



## Planning & Managing Improvement Initiatives

### Basic, first-step considerations

This discussion is not a prescription for managing change, but an approach to some key concepts often overlooked when improvement initiatives are begun. It goes without saying (but for emphasis I'll say it anyway) that what follows assumes a methodical, rather than an improvisational approach to everything else involved in getting people enthused, focused and collaborating efficiently on a change implementation project: constant attention to lessons available from Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of human needs*, and the application of fundamental *management operating processes*<sup>1</sup> such as -

- Role clarification.
- Common understandings of quality improvement theory and practice.
- Clearly understood and agreed planning/plan management, problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution practices.
- Ensuring, if a team approach is required, that the criteria of an effective team are known, agreed and present.
- Skilled group facilitation systems and practices.
- Commonly-understood and shared problem-solving methodology.
- Balancing the degree of participants' involvement (and that of others to be affected by the change) to gain the desired degree of their commitment.
- Balancing attention to the project's primary purpose with developing the group's capacity for that purpose.

### **Underlying Assumptions (in brief)<sup>2</sup>**

At the start of any form of shared venture or multiparty cooperation, there's much to be gained from identifying and clarifying the working assumptions underlying the various parties' approach; doing so can avoid limiting and crippling problems. Like house-painting, careful preparation is often tedious but everything applied to a poorly-prepared foundation is wasted effort.

Although this certainly makes good sense, it is definitely not common workplace practice. Making unwise and unsafe assumptions about foundational preparation appears to be commonplace in every workplace at the start-up of, for example, working-parties, project work, teamwork, meetings, planning, problem solving, strategic planning and change initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Matters dealt with in depth by other articles in the Thriving Workplace Subscription Library.

<sup>2</sup> See full version, page 5.

Those assumptions are often about needs, problems, values, principles, priorities, perspectives, boundaries, practices for dealing with differences and decision-making, and other management operating systems or processes.

Assumptions are suppositions or premises incorporated into thinking and regarded as true.

If made unawarely, reached without positive proof or not tested with others presumed to also hold them, they may be entirely invalid and lead to misdirection, confusion, conflict, blocked progress, inappropriate conclusions, unwise plans and initiatives.

Bring your own and others' assumptions into awareness from wherever they are currently held vaguely or imprecisely in the sub-conscious. Discuss them until you reach clear agreement wherever you can, and an understanding of the implications of disagreement, where you cannot – before you go ahead with multiparty ventures.

One approach to this is to locate generic or generally agreed helpful assumptions underlying the practice of continuous improvement, before improvement efforts begin. Discussions about these can help identify strongly-held agreement, sharply-held differences and grey areas to be worked through, as the starting point of productive and constructive shared work.

Here's a list I've constructed for this purpose. I happen to believe they are all helpful and should underlie most, if not all workplace improvement efforts. It's not important that you share my views but it may be vital to your success that you clarify your own and those of others with whom you'll work or on whose approval your improvement plans will depend. (The full version begins on page 5.)

- 1 All components of our organisation can be improved.
- 2 Constantly improving efficiency (how we do things) will not necessarily make the improvements necessary for success. We must also examine and test our effectiveness: the appropriateness and relevance of what we do.
- 3 *Existing systems produce existing results. If something different is required, the system must be changed.* [Christopher Ball]
- 4 More can be accomplished by working together to improve the system than by working individually around the system.
- 5 Methodical approaches to the practice of leadership, management and continuous improvement are, in general, preferable to *ad hoc* or improvisational approaches.
- 6 Working and functioning in groups requires that we examine and discuss ethics, the distribution and uses of power; and issues of dignity, equality, inclusion, status and rewards, no matter how sensitive are those matters or how uncomfortable we may feel about doing so.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As a separate issue, *Ground-rules* to guide project group behaviours should be devised and managed, to safeguard whatever the project group members' value in regard to these matters.

- 7 Continuously improved service and product quality begins with methodically monitoring customers' perceptions of quality. The customer is the *next person in line*. Whatever our own thoughts about the quality of services and products we provide, the customer defines the quality of their experience of products and services intended for them.
- 8 We cannot function with true collegiality in communities of interest or draw on the full potential of our groups if our organisations perpetuate hierarchical inequality, adversarial relationships and competitive individualism; those models and practices are counter-productive and outmoded.
- 9 Despite the goodwill and respectful intentions of those who lead, manage, participate in and otherwise comprise organisations, those intentions often fail to inspire sufficient collective animation, enthusiastic cooperation and lasting commitment. Organisations often do not thrive; they merely survive.
- 10 Organisational focus, planning, improvement efforts and other attention are often significantly imbalanced in favour of the *Primary Task* (or *Primary Purpose*). Commonly, insufficient attention is given to developing capacity for it.
- 11 Single-mindedly or disproportionately concentrating on the *task* or *business* may succeed for a while or when times are good, where this is goodwill, plenty or an excess of resources to *oil the wheels*. When these resources run out or are stretched to breaking point by a challenge, conflict or crisis, a lack of capacity for the *Primary Task* reveals itself in gaps, waste, under-performance and incompetence. At that point, survival becomes and remains the predominant driver of organisation culture.

## Project Purpose

A group's, team's, organisation's or meeting's activities are what it attends to in order to achieve its purpose; those matters constitute its current *agenda*. Agenda is very different from purpose.

When an enterprise proceeds without a clearly-agreed statement of purpose or with one capable of differing interpretations, every decision about agenda is flawed in the eyes of those for whom it represents a misperception of purpose. Whether or not what is done is relevant, important, right, or whether where, when and how it is approached it is appropriate, is always open to irresolvable argument.

It seems remarkable to me, that change initiative projects frequently fail to define their true purpose. Rather, the project agenda is regarded as its purpose. For example: *Work out how to reduce the time it takes for . . . ; Reduce the waiting list . . . Make pan-organisational or sector cooperation improvements . . .* Of statements such as these, another question (and possibly two or three questions) should be asked: *What for . . . ? So that . . . ? What do we intend that this result should ultimately produce . . . ? So that what . . . ?* until a good deal more clarity about the project's Big Picture purpose is revealed. Done more often, fewer initiatives would wind up in the organisational swamp.

Often, the broad purpose of an improvement initiative amounts to, "*Increase the rate of continuous improvement to the quality of services we provide our client population*". In most cases, greater specificity should be sought but even as it is, a statement of purpose similar to this will provide a constant target and reference-point for the validity and worth of an improvement project's activities.

## Project Themes

Further clarity and focus can be gained by establishing clearly-stated project themes, which may also act as boundaries and checks. Avoid bland and meaningless references such as *Responsibility, Trust, Respect, Support, Honesty, Openness, Efficiency, Professionalism and Quality*, for example, unless they pre-exist in the organisation's charter or founding documents (of those of the project's) and are described in behavioural terms (as they should) so that people know how to recognise them in practice.

## Observations and Challenges

Under this heading, an improvement project group might usefully note the relevant common practices that run counter to the foregoing list of "good sense" assumptions within the organisation, and other challenges likely to affect implementation of the initiative. For example:

- *Likely or imminent government-initiated changes/economic events imposed on the organisation are very likely to seriously challenge its currently-stretched resources and significantly challenge the goodwill and wellbeing of our staff, in some important areas at least. Positioning the organisation to deal with these demands will impact on our intentions to pursue other important targets . . .*
- *Despite leadership's stated intentions, there is strong evidence that we operate within distinct divisional silos in ways that are detrimental to pan-organisational effectiveness. In particular . . .*

Care should be taken to guard against defining any problems listed, as "the absence of solutions", especially specific solutions, because this usually disguises prime causes.<sup>4</sup>

## Project Intentions

At the start it may be wise to state these broadly as though achieved and to add something like, "*greater precision and clarity will emerge from the Phase 1 monitoring and review processes*".) For example:

*All our governance and operational functions are underpinned and informed by -*

- *A distinct common purpose and vision*
  - *Shared ideals, assumptions, principles, policies and strategic intentions*  
*Clear roles and responsibilities and protocols*
  - *A common approach to leadership, management operating procedures, methodical planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating*
- and (in addition to its Primary Purpose) are aimed at continuously enhancing staff members' individual and collective enjoyment of their involvement and participation.*

## Broad Strategy

Indicate it and add something like "*greater precision and clarity will emerge from the Phase 1 monitoring and review processes*".

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<sup>4</sup> See our various discussion papers about Problem Solving, in the Thriving Workplace Subscription Library.

## Useful Generic Assumptions for Improvement Initiatives (full version)

1. All components of our organisation can be improved.
  - There is no established rule, structure, process, principle or practice that is set in concrete.
  - The organisation has untapped potential and undiscovered talent ready to be released. We all have a responsibility to locate and help release it.
  - We should counteract learned passivity, uncritical acceptance and submissiveness, by actively encouraging curiosity and questioning, critical thinking, self-initiative and self-assertion,, responsible experimentation, risk-taking and action-reflection learning.
  - We should seek and systematically remove other barriers to constructive involvement, pleasure of participation and pride of association.
  
2. Constantly improving the efficiency of what we currently do to fulfil our primary purpose and survive as an organisation will **not** necessarily make the improvements necessary for success. We must also examine and test –
  - The appropriateness and relevance of what we do – our effectiveness.
  - How well our plans, strategies and actions balance the pursuit of our primary purpose with developing each individual member's capacity and the organisation's collective capacity for it.
  - The degree to which our plans, strategies and actions match the beliefs, values and principles we espouse.
  - Whatever incongruence exists between our tacit (inferred, implied or unstated) theories-of-action and the theories-in-use in the organisation.<sup>5</sup>
  
3. More can be accomplished by working together to improve the system than by working individually around the system.
  - Organisational systems either inhibit or release performance potential. When placed in the same system, people, however different, tend to produce similar results.
  - Empowering people to make improvements and remedy under-performance without changing the processes, structure or systems they work in, increases helplessness and cynicism.

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<sup>5</sup> *Teamwork*, for example, is often openly espoused as a "value" by organisations which reward only or chiefly individual effort and results.

*Community or Stakeholder representation* is tokenism if those selected to represent the community at decision-making forums behave with uncritical acceptance and passivity.

If we claim to practise *openness* yet make decisions or some decisions behind-the-scenes, or make them with obscure or secret processes, there is similar incongruence.

*Trust*, as an implicit theory-of-action, is nullified by a theory-in-use of valuing secrecy, and of distrusting transparency, openness, democratic processes, certain people or people in certain roles.

- Removing the causes of problems in the system, and the problems created by the system, inevitably leads to improvements.
- Involving in the inquiry into and remedy of problems those who directly experience them, taps a potent source of insight and increases the likelihood of widespread commitment to the eventual solutions.

4. Methodical approaches to leadership, management, decision-making, problem-solving, planning and continuous improvement are, in general, better than *ad hoc* or improvisational approaches.

- Methodical (or systematic) approaches provide consistency and can generally be trusted to bring clarity and progress where there is currently disorder or confusion.
- Their assumptions and practices can be more easily taught to others to bring shared understanding and reductions in uncertainty and guesswork.
- When groups agree to work within them, participants share an awareness that informs effective participation and facilitates collaboration, efficiencies and improvements to process.
- Because the assumptions of *ad hoc* approaches are usually obscure, collaboration with them is thus more difficult to achieve and enhancements harder to identify.

5. Working and functioning in groups involves, primarily, relationships amongst people.

- Human relationships are the underpinning of all our improvement efforts.
- This requires that we examine and discuss ethics, the distribution and uses of power, and issues of dignity, equality, inclusion, status and rewards, no matter how *sensitive* are those matters or how uncomfortable we may feel about doing so.
- It usually also requires an uncommon degree of skill and competence in interpersonal effectiveness and group facilitation practices.

6. Continuously improved service and product quality begins with methodically monitoring customers' perceptions of quality. *The customer is the next person in line.*

- Whatever our own thoughts as providers about the quality of our products and services, the customer defines the quality of their experience of whatever products and services are intended for them.
- The customer is the *next person in line*. Every member of our organisation is a customer of someone else's service provision.
- Leaders provide leadership services; their in-house customers are those they lead and those for whom they lead. Managers provide management services; their in-house customers are those they manage and those for whom they manage.

- If leaders and managers are not methodically monitoring the quality of their services through their customers' perception, they should not expect enthusiasm (amongst those people) for other improvement initiatives elsewhere.
7. We cannot function with true collegiality in communities of interest or draw on the full potential of our groups if our organisations perpetuate hierarchical inequality, adversarial relationships and competitive individualism; those models and practices are counter-productive and outmoded.
- Although we may not personally be obsessed with power, we are bound to be caught up and complicit in that preoccupation to the degree that our organisations are. If we lack the power and authority to change our organisation's preoccupation with these models, then we should seek to create *niches of autonomy* in which, as far as possible (and with a clear mandate for doing so), we can operate together in ways more attuned to what we personally value.
  - Organisational structures and systems form the basis of group culture and either restrain or liberate performance potential, producing similar behaviours and results no matter the identity of current constituents.
  - So long as they foster or support inclinations to dominate and the idea that *jockeying to be on top* is the best or only valid way to confront difference and inequality, we'll find elusive the real teamwork and other benefits of cooperative efforts often espoused and so desperately needed to further collective knowledge.

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