INVOLVEMENT LEADS TO COMMITMENT! OH REALLY?

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As part of a recent consulting assignment, we were asked to facilitate the redesign of several critical business processes for a state transportation department. The client agreed that involving many directly affected stakeholder groups would be an important ingredient. When we assembled the initial group of about thirty individuals and asked them how they felt to be selected, we heard an earful:

> " they already know what they're going to do, we're just here for window dressing"
>
> " this organization hasn't followed through on a committee recommendation since I've been here, and that's going on 20 years"
>
> " being open in this place can be a career limiting experience"

Doing this type of work for a living allows me to say unequivocally that these type of sentiments are much more the norm than the exception. Also true, however, is that as you continue talking, these same individuals desperately want to be involved. They usually see a need for change and have terrific ideas.

Of course, leaders or project sponsors have their own experience in receiving the results of committee work. Some of their common sentiments include:

> "They go right to reconceived solutions, there is no creative thinking going on"
>
> " All we get back are wish lists. People continue to think the answer is just a matter of throwing more resources at the problem."
>
> " What groups end up working on isn't even close to what we asked them to do."

So, while many truly believe that involvement leads to higher quality solutions and greater commitment, the results in most cases have fallen short. In fact, the whole experience can be so frustrating for all concerned that it becomes difficult to engender much enthusiasm on anyone's part for "another team project."

From The Leader's Perspective

Granted, some leaders will set up teams to give the appearance of involvement and will only be satisfied when the team comes up with their preconceived solution. But our experience is that most leaders are well intentioned and want the team to generate their own answers. Their dilemma seems to be how to empower a group, giving them creative

freedom without “giving away the store”. They worry about recommendations coming back that won’t be acceptable and the message sent if, in fact, a team’s recommendations are turned down.

One answer has been to become more adept at developing team charters. Unfortunately, this seems to result in more specific and narrow charters. The lines to fill in on the chartering form are forever increasing. Another answer has been a type of abdication, ie., “Let’s send them off and deal with their recommendations when the time comes.”

The Team’s Experience

When charters become more narrow, the team will often discover that the real issues exist outside of the assigned task. In one client organization, a facility’s manager asked his support services team to improve the way they received and handled requests from other departments. As the team explored various alternatives, the solution they considered best would require dramatically changing the responsibilities on the part of both the “customer” as well as the facility’s engineers and technicians. When not allowed to come forward with such status quo busting ideas, people tackle assignments with an attitude of compliance at best.

On the other hand, when leaders abdicate or give little or no direction, teams end up spending countless hours trying to “mind read” the executives and arguing about whose right.

So What’s Really Going On?

We think a number of things contribute to well intentioned efforts falling short:

1. Teams Learn Along The Way

In a well run team, from the moment they begin tackling a problem, perspectives and understanding starts to shift. People listen to each other, they gather information about the problem and its causes which often tells a story different from their initial impressions. A new collective view emerges. On the other hand, those who chartered the team move on to other things and their perspective on the original issue remains the same. When recommendations which are built from a new foundation are presented to those who hold an outdated view of the situation, tension and predictable conflict emerges. Executives have even told us that they weren’t sure what a team recommendation really meant but were too embarrassed to say so. “It was ‘easier’ to just disagree and shoot down the idea.”

2. Priorities Do Change

Business conditions and issues are constantly changing. The fact that priorities change with them should not surprise people. In fact, it’s good business. A public transportation client was heavily involved in a work redesign effort when new monies were allocated by the state legislature. The thirty individuals involved on redesign teams were needed back on the job, in the short term, to launch several new highway projects. The downside for not delivering on the new monies was too great! Frustration and resentment result not from leaders shuffling the priorities, but when sound reasons are not given. Or when a team puts in numerous hours of hard work only to find out when they are *done* that no one bothered to tell them. “Well why did you wait until now to tell us,” or even worse, “ We knew you weren’t serious about doing something in the first place,” are the resulting sentiments.

3. Teams Need Both Direction and Freedom

Team members really do want to know what leaders see as the issue(s). They don’t want to have to guess. They want to know if anything is off limits and what the decision parameters (cost, productivity, quality) are. What they don’t want are surprises later. They also want to solve the real problems. What they don’t want to do is simply put the bells and whistles on someone else’s pet answer.

4. Team Members Only Partially Represent Stakeholders

Picking the right team members is a critical part of effective participation. While large group meetings can be highly effective for a few specific purposes and situations, smaller

groups will continue to be the most frequent avenue for participative problem solving. Given the constraints of size on effective group dynamics, typically not all stakeholder groups are represented. Or a given stakeholder group is so large that one or two people can not effectively represent the range of views. When recommendations are finally presented, they may not have the support needed to give them a true field test. A perceived or real lack of significant input causes behind the scenes politicking with various alliances being formed. Managing these various positions at the moment of decision making to some kind of consensus is next to impossible. The agenda has become “defeat the idea”. Again, a lot of hard work goes nowhere.

What Can Leaders and Teams Do?

At one level the answer is both obvious and simple - require ad hoc teams of whatever nature to *stay connected* with all decision makers and stakeholders throughout the course of their work. What this means is that at several critical junctures of the solution finding process, an ad hoc team would “check in” with both types of groups. This leads to mini consensus building moments all along the way. The theory is this - why proceed to step 2 in our solution finding, if we don’t have consensus at step 1, for example, what the most significant causes are. Then why proceed to step 3 if we can’t get consensus at step 2, such as what the highest weighted decision criteria are, etc.

Each such moment between decision makers/stakeholders and ad hoc teams provides and opportunity to learn together and stay in synch. Leaders can then make informed choices as to whether to allow a team to move outside of the original charter. They can tell a team that a new priority has pushed their project to the back burner for 2 months, etc.

At another level, the activity of staying connected is not so simple. For example, the purpose (make a decision, seek input, inform others as to status of..., generate ideas, etc) of “staying connected” will be different at different points of the process and/or for different stakeholder groups. So these activities need to be thoughtfully designed as to agenda, structure, and best “meeting” technology. We must move beyond always calling another meeting and make use of the host of options available. Surveys, interviews, large group events, inviting people only to specific team meetings, phone calls, intranets, etc.

Likewise, when meetings are the best technology for the purpose intended, groups must move beyond the knee-jerk discussion mode to more productive group techniques such as nominal group, small group discussion and report out, vote-influence-revote decision making, etc.

Turning projects and problem solving over to temporary teams must be seen more as a process to be managed than simply a way to increase participation. When this happens, my experience suggests a significant decrease in the following comments when recommendations are finally brought forward:

> “That will never work”
>
> “Our priorities have changed, thanks for your work but we’re not interested in that right now”
>
> “That’s not what we asked you to do!”

Or worse yet,

> “Thank you very much, we’ll think about it and get back to you.”

Yeah, sure!