



Developing inclusive strategies

Bringing about organisation change is made more difficult when the planners are divorced from the people affected. Geof Cox looks at large-group intervention methods as a means to include all stakeholders in the change process, thereby ensuring that outcomes are more positive and implementation is more effective.

A new way of thinking

The world today is not a simple cause/effect model but a complex web of interconnected causes and effects, some instantaneous, some with a long time lag. To make sense of this shift and to ensure our organisations survive and prosper, we must begin to take a more holistic view of what is happening – to adopt a systems thinking approach to ensure that:

- the rate of learning is faster than the rate of change
- internal flexibility is greater than external turbulence
- internal collaboration is greater than internal conflict
- clarity of vision rises above the information explosion
- corporate mission is stronger than disintegrative forces
- innovative pro-activity predominates over conservative tendencies
- quality supersedes quantity as the basis of achievement
- a wide sense of the complex takes precedence over narrow perception
- we think global, act local; think local, act global.

Under the old paradigm, the way is to plan the strategy then implement it. This approach has never worked particularly well because the strategy is usually devised by an unrepresentative group cut off from the rest of the organisation; the planning process is linear; and the world will not stand still while the planners do their planning.

Once devised, the strategy is then communicated to the rest of the organisation through a 'cascade' method, which is also flawed because it is too slow; the message gets diluted and distorted as it moves down the pyramid; it is a passive 'tell or sell' process resulting in low levels of commitment; and there is no feedback loop to provide for organisational learning.

Key questions

In organisation change, the three Ds dominate – downsizing, delayering and decentralising – and they seem to result in people being disgruntled, displaced and dispossessed rather than delighted, decisive and dynamic! Change will not decrease in its frequency or its impact, so staff will be affected more and more. More

change leads to low morale, leads to low productivity, leads to more change.

How do organisations stop this vicious circle and create organisation change where people experience the positive Ds?

Research demonstrates that an inclusive strategy that involves all stakeholders in the organisation, not just the financial shareholders, and focuses on the needs of its customers, employees, suppliers and the wider community and environment is one of the characteristics of outstanding long-term performance. But to involve all stakeholders in meaningful debate is difficult.

How can you ensure meaningful strategy discussion and decision making with diverse interests?

Planning in fast-paced environments requires continuous organisational learning, and the open sharing of knowledge. Strategies that yield success are those that motivate and stimulate employees and customers. Most good ideas flow from the shop floor, and from the service deliverer who is nearest to the customer.

How can we involve employees and customers in the creation of strategies?

As the rate of pace of change increases, it is necessary to make decisions ever more quickly. The current rule of thumb is that one internet year is the equivalent of three calendar months. Yet effective decision making takes time.

How do you increase the speed of strategic decision making?

And once you have developed a strategy, you need to get it enacted quickly before it passes its sell-by date. Traditionally, the selling process has taken time and met with resistance from staff.

How do you increase the acceptability and speed of implementation of strategy?

These are the issues and questions facing directors, senior and middle managers, and executives who have an interest in, and an input to, the strategic direction of their organisation. They require the application of new methods and processes that involve the use of large-group participation in identifying strategic direction and ensuring rapid acceptance and implementation.

Large-group intervention technologies

A large-group intervention is a participative conference, event or meeting where a large number of participants, comprising a diverse cross-section of an organisation's stakeholders, come together to work on real organisational issues of strategic importance.

Large-group interventions enable hundreds, even thousands, of people to gather together for the purpose of planning strategic change and exploring its implications. Having the 'whole system' in the room creates a broader information base and improves cross-functional working.

In summary, the large-group intervention methods have some major advantages over conventional meetings and conferences:

- ability to accommodate very large numbers in a participative process, allowing everyone in the organisation and key external stakeholders (customers, suppliers, collaborators, partners, community) to be covered by one, or a small number of events
- short lead times and very fast results
- participation by stakeholder groups facilitates whole systems change
- maximum involvement, high motivation
- creative forces are unleashed
- events designed by a team that is a microcosm of the whole, so change begins even before the event
- high degree of self-management
- identification of common ground and alignment with a shared vision
- participants take ownership of their problems and find their own ways forward
- commitment to implementation
- database of strategic information is built
- power issues are reduced to a minimum
- event sends a strong message to the organisation that things are really changing.

Key questions answered...

So the questions set out earlier can be answered by large-group interventions.

How do organisations create organisation change where people experience the positive Ds?

Appreciative Inquiry Summits focus on what works in organisations rather than on problems, and therefore create much more positive and energising outcomes.

How can you ensure meaningful strategy discussion and decision making with diverse interests?

Future Search Conferences are designed to bring groups of stakeholders together to identify common ground on which to build a joint vision. Putting the whole system in

the room allows for real-time collaboration and resolution on the issues that divide and unite.

How can we involve employees and customers in the creation of strategies?

Open Space Technology allows for large numbers of people to participate in a co-creation environment. Appreciative Inquiry Summits can similarly cope with large numbers of people in simultaneous dialogue that creates futures based on what works.

How do you increase the speed of strategic decision making? and How do you increase the acceptability and speed of implementation of strategy?

Most large-group events last for a maximum of 2–3 days, and as the people who will implement the strategy are present, there is no delay between the decision and the implementation. Indeed, as the decisions are made by the community they are more acceptable – 'even if my idea did not win through, I was part of the decision-making process.'

Conclusion

For Roger Harrison, long-time consultant and writer on business and organisation development, encountering these new technologies was a blinding flash of the obvious – "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 co-operate 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." Many consultants and organisations have come to the same conclusion as Roger. These technologies help us to build the fast cycle strategic change that is needed today.

Further reading

Senge, Peter (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*, Bantam Doubleday Dell.
Harrison, Roger (1995) *Consultants Journey*, McGraw-Hill.
Bunker, Barbara Benedict and Billie T. Alban (1997) *Large Group Interventions: Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change*, Jossey-Bass.

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