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Organization Development Primer: A Review of Large Group Interventions

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ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT PRIMER: A REVIEW OF LARGE GROUP INTERVENTIONS

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Large group interventions are designed to help people collaborate effectively by thinking and acting from a whole-systems perspective. "Whole systems" refers to the way an organization operates internally through its processes and externally through its relations to customers and other stakeholders. There are a number of core values underpinning all whole-systems change methodologies.

- Rather than segmenting the organization as disconnected parts, large scale change methods view the organization as a series of inter-connected parts, with each part a manifestation of the whole. Participants seek to understand and manage the dynamic tension associated with such complexity.
- Large group techniques bring together stakeholders from all parts of an organization to dialogue and achieve a mutual understanding of their interdependence.
- Organizations do not exist but organizing processes and procedures do. By viewing organizations not as static entities but as a series of ongoing processes and activities, whole-scale methods enable the development of evolving organizing processes.
- Large-scale methodologies assume that an organization's reality is a function of the dominant assumptions or mental models of its members. Accordingly, organizations evolve as they articulate, test, and refine the mental models of their members.
- Individuals within organizations have the capacity to self organize and redefine their reality. Appreciating that it is unsettling work for members to examine and adjust their mental models, large-scale techniques employ future visioning as a way of helping individuals explore competing mental models.

- Large-scale methods assume that people are “good” and driven by common needs that define our humaneness such as love, sense of belonging, justice, harmony, respect, dignity. These core values form the basis for creating common ground.

While the six methods reviewed here vary, they all bring together a cross-section of relevant stakeholders, often in a two- to three-day summit-style meeting. Together stakeholders address actual business issues by collecting and analyzing data, making decisions, and planning actions. In most organizations, such activities are usually reserved for the management elite.

FUTURE SEARCH

Developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, a future search session convenes a representative group of stakeholders (such as customers, suppliers, managers, subject matter experts) over three days to focus on a common organizational challenge. Based on Kurt Lewin’s concept of action research, participants collect and analyze data from the system’s past and present to define and plan for a preferable future. A future search session is facilitated by a leader who guides the group through a structured process so that participants have meaningful discussions and take ownership of the results.

The future search methodology is designed to develop an egalitarian organization in which the desires and aims of the collective are discovered and realized. While the external environment is addressed, the assumption is that it can be shaped in accordance with the stakeholders’ collective ideals. This common vision for the future is assumed to act as a “pulling force” that energizes and enables stakeholders to act independently yet cooperatively to achieve the shared vision. Future search holds that energized and deeply committed stakeholders, and not formalized action plans and authority matrices, carry the essential activities forward. As a result, specific follow-up activities are not organized unless stakeholders opt to plan for them.

SEARCH CONFERENCES/PARTICIPATIVE DESIGN

Fred and Merrelyn Emery's Search Conference methodology assumes that the organization must adapt to its ever evolving and increasingly unpredictable environment, and that the best way to do so is through a process of wide involvement. Accordingly, the Search Conference process brings groups together of stakeholders to define and analyze their environment, identify a common preferred future five to 10 years out, develop goals, and plan actions. Stakeholders are encouraged to follow the process in a series of participative design workshops. The workshops teach them how to design a democratically oriented organization in which people have: meaningful work and a sense of purpose; opportunity to make job related decisions and to develop and learn; a good mix of tasks requiring skill variety; and a desirable career path enabling personal growth and development.

While the Search Conference methodology is committed to involving the entire system, it involves a representative sample of stakeholders (to a maximum of 32) to permit the optimal level of dialogue. When it is determined that more than 32 people must be involved, simultaneous workshops are held and the results are integrated.

OPEN SPACE

Open Space, developed by Harrison Owen, brings together a group of people to share ideas and ideals and engage with other interested colleagues in conversation. Based on Karl Weick's concept of retrospective sense making, the process enables people to talk on various topics in a loosely structured environment. The assumption is that change occurs as human energy is surfaced and channeled productively.

An Open Space meeting is facilitated by a process leader who creates a forum for the "energy" that is inherent in the group to emerge. Accordingly, the facilitator carefully defines the process rules, principles, and boundaries within which

conversations can take place. Given the overall topic for the Open Search session, participants are invited to share potential ideas and agenda items and to become discussion leaders for others who want to join them. Interested parties then meet in a predefined location and together have a discussion or plan actions.

While a primary value underpinning the Open Space methodology is organizational harmony, a core assumption is that organizational members act responsibly when they are given the opportunity to surface, discuss, and solve real-world challenges.

LARGE-SCALE INTERACTIVE PROCESSES

The Large-Scale Interactive Process, attributed to both Dannemiller Tyson Associates and Robert Jacobs, seeks to convene the whole system of stakeholders (and not a representative sample) in summit-style conferences for the purpose of joint diagnosis, vision development, and joint action planning. The assumption is that data filtered through others are less powerful than the unfiltered insights of all stakeholders.

Based on the work of Ronald Lippit and Richard Beckhard, the underlying theory suggests that change planning is guided by a simple yet powerful formula: $D \times V \times F = R$. To bring about change the organizational system must first have D, or dissatisfaction with the status quo. People must understand why change is necessary. Next, the system needs to develop V, or a common vision of the preferred future. Finally the system needs to develop F, or first steps to create action towards the vision. If any of the three inputs (D x V x F) are lacking, the product will be zero and resistance will not be overcome and change will not occur.

Guided by this formula, change agents design exercises and conversations that enable stakeholders to identify factors driving dissatisfaction with the status quo. Activities are then organized to either share or create a vision and plan system-wide actions.

Honouring the perspective of diverse groups of stakeholders is a core value, and the assumption is that learning and openings for change occur as stakeholders see the change challenge from a whole-systems perspective. Large-scale activities are not based on events but rather occur in a series of summits that evolve over time.

SIMU-REAL

Developed by Donald Klein, Simu-Real brings together groups of up to 50 people for a one-day session. Participants engage in simulated activities and conversations that tap into formal and informal relationships within an organization. The underlying assumption is that the informal culture drives much activity within any organizational setting and that by participating in the simulation and reflecting on the experiences, members become aware of informal cultural elements that they can adjust and change. Through simulation, participants also have an opportunity to experiment with future scenarios in an attempt to test out ideas, assumptions, and alternative ways of organizing. A core value of Simu-Real is organizational harmony, achieved via heightened system awareness and enlightened action planning.

FAST CYCLE FULL PARTICIPATION AND THE CONFERENCE MODEL

Both Fast Cycle Full Participation (developed by Pasmore and Associates) and the Conference Model (developed by the Axelrod Group) are aimed at creating change through the optimal design of an organization's social and technical systems. Both are focused on creating organizational designs through whole-systems methods; Fast Cycle employs Search Conference methodology and the Conference Model employs future search. Each method enables key stakeholders to assess events, trends, and developments, identify customer needs, analyze the social and technical environment, and create and plan for the ideal system.