New Perspectives on Sustaining Organizational Success

by Peg Holman

Think about a time when you were part of a group achieving exceptional results. What was happening? People respond very consistently to this question: The purpose was clear and meaningful; everyone pulled together to make the project a success; natural leaders emerged; people did the work they felt best able to perform; and participants willingly took risks. Later, when the team reflected on the experience, they were often astonished by their accomplishments. What if this deep sense of community and ability to produce extraordinary results were the norm for how organizations and communities worked on a daily basis? What principles can we follow to make this goal a reality?

Sustaining High-Impact Efforts

Over the past 30 years, the number of stories about groups that have created and sustained such experiences over time has grown. Examples range from curriculum redesign and faculty development at Brooklyn Technical High School in Brooklyn, New York, to an award-winning change initiative at GTE involving front-line staff, to successful efforts in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, to find creative ways to overcome a tax-limiting referendum.

In most of these efforts, people worked in new ways to achieve ambitious and fundamental changes. The organizations or communities in which they operated shared a belief that knowledge primarily comes from the people working within the business, not from experts or outside consultants. Participants in such projects expanded their

horizons to view the system as a whole, rather than simply focusing on their own small area of operation, resulting in commitment to a shared, desired outcome. This common focus moved people to act, with significant and lasting results.

These stories of successful organizational transformation provide clear evidence of better ways of working together. The approaches used in these cases fill two huge voids that most large-scale change efforts miss. The first improvement entails *intelligently involving people* in changing their workplaces and communities by shifting power and control from the hands of a few to the hands of the many. The second involves *approaching change systemically.* This approach can optimize the whole organization's performance, not just that of an individual department or branch.

Organizations that undergo successful, long-term change processes seem to share seven characteristics:

A vision of the future that provides people with an opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves. When people see the possibility of making a significant contribution, they operate differently. The emphasis shifts from focusing on "why it can't be done" to "how can we make this happen?" There is a tangible difference in the atmosphere of organizations that have made this shift—they feel alive with possibility and excitement.

Involvement of the whole person—the head, heart, and spirit of the members of the organization. Over the years, words such as "hands" or "heads" have become a way to count numbers of people in organizations. They reflect a focus on what is considered important—hands to do the manual work; heads to do the thinking work. A successful

approach to change reengages the whole person: hands for doing, heads for thinking, hearts for caring, and spirits for achieving inspired results.

Understanding that knowledge and wisdom reside within the organization's people. This belief, that the people in the system know best, represents a profound shift from the days of bringing in outside experts with "the answer." Instead, successful change strategies engage people in the organization in making choices about what's best for them.

A perspective that change is a process, not an event. Events help focus people's attention, but they are only one part of the change equation. It is ongoing practice that enables long-term success.

A systems view of the organization. When people understand that they're collectively creating their organization, they begin to understand that system at a deeper level. They see interconnections among departments, processes, or relationships. Because more people understand the whole system, they can make intelligent, informed contributions to substantive decisions.

An effort to make critical information publicly available to members of the organization. What keeps the system whole over time is a commitment to sharing information that is traditionally provided on a "need-to-know" basis. When people are informed of what is important to the system and how it is performing, they make better decisions about their own activities.

A sense of the power of the individual to make a difference. When people understand the whole system, when they feel that their voices matter, they are more inclined to make a commitment to the change process.

Pulling It All Together

This kind of all-encompassing, high-leverage change process begins with two questions that can help participants gain a broader view of the system in which they operate:

What is our purpose? By exploring this question both intellectually (What do we what to accomplish?) and emotionally (Why is it worth investing time and energy?), people begin the shift to thinking systemically.

Who participates? Understanding the system requires knowing who is involved: Who affects it, who cares about it, who holds responsibility for its health and well-being.

Having established a view of the organization as a whole system, the group is well positioned to choose a change process that suits its needs (see "Tips for Undertaking Change Initiatives"). A successful approach will create conditions that help an organization or community improve by enhancing the quality of the interactions among people. In addition to developing a strategic plan, restructuring an organization, or directly improving traditional performance variables such as cost, cycle time, and quality, such methods seed participants' minds with new concepts and offer a safe environment in which to practice new communication skills and patterns of interaction. A wide variety of innovative change methodologies, including Open Space Technology, Appreciative Inquiry, Dialogue, and Future Search, can help guide and sustain the process.

Moving Boldly Forward

When organizations view change from a systemwide perspective and make the effort to involve those affected *by* the process *in* the process, the potential for unimagined results is within reach. As Goethe so eloquently reminds us, "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it." So, what are you waiting for? A more successful, more sustainable future is within your organization's grasp.

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LEVERAGE POINTS

Tips for Undertaking Change Initiatives

- **Be Clear About Your Purpose.** Not only is this the key to mobilizing meaningful involvement, it is also vital for sustaining the work when the going gets rough.
- **Know Where Your Support Is Coming from and Plan Accordingly.** Different strategies for getting started make sense depending on whether support is from the top, middle, or grassroots level.
- **Mean What You Say and Be Prepared to Be Tested.** People have an uncanny ability to ferret out underlying intentions. If the stated purpose for high-involvement change isn't authentic, participants will know and won't make the needed commitment to the effort.

- **Believe That You Can Create the Culture You Want.** Change is not always comfortable, so accept the fact that the process may be messy and focus on how best to bring people into a future that they desire.

- **Communicate with Everyone Involved Early and Often.** Engaging those affected by the process will help to generate much-needed momentum.

- **Get the Support You Need.** If you've never taken part in a large-scale change effort, involve someone who has—they can save you much anxiety when you're not sure how to proceed.