual's output ranging from thirty per cent to fifty per cent; the increase continuing regardless of the variable introduced, and accompanied by improved or maintained health, with decreased tardiness, sickness, and absence. After rather definitely evaluating the effect of rest pauses and changes in pay incentive it was concluded:

- (a) That the greatest factor in these results was an improved mental attitude of the employees, brought about by better and more personal consideration in supervision, and by freer and more pleasant working conditions.
- (b) That the social, home, or outside life, of people is definitely related to their success or failure in their daily work.

These conclusions were based on evidence found in the employees' conversations which had been recorded. Their disclosures showed the need for further study of actual conditions in the regular departments with special emphasis on the employees' attitude toward them.

Thus an interviewing program (8) was established for the purpose of learning the employees' likes and dislikes toward the various elements in their working environment. With this information at hand, it was thought improvements could be instituted which might enable the Company to realize in some measure the results already noted in the test room experiments. At first each of approximately sixteen hundred employees was interviewed and the results were so satisfactory that plans were soon made for extending it to other groups until now it includes about twenty thousand people, all of non-supervisory rank.

Each employee is invited to contribute his comments, and all that he says is held strictly confidential. No identifying information is in-

cluded in the written report of each interview.

A study of the employees' comments on working conditions on three fields (9). Comments on possible improvements in the physical working conditions and are making desirable the improvements in many items previously considered satisfactory.

Non-identifying comments of employees are discussed by supervisors in conference groups. Experience with this plan of training indicates that it has advantages not previously obtained by other training means. It gives the supervisor a mirror in which he may see himself as he is seen by employees and yields the values in the employee's point of view without the fruitless hard feelings which result from the method of direct accusation and argument. Approximately two thousand supervisors are now meeting bi-weekly to discuss employees' comments.

A combination of the comments of employees and the supervisory discussions are furnishing a new and valuable check of Company policies affecting employee relations.

The third by-product (10) is perhaps the most outstanding of all. It may be called the realization that the interviews, in providing a channel of expression for employees without fear of consequences, benefit the employees themselves. It has led to an entirely new conception of the program and has been the basis for the development of the present method of interviewing which is a radical departure from methods previously used. As evidence of this beneficial effect, many comments have been received from employees which in substance are as follows: "Gee, I sure do feel better now that I have that off my chest."

With this knowledge it became clear that if a channel for free expression were to be provided, the interview must be a listening rather than a questioning process (11). The interview is now defined as a conversation in which the employee is encouraged to express himself freely upon any topic of his own choosing. No restrictions as to time or subjects are made. Employees are paid average earnings for the time consumed in the interview.

It is interesting to note that with the development of this type of interview, it became evident that the information gained was more valid than when the interviewers had suggested topics upon which the employees should express themselves (12). It seemed a fair assumption that a spontaneous comment, arising without suggestion, was of more importance to the employee than one which followed a direct question from the interviewer.

These personal values are growing in importance as the program develops. It has been found that employees' opinions, in many instances, tend to become exaggerated and distorted probably because of continued thought on unpleasant subjects, and that these distortions become modified when freely expressed to a sympathetic and critical listener. Another element in this type of interview is that employees appreciate being recognized as individuals who have valuable comments to make, and enjoy the opportunity to offer their thoughts (13).

While the above brief view of the studies being conducted may seem to indicate that they are widely varied, they all have the same objective (14); namely, to increase the knowledge of factors entering into the complex human relationships found in the industrial order of to-day.