Participation that Matters: Creating Shifts that Enable Individual and Organizational Change

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To lay the groundwork for true and effective participation among stakeholders, change agents must create an environment that enables high quality conversations and learning interactions and that engenders strong positive emotions.

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A few years ago, under the direction of a new facility manager, the Human Resources Director of a large Canadian oil refinery approached me to complete a whole-systems operational assessment. I advised an alternative approach, suggesting that I facilitate the work of a steering team that would guide this critical effort and design its own set of interventions. While the HR Director was intrigued by the approach, she declined, saying that she had "no time" as the new facility manager wanted the recommendations yesterday. I gave her the names of several consulting firms and the assessment was duly completed. Two years later she called me and reported that none of the consultant's recommendations had been implemented. I asked why, and her answer confirmed a deep truth about enabling change. In essence, she said that because senior managers and key staff were not involved, they did not support the recommendations. Sadly, they had a strategy with no people committed or energized to make it happen.

As this scenario shows, participation matters. At its core, facilitating organizational change is about energizing people to design and execute smart strategies. Whether the change calls for a radical productivity improvement, a breakthrough innovation, or the development of an exceptional customer service culture, the initiative will require people working collectively to invest their heads, hearts, and wills. To do this, change leaders must facilitate a different way of seeing, thinking, and acting that can only be accessed when people are fully engaged in a situation and operating from a place of inspired experimentation.

Alas few organizations are skilled at engaging stakeholders in meaningful participation. More often than not, people are involved after decisions have been made and are then expected to adopt them, an approach Henry Mintzberg refers to as a "calculating" style of implementation. When leaders fully bake a change strategy and then serve it up for others to digest, an opportunity has been lost for the implementers

to personally connect with the intricacies of the challenge and the trade-offs inherent in solutions. With no context for understanding the decisions they are charged with implementing and no opportunity for voicing issues or working through the paradoxes that inevitably emerge, confusion and frustration can lead to paralysis and inaction.

By contrast, a "commitment" approach engages people in a learning journey so that they collectively shape the strategy along the way. Here, careful attention is given to engaging the stakeholders of the system in conversations and experiences to enable a deep appreciation of the challenges they collectively face and the opportunities for joint solutions. Proponents of stakeholder involvement report that the skilled use of participative technologies lead to better decision making and more committed stakeholders. Paul Nutt, for example, found that change strategies were judged to be of higher quality and were more likely to be implemented when change leaders meaningfully involved and educated stakeholders.

What does real co-creation look like and how is it facilitated? What conditions must be present for participative endeavors to lead to enhanced decision making and energized action taking? Below I explore links between stakeholder participation, commitment, and the quality of change strategies through three lenses: organizational learning, stakeholder conversations, and emotional engagement. The purpose of the multi-lens view is to explore, with fresh eyes, core elements that contribute to higher level participation.

ENABLE PEOPLE TO LEARN AND EXPERIMENT

While our organizational challenges call for collective learning and creativity, the collective situation that organizations face is often not apparent, as people see challenges from their own frame of reference. When people do not connect the dots between issues, events, and challenges, organizations remain fragmented and inefficient. Edgar Schein suggests that gaps between the operating norms, world views, and interests of various groups in organizations (mainly those who operate on the front line, those who engineer systems, and those who lead) create a cultural divide that prevents learning and whole-system adaptation. When organizations attempt to redesign or reinvent themselves, cultures collide and failure results. The antidote,

according to Schein, is to create mutual understanding so that joint opportunities can be identified and realized.

Accordingly, during change a resource that must be nurtured is the quality of learning interactions among stakeholders. The best way to do this, contends Marvin Weisbord, is to *"get the whole system in the room."* Viewing organizations as whole systems enables stakeholders to explore relationships among people, units, or departments, and the relationships between the organization and its external environment. A broader mutual understanding of their interdependence enables stakeholders to understand the impact of change in one area on the others.

People cannot learn if they are not fully engaged in the process of understanding the many dimensions of the challenge and testing the solutions. Social interaction among colleagues, each bringing a unique skill or perspective, broadens the database from which challenges are viewed. As people share and learn, a fuller picture starts to take shape for both "what is" and "what can be", thus dissolving boundaries. Reflecting on their success at Ford Motor Company, Dannemiller and Jacob claim that "a common data base was a critical ingredient to the success at Ford. Seeing the world through the eyes of each other enables large groups of people to find common ground. By building a common data base of dissatisfaction, vision, and first steps needed to bring about change, a paradigm shift occurred in which a critical mass of the system made a commitment to change. There exists a saying: you can influence as far as you can see. At Ford, the farther they could see, the more they chose to influence."

At its most basic level, participation enables people to see beyond their habitual patterns of thought and action and to diagnose their challenges collectively from a wider-angle view. As new learning is absorbed through dialogue and action, the players become rooted in a deep sense of knowing that provides a context for moving forward together.

CREATE SPACE FOR NEW AND MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION

If learning is a precursor to robust decision making and energized action taking, then conversation is a critical mechanism through which learning occurs. Daft and Weick described organizations as interpretive systems, and organizational reality as a function of the mental models of its members. From this perspective, organizations are *what we*

make of them or *what we make them to be* and conversation is the medium through which meaning is made.

The trick to managing change successfully, then, is to create space for new and meaningful conversations that shift peoples' thinking, feelings, and actions. How organizational leaders shape the collective conversations during change determines which challenges or opportunities get noticed, how they are understood, what solutions emerge, and which actions result. Appreciating that it is unsettling and anxiety provoking for members to examine and adjust their mental models, great care must be taken to create a psychologically safe and non-threatening way for members to explore competing assumptions and co-create a set of revised assumptions.

Ford and Ford identify four sets of conversations that they claim shape the field of attention during change: *initiative conversations* to create a heightened sense of awareness and readiness; *understanding conversations* to enable a multifaceted comprehension of the challenges and success factors for emerging opportunities; *performance conversations* to evoke action; and *closure conversations* to signal completion, focus peoples' attention on pressing challenges and concrete actions.

Similarly, Kathy Dannemiller and colleagues offer an alternative formula for engaging people in critical conversations during change. It is built on the notion that resistance is a normal and natural human response to change and that to move forward, people must have a deep appreciation for the *why, what, and how* of the change. They suggest that by working through a series of conversations, from *why* change to *what* and *how*, stakeholders have an opportunity to join around common challenges and shift attention and meaning-making from joint diagnosis to joint design and action.

Over time, change agents should facilitate conversations among stakeholders that shift attention and focus from defining the challenge and key success factors to generating opportunities and solutions, and finally to enabling aligned action and closure.

PIQUE EMOTIONS TO FUEL CHANGE

While we know that people and their emotions cannot be separated, organizations and the scholars who study them have not, until recently, been attuned to the important role emotions play in determining attention, focus, cognitive flexibility, and energy for

change. In fact many organizational leaders might well prefer that people leave their emotions at home as emotions, especially fear or anger, are viewed as getting in the way of work. The predominant view is that decision-making is primarily a rational and cognitive process with emotions a by-product. Conventional wisdom suggests that if we change how people think, emotions will follow.

Recent research in the cognitive and social sciences shows that the opposite may be true. A growing body of work suggests that emotions drive decision-making and energy for change and are a fundamental antecedent to organizational change. For example, the broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions serve to broaden one's perceptual capabilities as well as amplify one's thought–action patterns, leading to more flexible and integrative thinking. Conversely, negative emotions are thought to limit attention and cognitive flexibility.

Management scholars Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal describe organizations as playing fields of human emotions, with emotions providing the fuel for attention and action. They found that the nature of the emotions at play in organizations, either strong or weak and positive or negative, define the energy organizations have to create and enact change. Companies characterized by weak emotions (both positive and negative) exhibit relatively low levels of attention, emotion, and activity. In contrast, companies characterized by strong emotions experience higher levels of collective arousal and action taking.

As the authors contend, "One of the most striking features of high energy companies is their productive urgency. Being constantly in an alert mode allows them to process information quickly and mobilize their resources rapidly. High energy also pushes them into striving for goals that are somewhat larger-than-life; those that go beyond the routine, the obvious, the normal. Low energy companies look for standardization and institutionalization. They try to avoid surprises, exceptions and risks. High energy companies thrive on surprises, the excitement of the unknown and opportunities that exist at the edge of the possible." Interestingly, those companies operating in high-energy zones experienced shared emotions which enabled a strong alignment of perception, sense making, and action, providing support for the idea that emotions are contagious.

In studying the mysterious phenomenon that enables large groups of people to experience a sudden and shared shifts in attitude or behaviour, sociologists Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson, concluded that emotions are indeed contagious. They identified a number of mechanisms through which emotional contagion occurs, including mimicry and synchronization of expressions, vocal rhythms, and postures. Recent neuroscience studies have isolated brain cells called mirror neurons which, when activated, lead group members to experience similar physiological symptoms including posture, breathing rate, vocal rhythms, and inflections.

Bringing together the research, Tobey and Manning propose an emotion–driven model of change whereby emotional contagion drives change via physiological mimicry. They suggest that while incremental change is enabled through rational sense-making mechanisms, rapid and large-scale change occurs when common shared emotions fuel unconscious mechanisms that activate both attention and behavior. Once aroused, those with relevant skills and experiences are able to channel their knowledge into creative pursuits and goal-directed behaviour.

If emotional arousal and contagion provide the fuel for fast and focused change, then managing and mobilizing emotions becomes a critical competency of change agents. Techniques that bring stakeholders together and provide a space in which strong emotions can be activated and spread should enable rapid, widespread change. Mechanisms such as emotional appeals from leaders, exploration of the need for change, visioning and scenario planning exercises, presentations from customers or trends experts, musical interludes, and improvisation and humor are all mechanisms that can facilitate emotional arousal.

Important as well is to focus stakeholders on goals rather than problems, a technique that has been shown to enhance group vitality, creativity, and commitment. Leaders that shift the focus from problems to be solved to opportunities to be realized establish a zone of creative tension, built on strong positive emotions. Keeping people connected and providing opportunities for reflection and working through the many paradoxes associated with frame-breaking change can be a useful method of maintaining positive emotions. Luscher and Lewis found that periodic sparring sessions in which stakeholders were able to share frustrations, examine assumptions and frame challenges more proactively, enabled stakeholders to develop a sense of workable certainty and stay focused on achieving outcomes.

Important to note is that emotions cannot and should not be manufactured. If positive emotions are generated during large group meetings and not subsequently supported through the word and deed of those leading the change, emotions can quickly turn to cynicism and frustration. Rather than manufacturing emotions, the change agent's role is to create a space for honest appraisals and genuine participation. Emotions surface naturally as people connect to the challenge and to each other, and the more people feel a sense of obligation to solve the challenge and to work with each other, the stronger their emotions will be.

SUMMARY

Critics of participation suggest that, despite promising claims, the track record of participative leadership, decision making, and goal setting is at best mixed. But as Pasmore and Fagans suggest, it is not participation per se but the ineffective and superficial manner in which change leaders and organization development practitioners have attempted to engage employees that accounts for the mixed results. While engagement may be a popular buzzword, many efforts are half-hearted attempts to engage for the sake of engaging. In one recent example that I have noted, a large government agency embarked on a strategic renewal exercise in which data collection sessions were facilitated with several large groups of employees before any thought had been given to the purpose of the participative efforts or the desired outcomes. In essence, data were collected unthinkingly by well intended yet overly zealous organization development practitioners, who assumed that engagement was the objective not a critical medium through which change occurs. As a result, employees did not have conversations that mattered and their involvement did not produce learning or energized action. As Pasmore and Fagans claim, "Participation cannot be expected to produce positive results when the issues addressed are irrelevant to task performance, when people don't understand the organizational context, and when the effectiveness of performance is beyond the control of the employee."

In any participation strategy, the aims of change leaders must be true; participation should only be used when change leaders are truly interested in learning from and with the stakeholders of the system. Commenting on the value created

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through involving stakeholders in large scale change, Dannemiller and Jacobs say participation is simply a revolution in common sense: "Bring together all the interested and affected parties to a change, provide them with the right information and an opportunity to work together interactively – be they five or 500 – and they will create their future. Most important, they will then be empowered to do the right things to make that future a reality. Nothing more than basic common sense."

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