

# Rapid and inclusive strategy development

by Geof Cox

At a private meeting recently, some UK CEOs and government advisers made the following comments:

*"We don't know what we are doing"*

*"We are just making it up as we go along"*

*"I am scared stiff, but I can't admit that to anyone"*

*"We have never experienced anything like this before"*

In the current times of uncertain economics, organisations are forced into making changes. And, despite Edmund Burke's advice "You can never plan the future by the past", many CEOs try to do just that as they seek to find some response in the short time available for their decision. Some opt for simple radical surgery and cut out unnecessary or redundant resources. Others try a more complex solution and restructure their operations. Either approach is fraught with difficulties. Radical surgery leaves people feeling 'survivor sickness' and exhibiting lower productivity. More complex change takes too long for people to understand and adapt to the new realities and relationships due to a disconnect between leaders and employees in the organisation – as Professor John Kotter of Harvard pointed out in his research on why transformation efforts fail<sup>1</sup>.

The pressure is on organisation leaders to produce strategies that are more innovative, adaptive and produce them fast. Traditional, linear, top-down strategic planning processes do not deliver. Devising a strategy in a group cut off from the rest of the organisation lacks the real-time strategic information on what is actually happening, and the involvement of key stakeholders. Then, however good the strategy, communicating to the rest of the organisation through a 'cascade' method, is too slow; allows the message to be diluted and distorted; results in low levels of commitment; and provides no feedback loop for organisational learning. We need a different approach: an approach that allows for stakeholder engagement, flexibility, speed of decision making, creative thinking, shared information, and rapid deployment.

## Key questions

Strategies that will yield success are those that motivate and stimulate employees. We know that the knowledge of what to do is not confined to the executive suite. More often than not, the solutions are already known, but lack the commitment to be implemented. The front line employees have access to real time information on what is happening, but communication mechanisms do not allow the transfer of this knowledge to decision makers. ***How can you involve employees in the creation of strategy?***

Experience also tells us that pursuing an inclusive agenda that focuses on the needs of all stakeholders is one that has a greater chance of success. Looking at the whole system allows for insight and innovation, and a greater opportunity for identifying an effective way forward. Yet, it is often difficult to engage stakeholders who may be in competition or conflict with each other. ***How do you create real dialogue with the stakeholders and reconcile differences that will generate that inclusive, successful strategy?***

In times of difficulty we often forget that a lot of what we do actually does work. There is a danger of throwing the good out with the bad, especially when using radical, surgical change approaches. Again, research identifies that working with strengths and enhancing what works has greater success than trying to fix weaknesses and what doesn't work<sup>ii</sup>. ***How can you identify the root of success rather than the root causes of failure?***

We also know that engagement in the decision making process increases acceptance and commitment to the outcome<sup>iii</sup>. Times of change also foster fear and negative emotions that block people from fully engaging. ***How do you translate negative fear and apprehension into positive energy working to succeed through the troubled times?***

And there is the also the problem of time and money – or lack of it! Many re-organisation and change processes are known to take months, if not years of concentrated effort, and a lot of resources. Yet these are two elements that are in short supply when change is reactive to severe market pressure. ***So, how do you manage to engage people, develop strategies and get commitment to implementation in a fast and cost effective manner?***

### **A new approach**

The answers to these questions lie in engaging in whole system participation events. These are conferences, events or meetings 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. They 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.

The methods - Appreciative Inquiry Summits, Future Search Conferences, Real Time Strategic Change, Open Space Conferences, World Café, etc - utilise systems thinking and allow everyone associated with the problem or organisation to be involved, employees and stakeholders alike. Simultaneous involvement of hundreds of people from all levels allows for exchange of ideas, gathering of strategic information, decision making and planning in a single event – or linked series – of events typically lasting no more than 2-3 days. Truly rapid and inclusive strategy development.

By focusing on positive outcomes and best practice, participants in these events experience enjoyable ways of working that release creativity and breakthrough results. They replace the passive 'tell and sell' model with high levels of participation and co-creating, so generating commitment. There is no need to get 'buy in', the participants are the joint architects of the strategy, so they are highly committed and motivated to it. Implementation starts immediately. Rapid strategy deployment as well!

For example, in one company, Appreciative Inquiry was used to conduct a analysis of the total system which was completed in less than two weeks by the employees themselves. In another, a summit meeting brought together all 750 employees, the company's leadership, and 100 customers to create a new business model – a year on, profits were up over 200 percent and absenteeism down 300 percent.

In another application, IKEA simultaneously doubled sales, improved quality and cut the price 30% without cutting profit of it Ektorp range whilst making sofa shopping easier for customers, and cutting delivery times – all in a concentrated three day event involving 52

stakeholders including suppliers, executives and workers from Sweden, Canada, the U.S. and other countries, along with several customers.

These events utilise internal experience and expertise with consultants providing the expert design and facilitation of the events themselves. Thus the consultancy cost is vastly less than some processes where the consultants become integrated in the organisation to advise expert solutions. The outcomes are achieved more quickly than traditional approaches – and are more acceptable to the workforce. Fast – and cost effective – solutions.

### **Key questions answered...**

So the questions set out earlier can be answered by these rapid and inclusive strategy development and deployment processes.

#### *How do you involve employees in the creation of strategy?*

Many methods allow for large numbers of people to participate in a co-creation environment. If it is not possible to gather everyone at the same time in the same place, then collecting strategic information from the wide organisation which is then synergised in a representative decision making summit is a proven alternative.

#### *How do you create real dialogue with the stakeholders and reconcile differences that will generate that inclusive, successful strategy?*

Future Search Conferences are specifically designed 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.

#### *How can you identify the root of success rather than the root causes of failure?*

This is where Appreciative Inquiry and other strength based approaches score. Open Space Technology allows for large numbers of people to participate in co-creation. Appreciative Inquiry Summits can similarly cope with large numbers of people in simultaneous dialogue that creates futures based on what works.

#### *How do you translate negative fear and apprehension into positive energy working to succeed through the troubled times?*

Engagement allows people to openly address the issues that concern them and work together to produce strategies that they believe in. And by focusing on what works rather than problems, they create much more positive and energising outcomes.

#### *How do you manage to engage people, develop strategies and get commitment to implementation in a fast and cost effective manner?*

Most 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 and implementable. Co-creation delivers the highest level of commitment

### **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 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."<sup>iv</sup>

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.

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<sup>i</sup> Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail" by John Kotter. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Magruder Watkins, Jane and Mohr, Bernard J (2001) *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer

<sup>iii</sup> Senge, Peter et al (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Nicholas Brealey

<sup>iv</sup> Harrison, Roger (1995) *Consultants Journey*, McGraw Hill