



## AWAY DAYS & WORKSHOPS

The Chartered Management Institute and AIM Research have studied strategy workshops and away days run by organisations in the UK and found many of them to be wanting in terms of their design and impact.

In fact, many organisations don't measure their impact at all. Those that do report that they fall short of expectations. This is in a situation where almost 80 per cent of UK organisations host workshops at regular intervals and nearly half having them at least once every twelve months. Yet 4 in 10 suggest they have no clear-cut impact on productivity and profitability and only one-third think that they improve innovation.

However, the study also suggests that well designed workshops do have a positive impact on business development and can significantly improve internal working relationships and understanding of corporate values.

### Participation

Over 60 percent of workshops had an objective of developing new strategies, half use workshops to challenge existing strategy and to generate new ideas. But with two-thirds having less than 16 participants and with senior managers making up 76 percent of attendees and doing very limited preparation, it is difficult to see where the new strategies, ideas and challenges will come from.

Only 33 per cent of workshops were attended by line managers and fewer by junior managers, with only 6 percent including a key stakeholder in the strategy of the organisation – the customer.

### Self-congratulation

This is a good recipe for 'groupthink'. In these circumstances only the current knowledge and experience of the senior management team will come to the fore. This suggests that, with the

absence of impact measures, the reported success of these workshops may be no more than self-congratulation, especially as senior directors or CEOs led the majority (61 percent) of the workshops.

One of the key ways that the report identifies to improve these away days and workshops is to increase participation. Professor Gerard Hodgkinson, who led the study, comments: "Given that the major purpose of many strategy workshops is to challenge existing strategy or come up with new ideas, it is a concern that these events are typically dominated by the top team with significantly less involvement of other stakeholders. The involvement of managers and employee representatives at all levels can help bring in new perspectives and can build a sense of ownership that is needed to encourage effective implementation."

### Reasons

A previous article of mine in Strategy Magazine identifies a number of similarities with this report, which explains why strategy development is often flawed in organisations: it is conducted by a small group, unrepresentative of the stakeholders of an organisation, who are often isolated from the 'real world' using a linear planning process which assumes that the world is predictable. They then use a slow cascade process to disseminate the message, which gets diluted on the way and has no feedback loop. So why, in the face of evidence that involvement works and traditional methods are flawed, is nothing changing?

The difficulties seem to lie in a number of practical areas:

- How to involve diverse groups of stakeholders in meaningful discussions without destructive conflict?

- How to increase levels of participation and group size whilst not losing focus and impact?
- How to increase the speed and acceptance of implementation to match the speed of change?

### Large group intervention methods

Readers of *Cuttings* will know of my use of large group participation processes such as Open Space and Future Search Conferences and Appreciative Inquiry. It is these processes that can change the face of strategy development and address the criticisms levelled in the CMI report.

Large group processes, as the name suggests, allow tens, hundreds, even thousands of people to participate simultaneously. This means you can put the whole system in the room and create a broader information base from all stakeholders on which to determine strategic direction. They also deal with current and real time information, with decisions made in the workshops that are then implemented immediately – there is no delay in communicating strategy to everyone, as they are there.

As Roger Harrison put it so well: "It suddenly seemed so simple and clear, that if we wanted people to work together to change things, we need to get them working from a common appreciation of how things are... If we want them to cooperate in planning and action, we have to find common ground between them on how they would like things to be different in the future, and we have to give each of them a stake in a shared vision of that future."

All we need to do now is to cure CEOs and senior managers of the fear of using these processes – and being more successful!

*The role and importance of strategy workshops. Research report. CMI (2005)*  
*Developing inclusive strategies, Strategy Magazine, Nov 2004*  
*Consultant's Journey, Roger Harrison*

# Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.”  
*e e cummings*
- ✂ “To fly, we have to have resistance”  
*Maya Lin*
- ✂ “Everything considered, work is less boring than amusing oneself.”  
*Baudelaire*
- ✂ “Learning is like rowing upstream: not to advance is to drop back”  
*Chinese proverb*
- ✂ “If you want someone to build a ship, do not send them out to gather the wood, saw it up, nail it together to make a boat. Rather, teach them to have a desire for the sea.”  
*Antoine de Saint-Exubery*
- ✂ “Seek out that particular mental attribute which makes you feel most deeply and vitally alive, along with which comes the inner voice which says, ‘This is the real me’, and when you have found that attitude, follow it.” *William James*
- ✂ “To be ethical is profitable, but to be ethical because it is profitable is not ethical.” *Peter Koestenbaum*
- ✂ “Do not confuse motion and progress. A rocking horse keeps moving but does not make any progress.” *Alfred A. Montapert*
- ✂ “Freedom is actually a bigger game than power. Power is about what you can control. Freedom is about what you can unleash.” *Harriet Rubin*
- ✂ “It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.”  
*Chinese proverb*
- ✂ When asked to name just one big merger that had lived up to expectations, Leon Cooperman, former co-chairman of Goldman Sachs’ Investment Policy Committee, answered: “I’m sure there are success stories out there, but at this moment I draw a blank.”  
*Mark Sirower, The Synergy Trap*
- ✂ “The quieter you become, the more you can hear” *Ram Das*

## The 21st-century organisation

A recent McKinsey Quarterly article reported on some research they had conducted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation, with some interesting and challenging observations:

- Professional employees, who create value through intangible assets such as brands and networks, now constitute up to 25 percent or more of the workforce in financial services, health care, high tech, pharmaceuticals, and media and entertainment.
- Enabling these professionals to be productive enables big corporations to be competitive, yet most of them do little to improve the productivity of these employees.
- Corporate organisational structures – designed vertically, with matrix and ad hoc overlays – make professional work more complex and inefficient.

Leading to the conclusion that companies must change their organisational structures dramatically to unleash the power of their professionals and to capture the opportunities of the current economy.  
*McKinsey quarterly June 2005*

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## UNRESOLVED ANXIETY

Peter Koestenbaum’s excellent Weekly Leadership Thought email recently contained an excerpt from his book co-authored with Peter Block\*. It is a challenge to go beyond just learning the skills of management. I reproduce it below in its entirety:

*“People who exude provoking waves of anxiety because they have not resolved their neurotic anxiety into its existential underpinnings, who have not worked through their own inauthenticity, will have difficulty being in a managing position. Being a competent surgeon, for example, is not in itself enough to make the physician into an authentic healer. Even though the surgeon performs the healing function while the patient is supine and unconscious, it is the personal contact both before and after surgery that provides the frame of mind which – as many experts on holistic and psychosomatic medicine now maintain – will help ensure a speedy recovery, not to mention the purely moral issues involved. Same with a manager. Managers may have the surgeon’s knowledge of the business of the organization, but their own way of managing anxiety may keep them from really building an effective human organization.”*

*Koestenbaum’s Weekly Leadership Thought June 20, 2005*

*\*Freedom and Accountability at Work by Peter Koestenbaum and Peter Block.*

### MORE INFORMATION

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