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The Circuit Scheme

How about inviting a group of men from the plant next door over to study your operations—and then taking some of *your own* men to the other plant next week? Before you accuse the editor of "flipping his lid," let us point out hastily that such a scheme—on a far larger basis than two-plant—is working, and working successfully, in Great Britain. During the past 2 years about 7000 interplant visits have been made under the British Productivity Council *Circuit Scheme*. It looks good. With suitable modifications it would bear some careful scrutiny by chemical plant management here in the United States.

The British plan provides for the regular exchange of visits among six or eight companies in a given area, which agree to constitute a "circuit." The teams who visit are composed of management, technical men, and representatives of the labor force, all carefully selected. Their primary purpose is to promote the exchange of know-how which has proved effective in increasing productivity and the exchange of any knowledge which will result in increased industrial efficiency.

Don't underestimate the Britishers' skepticism. Some thought the visits would prove to be nothing more than "outings." Whether this is true, of course, depends entirely upon the seriousness with which such a program is taken, and the care devoted to planning. On the "outing" angle their skepticism was unfounded.

You probably have already guessed the main point of doubt because we Americans have no monopoly on the fear of divulging trade secrets. The chemical industry has always guarded its trade secrets and its process know-how zealously. In recent years some of this reticence is disappearing. We have some informal precedent for participation in such a team visit program. We know how the petroleum industry has shared its information—even some of its "secrets" and know-how—and has not suffered. We are all convinced of the value of attending meetings where nonconfidential information can be swapped with others working in similar fields. Then why not consider additional opportunities?

The British found one in (1) allowing the individual company or plant to state whether or not it preferred to exchange visits with a company making competitive products or indeed, with a company even in the same industry, and in (2) assuming that there are so many operations and techniques common to all types of manufacturing that there can be a profitable exchange of know-how without divulging trade secrets, or even between very widely dissimilar plants. Actually, they found that in the long run many companies *preferred* to visit companies in their own field and the fear of divulging trade secrets was just a scare.

A team can visit an entire plant, or confine its interests to a special department or area. It can look for increased efficiency and productivity devices in a narrow area common to its own plant and the one visited, or it can run the gamut. Just to show how many things can be investigated without touching process know-how, here are some:

Incentives	Welfare and pension plans
Suggestion systems	Production planning
Time and work study	Operations research
Training plans	Plant committees

Selecting the teams is important. Some plants may want to use the same team each time; others may want to give the experience to as wide a group as possible. Team members should be picked on the basis of the relation of their job interest to the particular subjects to be examined on the visit. British results indicate that use of members of the plant operating force on the teams has been so successful that it is almost imperative. Some managements felt that taking the labor force on visits to other plants might make them dissatisfied with their own. This has not been the case; after a couple of visits, they found that the labor force had picked up good ideas and were taking a new pride and interest in their own plant.

It should be obvious that these visits will not be successful unless considerable preparation time has been given to them. Some reconnaissance of the plant to be visited may be advisable to decide where the attention of the visit should be concentrated. Preplanning, with a good agenda worked up, can save time. Follow-ups and continuing cooperation logically follow the visits.

What sort of real results have the British obtained? In an area of 36 firms where six circuits are operating, three are going to modify their planning systems, three will improve cleanliness, three have seen opportunities for simplication, one will improve its lighting system, one has found out how to prevent some waste of materials, and seven have noted desirable modifications of production methods. In an area where Imperial Chemical Industries was a participant, specific points of interest noted were such items as materials of construction in acid handling; preparation and handling of starch adhesives; specialized ventilation and lighting; and details of a planned maintenance scheme.

In the United States we have seen the results which can be attained by interplant cooperation best exemplified in the disaster control organizations formed in several industrial areas. These were spontaneous organizations, started by one or more companies in recognition of a need. We can also see considerable possibilities in the spontaneous organization of American equivalents to the British Circuit Scheme, with the realization that there will be something good in it for every participant.