

## LUDEC'S LEAP YEAR

Companies in Europe need to compete by doing things differently, continuously reinventing products and services in ways that can't easily be imitated by competitors. The knowledge, experience and creativity of the entire workforce must be harnessed as a shared resource for improvement and innovation. However traditional ways of organising work and traditional approaches to management can't deliver such versatility. Change is needed in the workplace – often radical change that challenges established roles and responsibilities. But such change is almost invariably messy, a journey which involves learning and experimentation, trial and error. Moreover there is plenty of research to show that change initiatives are very susceptible to failure – sometimes dramatic but more often the result of a slow process of “innovation decay”.

Ludec is an example of a company committed to such a journey. A manufacturer of high-tech radio transmission equipment, Ludec has invested heavily in new production capacity in Europe because the company believes that keeping design and production together is the only way of sustaining high levels of innovation and versatility. Inspired by Scandinavian traditions of empowerment and knowledge sharing in the workplace, Ludec's *LEAP* (Listen, Engage, Assimilate, Participate) initiative creates both physical and organisational spaces for teams to reflect on how products and processes might be improved. Using their tacit knowledge and experience of “what works”, shopfloor teams can engage in dialogue with design engineers and managers to try to find outcomes that improve quality, performance and productivity while at the same time improving job satisfaction. Teams can halt production without permission, using the “LEAP Rooms” as protected spaces in which they can ask difficult questions and search for “win-win” solutions. Moreover design engineers are now located on the shop floor, their work open to scrutiny by assembly workers who are not slow to point out the practical manufacturing problems that will result from particular designs. Although LEAP is not fully embedded in the hearts and minds of all managers, it has certainly contributed to the company's improved performance against a number of indicators, not least staff retention.

Trade unions in Ludec have become passionate champions of LEAP. Partnership, established some years ago in the company, is now seen as “old hat”. Rather unions have come to see themselves as “knowledgeable participants” in the company's search for sustainable success, guardians of the right of workers at all levels to use their knowledge, skills and creativity to the full in their working lives. By winning improvements in quality of working life for their members, unions are also helping to secure enhanced competitiveness for the company.

The play begins by revealing the history of LEAP and its impact on the four principal characters. All seems to be going well, despite some barely concealed tensions. But when an important new order means that production schedules need to be completely reorganised in order to meet tight deadlines, will the company be forced to abandon LEAP in order to meet its targets?