



## **TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONS**

Karin Osler reports:

### ***How interactive strategising takes organizations ahead...***

Many organizations deal with conflict in an ad hoc manner. They change the organizational structure or incentive schemes, introduce training or value-sharing workshops, provide third-party interventions, or improve communication channels. All of these can contribute to healthier organizational environments.

Yet organizational conflict is not resolved by developing once-off solutions. Rather, it can be managed and prevented by designing long-term strategic processes that empower and involve individuals, thereby aiding the management of conflict in a creative, ongoing way.

When talking about strategic management, we do not mean the old-style of planning, where the top people in the organization take themselves to an exclusive blueprint and devise a blueprint for the organization's future, to be kept under lock and key. In this style of planning, the people at the top presume that they know better than anyone else, and therefore need no wider participation in the process. Rather, by planning we mean introducing a new style of strategic management where everyone is involved in the planning process. Where meetings allow all levels of the organization to participate in deciding where the organization is now, and in designing paths for the future. Where success is not gauged from the quality of the eventual planning document, but rather by the levels of participation and learning involved in the process. Where employees feel they are actively involved in the running of the organization, and where they feel empowered make decisions that affect them, rather than merely react from directives coming down.

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This type of interactive planning process is being introduced in many South African organizations. People are realizing that traditional quick-fix solutions, perhaps effective in the past, do not work in today's environment; that trends towards the empowerment and democratization of society have to be reflected in our organisations; and that no individual or group of people has the right or capacity to decide on the future of others. Within this climate, interactive and participative processes offer a fundamental way of transforming organisations, a high leverage way that will yield positive and exciting results.

There is not one way that will work for all organisations. However, there are certain guidelines to assist in planning the process: -

- Involve all the stakeholders. At each stage of the process one has to ask who are the important stakeholders and how can they contribute to the planning process. For example, a proper planning process for a community-based education system should involve all stakeholders such as teachers, parents, pupils, and community leaders. Each of these parties offers a valuable perspective, without which the planning process would be incomplete. If all the stakeholders cannot be involved, then at least their input should be obtained. It is this broad base of participation that gives legitimacy to the process, and helps ensure that the plan will be implemented.
- Focus on understanding the current situation. This could include an analysis of external environmental trends in the global, national or community environments, as well as an analysis of the internal problems of the organisation. For example, do employees believe in what the organisation is trying to achieve? How satisfied are they with current management practices? In this stage it is not important to gain absolute consensus, but rather to acknowledge that everyone's perspective on the problem is legitimate and important. The picture that emerges is often not favourable, making people realise they must do things differently in the future, and providing energy for change.

- Focus on designing the ideal future. Once there is a shared understanding of the current situation, there needs to develop a shared vision of a desirable future for the organisation. Whereas the analysis of the current situation provides 'push factors.' The more people focus on ideals, and on the future, the more agreement there is likely to be between conflicting parties. This focus takes the problem out of the present situation, where one focuses on facts, limitations and imperfections, and focuses on the ideal. This is the realm of possibilities, of creative imagination and input as to how individuals can influence and shape desirable outcomes.

There are many different ways of looking at the ideal future – and each organisation needs to define its particular approach. Some guidelines are:

- Look at the organisation's mission. What does it want to achieve for its wider stakeholders; what does it want to be or do for its customer, its employees and the wider community?
- Assess the organisation's strategy in light of the declared mission. For example, an organisation with a mission of being "supportive in the wider community" could strategise to provide literacy programmes, housing subsidies and crèches.
- Define the core values that the organisation wants to live by. How can these values guide behaviour, or help people decide what to do daily? The values agreed upon will of course vary from organisation to organisation. Values give purpose to an organisation, and the collective process of defining them gives people an opportunity to begin to really know and understand each other. An example of core values could be the value of self-improvement, where everyone has the right and duty to make him or herself better.
- Concentrate on solutions as well as problems. Much discussion in organisations, and indeed in society at large, is focused on problems. This often ends up in a negative spiral where people begin to believe that they cannot have any influence on the situation. When embarking on a strategic management process one has to acknowledge the extent of the problem, and then concentrate on positive and constructive solutions to solve or eliminate it. This focus requires a completely different thinking process and creates positive energy.

- Concentrate on symbols. People relate vigorously to symbols and symbolic acts. Think of the symbols of great sporting teams and how important they are to team followers, who rally behind a flag or team emblem. Think also of the symbolic acts of some of the great figures in history, such as Christ's multiplying of the loaves and fishes or Ghandi's burning the Indian people's passes. Invariably these symbols and symbolic acts serve to emphasise and empower the shared values and those who embody them.

Built into the strategising process must be models for rejuvenating the process. Change in organisations is neither simple nor speedy. It requires dedication, energy, vision, persistence and courage. Those who have experienced change in large organisations will attest to the fact that real change can take anything from 4-15 years to become truly effective. Hence the necessity of involving as many people in that organisational change, as deeply as possible. Effective change needs many torchbearers, and at all levels of the organisation. The real trick is to gain sufficient consensus and enough excitement about a different and better organisational future so that people are prepared to push the steamroller until it starts to roll down the slope of its own accord. Then all that is needed is very good navigation and some fine-tuning.