WHAT IS TO BE DONE: LEARNING DEMOCRACY WHILE IMPROVING ORGANIZATIONS

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Two-day planning exercises are one way to meet the demand for management training in the postcommunist countries. These exercises serve as problem-solving meetings, help the people who participate to become more accustomed to open discussions, and provide an opportunity for academics and people from related organizations to learn about the problems of an organization and to cooperate in finding solutions. Participatory planning exercises require no prior technical training. Because the method is easy to learn, exercises of this kind can spread rapidly through a society, providing many people with a new kind of experience in organizational problem solving. Because the method is learned by applying it in practice, managers are not removed from their responsibilities as managers. The method is particularly effective at teaching the kinds of skills most needed in countries making the transition to democracy and market economics—individual initiative and bottom-up decision making.

Recent political changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have led to a surge in demand for management training. This article responds to that demand by calling attention to a highly effective method for holding a two-day planning exercise with the members of an organization. The method is easy to learn and to use. It requires no technical training and uses only equipment (e.g., cards, felt pens, and

masking tape) that is inexpensive and widely available. In many organizations the use of this method has been associated with a profound change in the beliefs of people in the organization from resignation and hopelessness to optimism and renewed confidence.

These planning exercises are structured conversations and can be thought of as a decision technology in much the same sense that computer simulation is a decision technology (Umpleby, 1986). The purpose is to make explicit the views of the people in the organization, to develop a shared perception of the challenges facing the organization, and to design actions to deal with those challenges successfully. The effect of such an exercise is to coordinate and energize the efforts of the members of the organization.

In terms of the taxonomy of theories presented at the 1990 European Meeting on Cybernetics and Systems Research, this paper offers not a theory of how societies operate or a theory of how societies change but rather a method for how to change an organization (Umpleby, 1991).

ELEMENTS OF A PLANNING EXERCISE

There are many ways of holding a planning exercise. One method, known as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), has participants look first at the present and then at the future. The method presented in this paper, known as LENS (leadership effectiveness and new strategies), was developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs (Spencer, 1989; Troxel, 1993). For an event taking place in four time periods (e.g., two mornings and two afternoons) the participants discuss four topics:

1. The *vision* represents what the members of the organization would like the organization to be. When asked what their vision for the organization is, many people have to think for a few moments before they answer. Sometimes people repeat what the leaders of the organization say its goals are rather than saying what they would like its goals to be. A sign that this has happened is a lack of coherence between the vision and the subsequent discussion.
2. Once the vision has been defined, the group is asked to identify the *obstacles* to achieving the vision or the *contradictions* present in the

current situation. In this part of the planning exercise it is common for people to blame individuals and organizations outside the group. The purpose of the conversation at this point is to bring to the surface any issues of distrust within the group and to show how it is possible for the group to take actions to regain control of its destiny.
3. The third step in the planning process is to devise *strategies* for removing the obstacles to achieving the vision. Strategies usually take the form of programs to be carried out by teams within the organization.
4. Once the needed strategies have been agreed upon, the group decides what *actions* will need to be taken to implement the strategies. Responsibility is assigned. The group decides who will do what, when, and at what cost.

During the evening separating the two days, a small group writes the story of the organization. If the story that people have been telling about the organization is depressing or defeatist, the story is rewritten to emphasize the decisive, positive steps that have been taken. Once revised into a positive version, the story should be repeated on many occasions. The story contains a history of the organization, but it also defines the organization's mission. The story relates the historical context, tells what innovative steps have been taken recently, and praises the courage, hard work and dedication of the people involved. Often there is a claim that the innovative nature of the organization serves as an example to others both locally and internationally.

HOW THE METHOD WORKS

The planning exercise is conducted partly in one large group and partly in several small groups. The small groups report their results to the larger group. Since many ideas will come up in more than one group, people learn that others have similar concerns. Ideally, the ideas from the small groups are written on note cards and are put on a wall that everyone in the large group faces. This seating arrangement puts everyone "on the same side," working together to define and to solve a set of problems. Ideas can be explained or clarified but not eliminated. All ideas are accepted. The ideas are then grouped according to similarity. The frequency with which an idea appears is an indication of

how widespread is the concern about it. The ideas of every participant are included in the final plan.

These planning exercises are governed by several principles.

1. Social systems are composed of thinking participants. Their cooperation requires that the members of an organization participate in the planning for the organization. Participation brings in new ideas, contributes to coordination within the organization, and builds commitment on the part of those who will implement the plans.
2. A strategic planning exercise should be conducted at regular intervals, approximately each year. Improving processes and procedures should occur continuously through quality improvement teams.
3. Key people from outside the organization should be invited to take part in the planning process. Outsiders can contribute resources, technical skills, and fresh perspectives. When the members of the organization are ready to implement their strategies, those who are in a position to lend support will understand what is being done and why because they were present when the plans were drawn up.
4. When conflicts or disagreements arise, they should be resolved by conducting an experiment. Factual disagreements can be regarded as conflicting hypotheses and resolved by collecting data. Disagreements over preferred procedures can be tested on a small scale to determine which produces the best results.

HOW THE METHOD IS IMPROVED

This method has been used in corporations, government agencies, and community organizations in countries around the world for a decade and a half. But improvements are always possible, particularly when a method is used in a different kind of situation, such as in societies making the transition to democracy and market economies. To improve the method a core group of people using it should come together each year to share their experiences and to design modifications. The intention is to repeat experiments that were successful and to discard those that were not. The group then agrees upon a new set of experiments and tests them in practice during the following year. Over time the group creates a set of methods that they feel work well in their environment.

ADVANTAGES OF THE METHOD

This method requires no specialized technical knowledge. Individuals learn the method by participating in several planning exercises, each time assuming additional leadership responsibilities. Because training occurs "on the job," managers are not removed from their responsibilities as managers while they acquire this new skill.

By giving all participants an opportunity to raise issues of concern to them and to suggest remedies, the method maximizes the productive use of available talent.

Because the time required to learn the method is not long and because no technical knowledge is required, the method can spread quickly within an organization and to other organizations. At the present time in the postcommunist countries there is a need for a very large number of people to experience a different type of decision-making procedure in organizations. Because experience in conducting planning exercises can be learned quickly, the method can spread rapidly.

The method is particularly effective at teaching the kinds of skills most needed in countries making the transition to democracy and market economies—individual initiative and bottom-up decision making.

FOLLOWING THE PLANNING EXERCISE

After the planning exercise has been concluded, the leaders of the organization may desire an ongoing consulting relationship with those who led the planning exercise or with some academics or consultants who were invited to take part because of their technical expertise. A design for a more detailed, more comprehensive, and more time-consuming planning process has been described by Russell Ackoff and his colleagues (Ackoff, 1983; Ackoff et al., 1984). An approach that emphasizes the structure of an organization and its interactions with its environment has been developed by Stafford Beer (Beer, 1985). Lapin and Sazonov in Russia have created a five-day planning method called "innovation games" that is based on the work of the Tavistock Institute (Lapin & Sazonov, 1991).

A HISTORICAL NOTE

In 1905, following an unsuccessful revolution against the Czar, Lenin wrote one of his most famous works, "What is to be done?" (Lenin,

1966). (Nikolai G. Chernyshevski used the same title around 1850 for a fictional novel about a socialist utopia.) In his long article Lenin defined the principles of Bolshevik organization. It was an authoritarian organization of dedicated professional revolutionaries, individually recruited from among workers and intellectuals. He believed that revolution must be carefully and systematically planned and carried through. He insisted that the revolutionaries go among the people as theorists, as propagandists, as agitators, and as organizers.

This article also proposes a movement of intellectuals and employees of organizations, but a movement dedicated to steady improvement of organizations through uncoerced participation of their members and by using methods developed in recent decades in the fields of cybernetics, systems theory, management science, and social research.

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DISCUSSION OF UMPLEBY'S PRESENTATION

Mulej: How would you compare your proposal to total quality management?

Umpleby: This method is very similar to "affinity diagrams," which are part of total quality management (TQM). However, TQM focuses on improving processes, as opposed to the strategic reconsideration of the organization as a whole. The way that LENS has been used is closer to strategic planning. TQM is a larger collection of methods. The point I want to make is that LENS provides good practice for democracy. In a LENS exercise people learn to express themselves and to listen to others. The participants make suggestions, both to define problems and to propose solutions. And managers learn that this process works to their advantage.

In 1990 I conducted a LENS exercise with a firm in the former Yugoslavia. Over lunch the chief executive said that he liked the process because he felt it was leading people to take responsibility for implementing their suggestions. He said that he felt that he would be carrying less responsibility and would have more time for strategic thinking. The process allowed him to know what his employees were thinking and why and what they were planning to do. Also, since he was present, they knew that he knew and did not object. He felt that he would have to spend less time on detailed supervision.

The result of a LENS exercise is a shared conception of what is happening and why. People can then operate more autonomously, while knowing that they are all moving in the same direction. Of course, periodically the group comes back together and repeats the planning exercise.

Mesjasz: What advantages does LENS have to methods such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) or OD (organizational development)? Could you just enumerate?

Umpleby: I have used both SWOT and LENS, and I prefer LENS. LENS begins by defining the operating vision or mission of the group or organization. SWOT begins by defining the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. But perceptions of strengths and weaknesses will differ, if conceptions of mission differ. Obtaining agreement first on the organization's mission can prevent disagreements on what is a strength and what is a weakness. For example, if a group of professors believe

that the purpose of a university is to provide education, then a research program is optional, not required. However, if they state their mission as "education, research, and public service," then a research program is a fundamental part of the mission.

Organizational development is a large field based primarily on a psychoanalytic foundation. People with a background in organizational development tend to emphasize the irrational aspects of human behavior. They have a penchant for uncovering hidden, psychological motives. The stated objectives of an organization are of little interest to them. When listening to a group conversation, they listen for psychological undercurrents. LENS, in contrast, assumes that an open conversation can yield useful results. The process—the sequence of topics to be discussed—is defined in advance. The content—the plans that are made—is the result that is desired.

A group can begin with any method they feel comfortable with, LENS or some other method, then adapt the method to the local situation. By creating their own process, people come to feel that the process is theirs. They know how and why it works because they have created it themselves. They should continue to examine it and modify it over time.

Koizumi: This type of method may work for an organization or a small community. But what we are facing is changes in a large society, and you may encounter the problem of different organizations having different interests. Bureaucracy may have some agenda, and farmers may have another agenda. You have to go to the next step of coordinating among those different agendas.

Umpleby: Yes, this method will not solve all problems. I suggest it as a way of dealing with the social and cultural problem of preparing people to participate in democratic government. Practicing the method has the further advantage of improving the economy.

But, also, the method can be used at any level—in corporations, in communities, or in government. It could be used among the cabinet officers of a government. However, this method for holding a planning meeting is certainly not a substitute for a democratic form of government with a balance of power among the various branches of government

Campbell: Could you use the LENS method for large-scale social experiments? Is its use limited to specific kinds of institutions such as corporations?

Umpleby: The method can be used with any group of people who live or work together. It could be used to design a large-scale social experiment. But the method is not sufficient by itself. It is just a way of beginning a process of working together. Other methods, such as TQM, are required.

Actually, Nikolai Lapin did something very similar several years ago. He and his colleagues developed a method they called "innovation games," and they used it with ministries in the former Soviet Union, I would be quite interested to hear him describe his experiences with that method.

Lapin: I think that this method is very interesting. It creates the possibility to adapt to concrete situations. But the method which I and my colleagues developed is more complicated. The main principle in my method is to use a conflict situation among the participants. The conflict is needed to explain that attitudes can act as boundaries or obstacles to new ideas and prevent people from moving to a new approach. If people can move beyond a conflict situation, they have new creative possibilities.

For the use of my method, two days is not enough. Sometimes at the end of the second day or the third day there is a change to new relationships among the people involved. And these relationships become more effective on the fourth and fifth days. Our seminar on innovation needs five or six days in a special residential conference center. We use the method of the Tavistock Institute.

Umpleby: Your comments remind me of something a Chinese graduate student once told me. He said that, to a person from China, Americans seem politically naive. In China, after thousands of years of history, people have become extremely sophisticated at political maneuvering. They routinely use complicated political and institutional maneuvers to achieve their aims and to obstruct the aims of opponents. By comparison, the American approach is simple and direct. He said that he could not imagine that the Chinese would take seriously anyone who proposed something as simple, and trusting, as LENS. The LENS method probably reflects the American cultural experience.

In defense of LENS I would make two points. First, the method has been used successfully in countries around the world, but it was developed and tested outside the former communist bloc. It is not the only approach possible, but it is, in my experience, a good place to begin. Second, Russell Ackoff points out that there are two ways to deal with

problems; one can either solve them or dissolve them. Some approaches are designed to confront problems and devise solutions. Other approaches, such as LENS, provide a different way for people to work together. The result is that old conflicts are redefined, usually in general language rather than specific language, and new kinds of solutions are proposed. Ideally, the group is able to move forward and old conflicts are eventually forgotten.