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A POINT OF VIEW

The Participation OS

Four modules on leadership, management, teamsmanship and composition, from underneath.

PUBLISHED IN FULL

2026

CONTENTS

Five arguments, and the furniture they rearrange.

Each module is the ordinary furniture of organizational life, looked at from underneath. Nothing about the categories is novel. That is the point.

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The Premise

Why participation, and why it is the layer underneath

> *The instinct is intact. It has been trained out of the eight hours in between.*

NOBODY HAD A JOB

For nearly all of human history there was no such thing as being given work. There was the thing that needed doing and the people who were standing there. Someone who saw a problem and waited to be told to solve it was not being disciplined. They were being useless, and usually not for long.

We survived by participating. Not as a virtue, as a mechanism. The group that noticed more, contributed more and corrected each other faster ate more often. Three hundred thousand years of that is not a cultural preference. It is the closest thing our species has to a factory setting.

Watch what people do the moment nobody is organizing them. They organize. They divide the work, argue about it, take the parts they are suited to and complain about the parts nobody wants. A group of strangers moving a sofa does this in ninety seconds without a line of process. The instinct is intact. It has been trained out of the eight hours in between.

THEN WE BUILT A MACHINE TO OVERRIDE IT

The modern organization is a device for making participation unnecessary.

That reads like an accusation. It is not. It is a description of an engineering achievement. The division of labor, the org chart, the job description, the reporting line, the manager: each is a technology for converting a variable input into a predictable one. Each takes a person who might do anything and specifies what they will do instead.

For the work they were built for, they were right. When the output is physical and repeatable, the variance participation introduces is a defect. Nobody wants a thoughtful reinterpretation of the assembly sequence. They want the assembly sequence. The apparatus of modern management was a correct answer to a real question, and the suppression of the human default was not a side effect of solving it. It was the solution.

That is worth sitting with, because it explains why the apparatus is so durable. It is not stupid, and it was not imposed by people who disliked their workers. It is a genuine invention that genuinely worked, and most of what we call professionalism is its residue.

THE CONDITIONS HAVE GONE

The machine was built for work that could be specified in advance. Most work can no longer be specified in advance.

When the output is judgment, the variance stops being the defect and becomes the entire value. You cannot write down the judgment you want in a brief, because if you could write it down you would not need the person. Everything a job description does well, it does badly the moment the job is to work out what the job is.

Then the second thing happened. The specifiable work is going to machines, quickly. What is left in an organization once the specifiable part is gone is precisely the part the apparatus was built to suppress. Noticing. Objecting. Connecting two things nobody asked you to connect. Saying the thing in the room that everyone can feel.

So most organizations now occupy a strange position. They are running a system designed to eliminate the variance of human contribution, at the exact moment when the variance of human contribution is the only thing they have left that cannot be bought by a competitor this afternoon.

NOBODY CHOSE THIS

Almost no one running a company today decided to suppress participation. They inherited defaults. The meeting structure, the approval chain, the way a brief gets written, who is invited to the kickoff, what happens to an idea that arrives from the wrong direction. None of it was chosen in a room. It accumulated, mostly out of whoever spoke loudest in the first two years, and hardened into how things are done here.

An operating system nobody wrote down defaults to passive, because passive is what happens when nobody designs for anything else.

Every organization is running an operating system. Most never wrote it down. An operating system nobody wrote down defaults to passive, because passive is what happens when nobody designs for anything else. People wait to be asked. Decisions collect at the top. The range of what the company can produce quietly narrows to the range of the few who feel entitled to speak.

The bill arrives quietly. A decision that sat for six weeks because the person who could have settled it was never asked. A hire who agreed with the room. A meeting where the first speaker set the answer and the four people who saw the problem said nothing and went back to their desks.

WHY AN OPERATING SYSTEM

Business writing is full of borrowed machinery and most of it is decoration. This one is load-bearing.

An operating system is the layer you do not notice. You interact with the applications; the thing determining what can run at all sits underneath, invisible until it fails. You did not choose it. It was installed, usually before you arrived, usually by someone solving a different problem. And it decides what is possible rather than what is good. It does not make your work excellent. It sets the range of work that can exist at all. A brilliant idea on a system that cannot carry it does not arrive in a compromised form. It never gets said.

WHAT PARTICIPATION IS NOT

The word carries baggage, and the baggage is the fastest way to lose an argument that is otherwise correct.

It is not consensus. Consensus is a decision rule; participation is about the surface available for contribution before a decision is made. An organization can be radically participatory and still have one person decide, quickly, alone, and answer for it. Confusing the two is how participation earns its reputation for slowness.

It is not more meetings. Most meetings are the opposite. A meeting where eleven people watch three people talk is a machine for converting participation into attendance.

It is not everyone having a say in everything. That is a misallocation of attention, and people resent it faster than they resent being excluded.

And it is not performance. Someone who does careful work alone, says little and leaves a colleague's ownership intact is participating. Someone who visibly intervenes in everything may be shrinking the surface rather than widening it. Contribution is not the same as visibility, and any version of this idea that rewards the loudest room has misunderstood itself.

TWO VARIABLES

Everything that follows reduces to one claim.

Composition × Agency = Output Quality

Composition is who is in the system. The range of training, experience, background and cognitive habit available to a problem. Agency is whether those people can actually contribute.

It multiplies rather than adds, and that is the argument. Extraordinary people with no agency produce the output of the three who feel safe enough to speak. Total safety with a narrow range of people produces a comfortable room that agrees with itself, quickly and pleasantly, and is wrong in the same direction every time.

Neither substitutes for the other. That is why most work on this fails. Organizations hire for composition and wonder why nothing changed, or work on culture and wonder why the thinking is still narrow. They are working one variable in a product.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Four modules, and they are the ordinary furniture of organizational life. Leadership, management, teamsmanship, composition. There is nothing novel about the categories and using familiar ones is deliberate. The argument is not that companies face new problems. It is that the familiar ones look different through this lens, and become tractable in a different way.

0 1

On Leadership

Creating the conditions for participation

> “*Rank grants authority. Only leadership generates participation.*

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

Most organizations treat leadership as a rank. It arrives with a title, a reporting line and a number of people underneath it, and the assumption is that the title is the thing. It is not. Rank grants authority, and authority is genuinely useful. It can compel compliance, which is sometimes exactly what a situation needs.

But compliance is passive. It is a person doing what they were told, at the level required, and stopping. Nothing about authority produces the other thing: someone who brings what they actually have, including the parts nobody asked for. That is participation, and no amount of rank generates it. Only leadership does.

This is why leadership is not reserved for people with direct reports, and treating it as though it were wastes most of the leadership available in a company. A junior strategist who clarifies a confused brief is leading. A designer who makes room for a quieter colleague's idea is leading. A project manager who names the problem everyone in the room can feel and nobody has said is leading. In each case someone has expanded the conditions for others to contribute, which is the whole job.

The best leaders do not generate the answers. They build environments where the right answers can emerge from the people around them, which is a less flattering description of the role and a more accurate one. Their work is the participation surface: the total area available for contribution, and whether it is widening or shrinking.

FIVE CONDITIONS

Leaders do not produce the work. They produce the conditions that make the work possible. There are five, they are all operational rather than aspirational, and if one of them is missing the surface shrinks regardless of how well the other four are handled.

Direction. Clarity about where this is going and why. People cannot contribute to something they do not understand, and in the absence of direction they will either invent one or wait. Most organizations believe they have direction because it exists in a document. The test is whether someone in the middle of the company can state it without looking it up, and whether they use it to settle an argument.

The failure mode is not confusion. It is ambiguity that survives because clarity requires commitment, and commitment can be wrong. A leader who declines to name the mission is often protecting themselves rather than preserving flexibility, and everyone below them can feel the difference.

Safety. Permission to speak, disagree and fail without penalty. Every act of participation is a small act of vulnerability, because contributing something is offering something that might be rejected along with the person who offered it. Where that cost is high, people pay it once and then stop.

This is the condition most often claimed and least often true. It is not established by saying it is established. It is established by what visibly happens the first time someone disagrees with the most senior person in the room, and everyone is watching for that moment much more closely than the senior person realizes.

Space. Room to contribute in a way that suits the person contributing. This requires active design rather than passive retreat. Silence in a meeting is not space; it is an absence that the most confident person will fill within four seconds. Space is asking the question that brings someone in, structuring the discussion so that the first opinion does not anchor the rest, and noticing who has not spoken before the decision closes rather than after.

Standards. A bar that challenges without crushing. There is a persistent belief that high standards and wide participation are in tension, and it is backwards. Low standards do not invite contribution, they devalue it. If anything is acceptable, nothing offered is worth much, and the effort of offering it stops making sense. High standards focus participation by making it clear what would count.

The distinction that matters is between a standard held with ambition and one held with contempt. The same rejected work, returned with a reason and a belief that the person can meet the bar, produces effort. Returned with a sigh, it produces caution.

Momentum. Recognition and feedback that compounds. What gets recognized gets repeated, and what goes unnoticed gets quietly withdrawn. This is the cheapest of the five conditions and the most frequently skipped, usually by leaders who believe good work should not require acknowledgment. It does not require it. It simply does not continue without it.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

The difference is visible in ordinary behavior, and it is worth being specific because both versions look busy.

Passive leadership hoards decisions, on the reasonable-sounding grounds that they are important. Active leadership distributes them to the people closest to the information, and accepts the consequences of that.

> *The point at which a leader is bored of saying something is roughly the point at which the organization has begun to hear it.*

Passive leadership lets ambiguity stand. Active leadership names the mission, the stakes and the standard, and then repeats them long past the point where repeating them feels necessary, because the point at which a leader is bored of saying something is roughly the point at which the organization has begun to hear it.

Passive leadership responds to bad news with blame, which reliably reduces the amount of bad news that arrives and not at all the amount that exists. Active leadership responds with curiosity, which is harder in the moment and cheaper over a year.

Passive leadership fills silence with its own voice. Active leadership creates silence so that someone else can fill it.

Passive leadership accepts mediocre work to avoid conflict. Active leadership rejects it, because the team deserves better than to be protected from a standard.

THE TEST

There is one question, and it is not about you.

Are the people around you participating more than they were six months ago?

If the answer is yes, the conditions are working whatever else is true. If the answer is no, no amount of personal capability is compensating.

0 2

On Management

Developing people inside those conditions

> *"You can never blame the person you delegated to.*

DEVELOPERS, NOT DELEGATORS

Managers are developers of people. Not assigners of tasks, not processors of workflow, not bureaucratic intermediaries between the people doing the work and the people deciding what work there is.

Almost nobody is taught this. Most people become managers because they were good at the thing they are now managing, which is a promotion structure that quietly assumes management is the same job with more of it. It is a different job, and the confusion is the source of most of what goes wrong.

The distinction that matters is between a delegator and a developer. A delegator distributes work and measures completion. A developer distributes growth and measures capability. Both produce output, and in a given quarter their numbers may look identical. Only one compounds.

A delegator builds a team that can execute this project. A developer builds a team that can handle whatever comes next, which is the only thing worth building given that nobody knows what comes next.

THE PRINCIPLE UNDERNEATH IT

You can never blame the person you delegated to.

This is the least comfortable sentence in the doctrine and the most useful one. If you gave someone a piece of work and they failed, the question is not why they failed. The question is whether you set them up to succeed: whether the brief was clear, whether the context was shared, whether the capability was there, whether the support existed and was reachable, and whether you checked at a point when checking could still help.

Delegation without development is abdication. Dropping a task into someone's lap is not empowerment. It is abandonment with a generous name, and the person on the receiving end knows the difference immediately even if they cannot say so.

Delegation without development is abdication.

FIVE PRACTICES

Diagnose before prescribing. Understand where someone actually is before deciding what they need. Most development advice is generic because most managers have not looked. The gap between where a person is and where the work requires them to be is the development agenda, and it is different for every person on the team.

Stretch, do not break. Give people work slightly beyond their current capability. The sweet spot is productive discomfort: hard enough that it is not certain, supported enough that it is not dangerous. Too far below and the person stops growing while appearing to succeed. Too far beyond and they fail in a way that teaches them to avoid the next stretch.

Make thinking visible. Do not just give the answer. Show how you reached it. This feels like a waste of time in the moment and it is the highest-return thing a manager does, because the answer solves today and the reasoning solves the next fifty times. A team that has seen your thinking can approximate your judgment when you are not there. A team that has only seen your conclusions has to come and find you.

Feedback as development. Real-time correction, specific and frequent enough that none of it is surprising. The annual review is a monument to this practice failing. If someone learns something about their performance in a scheduled meeting that they could have learned in the moment it happened, the feedback arrived too late to be useful and too formally to be heard.

Graduate, do not hoard. The sign of a great developer is people outgrowing them. This is the practice most at odds with a manager's short-term interest, which is why it is the clearest evidence of the real thing. A manager who keeps their best people in place is optimizing for this year at the expense of everything after it, and the people around them can see it.

THE SAME SITUATION, TWO MANAGERS

A junior strategist delivers a weak brief.

The delegator says it is not good enough, explains what the brief should have said, and rewrites it. The brief is now good. The strategist has learned that their manager will fix their work, which is the only lesson available from that sequence.

The developer asks the strategist to walk them through their thinking on the insight, and asks three questions that expose the gap. The strategist rewrites it themselves. The brief is now good, later than it would have been, and the strategist has better judgment for the next one.

A direct report makes an error on a deliverable.

The delegator fixes it before the client sees it and either says nothing or says be more careful. The error is corrected and the thing that produced it is intact.

The developer asks what the quality check process is and offers to build one. The error is corrected and the system that produced it is upgraded.

Neither delegator behaved badly. Both did the faster thing, and in an organization where speed is the only thing measured, both will keep doing it.

THE TEST

When you are not in the room, does the team perform better, worse, or the same?

Worse means you have been delegating. The same or better means you have been developing. It is an uncomfortable test precisely because a manager's instinct is to be needed, and the answer that flatters that instinct is the one that indicts the work.

0 3

On Teamsmanship

What participation looks like between peers

> *Performers have a job. Participants have a job to do.*

PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

The word is slightly awkward and that is deliberate. Teamwork is what a company puts on a poster. Teamsmanship is the standard a group of people hold each other to when nobody senior is watching, which is a different thing and a more demanding one.

Every characteristic of a great teammate, described honestly, turns out to be a description of someone who participates rather than merely performs. A performer completes their assignment, competently, on time. A participant scans the whole field, sees what is missing, and moves toward it.

Performers have a job. Participants have a job to do.

This distinction is the difference between a group of capable individuals and a team, and it is almost entirely invisible on an org chart. Two teams with identical people and identical structures will produce wildly different work depending on which of these two things is normal in the room.

THE TEAM IS THE PRODUCT

Most professional service businesses have no patents and no proprietary technology. What they have is people and the way those people work together, which means the team is not the thing that makes the product. It is the product.

That should make teamsmanship the most protected asset in the building. In practice it is usually the least examined, because it is nobody's line item and it degrades slowly enough that no single quarter shows the damage.

THE PARADOX

The teammates who make the largest difference hold combinations that look contradictory until you have worked with one.

Selfless and driven. They subordinate ego to the collective mission, and bring relentless personal ambition to the quality of what they contribute. The selflessness is not modesty about the work. It is indifference about the credit.

Humble and confident. They know exactly what they do not know, and speak with conviction about what they do. The combination is what authority actually sounds like, and it is rarer than either half alone.

Egoless and passionate. They do not need to be right. They need the work to be right. When someone else has the better idea, they adopt it with genuine enthusiasm rather than gracious defeat.

These are not personality traits and it matters that they are not. They are practiced behaviors, which means teamsmanship is a discipline rather than a disposition, and it can be built rather than only hired.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS DO

Fill voids. When something needs doing and nobody is doing it, move toward it. The phrase is not that is not my job. The phrase is I have got it. This is the single most reliable indicator of whether a team is participating, because it requires no permission and cannot be faked.

Earn trust through action. Trust is built slowly through consistent behavior. Follow through. Hit the date. Admit what you dropped before someone finds it. Trust compounds, and every kept commitment raises the level available to everyone else.

Speak with candor and care. Say the hard thing, and say it well. The test is whether this person would thank you for it a week from now. Candor without care is just cruelty with better branding, and care without candor is just politeness that lets work stay bad.

Hold the standard. Accountability is a team function rather than a management function. When the work falls below the bar, great teammates name it to each other. A standard that only exists when a manager is present is not a standard. It is supervision.

A standard that only exists when a manager is present is not a standard. It is supervision.

Stay resilient through losses. Pitches are lost. Campaigns underperform. Great teammates process it, learn from it, and re-engage quickly and visibly. That choice is contagious in both directions, and the twenty-four hours after a loss set the tone for the month.

Make others better. The highest form of teamsmanship is not your own contribution. It is the contribution you unlock in someone else, which by definition will not appear anywhere with your name on it.

STRONG OPINIONS, HELD LOOSELY

Every participatory system eventually faces the same question. If everyone has a voice, what happens when someone has to decide?

Strong opinions means having the courage to commit. Put your thinking on the table with conviction, so that it can be argued with rather than guessed at. Held loosely means that when better information arrives, you update, and you do not defend a position because it is yours.

Both, simultaneously, always. The failure modes are symmetrical: conviction without humility produces a room that cannot learn, and humility without conviction produces a room where nothing is ever actually said.

STEP IN, STEP UP, OR STEP ASIDE

Step in when you see a void. Step up when the standard is slipping. Step aside when someone else is better positioned for the work.

There is no fourth option. There is no step back and watch, and the absence of that option is the entire point of the standard. Watching is the default state of a passive organization, and it is comfortable, and it is invisible, and it is the thing being argued against.

THE TEST

When something needs doing and it is nobody's job, what happens?

04

On Composition

Who is in the system, and whether they can reach it

> *“Homogeneity is a design flaw, not a moral failing.*

WHO IS IN THE SYSTEM

The quality of any participatory system is a function of two things: the composition of its participants, and the agency those participants have to contribute. Change either and you change what the system can produce.

Composition is who is in the room. The range of perspectives, experiences, disciplines and cognitive habits available to a problem. Agency is whether those people can actually reach the work.

Composition without agency is decoration. You can assemble the most varied group ever put in a building, and if only three people feel safe enough to speak, your effective composition is three. This is why so many organizations do genuine work on who they hire and see nothing change in what they produce. They improved one variable in a product.

Composition without agency is decoration.

HOMOGENEITY IS A DESIGN FLAW

Not a moral failing. A design flaw.

A system with identical inputs produces narrow output. That is not a values argument, it is an engineering observation, and it holds regardless of what anyone believes about fairness. When every participant shares the same training, the same background and the same way of approaching a problem, the system's effective range collapses to the range of one person with more hands.

Diverse composition is harder. Groups with real differences experience more friction, more argument and slower initial agreement, and anyone who has run one knows this. They also produce measurably better results when they push through it. The discomfort is the mechanism rather than the cost.

The strongest evidence for this is experimental, and it is stranger than the version usually quoted.

Phillips, Liljenquist and Neale put four-person groups to work on a problem with a single correct answer. Every group had three members drawn from the same social world and one newcomer. In some groups the newcomer came from that same world. In others the newcomer was an outsider. The groups with the outsider performed better, and reported feeling less confident and less effective while doing it.

The mechanism is the part that matters. The gains did not come from the newcomer contributing a missing idea. They came from the presence of someone socially distinct, and from what that presence did to the people who were already there. They stopped assuming agreement. They made their reasoning explicit. They worked harder at the problem because they could no longer take the room for granted.

Composition does not work by importing the answer. It works by changing the behavior of the people already in the room.

The widely quoted industry correlations between diversity and profitability are contested, and a 2024 analysis could not reproduce the best-known of them on a different sample. Do not build an argument on those numbers. The experiment shows a mechanism, which is what this argument needs and what a correlation cannot supply.

TWO DIMENSIONS

Cognitive and experiential range. Differences in training, discipline and problem-solving approach. A strategist, a writer, a media planner and a data analyst produce different output from four strategists, and every organization understands this intuitively even where it does not act on it.

Social and identity range. Differences in background and lived experience. This shapes how people see a problem rather than only which problems they see, and for any organization whose work depends on understanding people, those blind spots are directly and measurably expensive.

Cognitive range expands the skills available. Social range expands the perspectives available. The best teams have both, and the ones that have only the first tend to be very confident about the second.

WHAT BLOCKS IT

Exclusion. Structural barriers to entry. Who gets hired, who gets promoted, who gets staffed on the work that is visible. If the pipeline is narrow, the surface is narrow, and no amount of culture work downstream will widen it.

Silence. Cultural barriers to contribution. The cost of speaking up is not evenly distributed. It is higher for people who are already less represented in the room, which means the same conditions produce different levels of participation from different people. Leaders who assume an even playing field are reading their own experience of it.

Carelessness. Linguistic barriers to belonging. Language that pushes people out rather than bringing them in, usually without intent and usually without anyone raising it. This is not policing and framing it as policing is how organizations avoid it. It is a professional standard, on the same footing as spelling a client's name correctly.

FROM ACCESS TO AGENCY

There is a progression, and most organizations stop partway.

Access means people can get in the door. **Inclusion** means they have a seat. **Participation** means they have genuine voice. **Agency** means they have ownership.

Most organizations congratulate themselves at inclusion, which is measurable and visible and produces a photograph. The goal is agency, which is none of those things and is the only stage at which composition starts showing up in the work.

SYSTEM DESIGN, NOT PERSONAL HOMEWORK

This is the part that decides whether anything changes. Composition is not an individual responsibility and treating it as one guarantees it stays a sentiment.

It lives in hiring, because pipeline composition is the leading indicator of everything downstream. It lives in staffing, because who gets put on which project is where composition either becomes real or stays theoretical. It lives in how creative work is structured, in whether there are multiple channels for input rather than one meeting. It lives in development, because if investment is distributed narrowly then the composition of future leadership is being decided by today's habits. And it lives in accountability, because behavior that diminishes someone's ability to participate is a defect in the system rather than a matter of manners.

THE TEST

When was the last time a decision here was changed by someone who was not expected to speak?

The whole system

Leadership creates the conditions. Management develops the people inside them. Teamsmanship defines how those people show up to each other. Composition determines who is in the system at all.

Run one without the others and it fails in a way you can predict. Conditions without composition produce a comfortable room that agrees with itself, quickly and pleasantly, and is wrong in the same direction every time. Composition without conditions produces a group with real range that stays quiet, and a leadership team that privately concludes diversity did not work.

None of this is difficult to understand. All of it is difficult to do, because every one of these moves costs something in the short term and pays in a timeframe longer than most quarters.

The argument is only that the alternative is not neutral. An operating system nobody designed is still an operating system, and it is running right now, and it is deciding what your organization is capable of producing before anyone in it has had the chance to be good at their job.

WHAT THIS IS

This began as training material inside an advertising agency. The ordinary modules any company writes and few people read twice.

I rewrote them against one idea: that participation is the operating system underneath how organizations actually work, and that most of them are running a version nobody chose. It is not a proof. I have not run a controlled anything. What I have is a long time spent watching organizations get narrower than the problems in front of them, a thesis I believe is right, and a document that is more useful written down than sitting in a folder.

So it is published in full. Not because it is finished. Because a doctrine nobody can argue with is not a doctrine, it is a brochure.

If you read this and recognize your own company, there is a way to look at it more closely. If you read it and think it is wrong, I would rather hear that.

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THE PARTICIPATION OS · PUBLISHED IN FULL, 2026
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