

## Strategic Change as A Journey

We've seen the scenario before. It's the kick-off planning meeting for your high-profile strategic change project. The Chief Executive has been wheeled in to give the call to arms. The Sponsor has reiterated how important it is and how the future of the company depends everyone's efforts. The door closes. The strategy leader and the team rolls up its sleeves to begin the work. And then the questions start ...

I've frequently been asked to facilitate strategy or change planning sessions that follow this familiar pattern. And while I felt that I and the sponsor had a good grasp about why the project was being undertaken, it often became clear that the members of the strategy group were not so united. Doubts about "what this exercise is really about" often came quickly to the surface. Some wondered if the Board was unhappy about overall performance. Others were convinced that HR was really driving the agenda because of perceived issues with recruitment.

On another occasion, the issues were more about where the emphasis of change should lie. Was it important that the company change its internal culture? Should the emphasis be on building a new strategic competence? Or were these sessions really concerned about enhancing the customer experience?

Comments and concerns such as these should not be dismissed lightly. They reflect something that is very relevant to the task in hand - namely, the direction that the company should take. At the same time, the last thing any strategy or change facilitator wants is to open a Pandora's box of endless debate. Strategy or change planning isn't an intellectual exercise. It's done for very real and commercial purposes: the company has to change or else it's going to fall behind.

So how can these concerns be dealt with, or, even better, used to the advantage of the sponsor or facilitator?

The key thing to remember is engagement. When people voice concerns, the one positive thing that can be taken from the situation is that they are engaging in the process. They are not just sitting back and letting someone else take decisions while in private deciding that they will sabotage it later. The facilitator or sponsor therefore needs to use this engagement productively.

Facilitators and sponsors of strategy and change can utilize the concept of "strategic change as a journey" to harness the energy behind this latent debate. Over the course of the planning process, the planning group finishes each working session with an anonymous voting event to provide a group view about the real focus of the process. Each day, as voting continues, a fascinating group view usually emerges. This shows how prejudices held at the start of the process shift over time, as people become more confident that the planning process is addressing the real needs of the enterprise. Properly organized, this voting process can also be great fun at the end of a hard day's planning.

Participants start to see strategy or change planning as an exploration. Individual members of the team can privately compare their own perspectives of this journey with that of the group as a whole. In the time between working sessions, members reflect on these comparisons and can move into the following workshops with altered perceptions and a renewed commitment to the process. At the start, people can have wildly different views about what is wanted and what senior management expects. As they go through the process, they start to see how the group is changing its thinking, and how they compare. The process proves to be a powerful way of achieving real buy-in from the team.

Of course, strategic change facilitators and planners need to have the confidence to allow this engagement. The skill lies in enabling debate whilst also providing leadership and ensuring that the process does not go off-course. But those in this leadership role also need to allow sufficient flexibility to ensure that team members really feel that their views have counted.

In one engagement with a global IT services enterprise, the shift in focus for a week-long change planning session was remarkable. Initially, the perception of about a third of the participants was that the emphasis of change needed to be on the company's internal culture. Within a few days of discussion however, the emphasis had shifted to radically improving the customer relationship. The group developed an internal consensus which proved to be more robust than previous attempts at planning. Having arrived at this position through their own debate, they were prepared for the hard efforts that were to follow to improve the customer relationship. What had started as a dispirited group of individuals without a unifying purpose became, over the course of a week, a strong and committed group that could carry the customer change mantra to the wider enterprise.

Strategic change as a journey provides a creative approach for ensuring that strategy and change planning processes really do harness the energy of the group. As the team sees how its collective views evolve and mature over time, they develop a strong commitment to making sure that implementation is a success.

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