

Leader to Leader

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EXECUTIVE CHALLENGES

Overcoming Obstacles to Engagement

Even as organizations strive to build democracy in the workplace, there remain many challenges. Finding productive and honest ways to engage people in decision making is not easy. Why is this so hard—and what can be done about it?

One of the problems, according to Richard Axelrod, author of the recent book *Terms of Engagement: Changing the Way We Change Organizations*, is that even when we think we are genuinely trying to reach out and engage others in the organization, we tend to fall into familiar patterns that undermine that engagement. We listen to the same people, the ones who are out-

spoken and the ones we know. Or we fall into the trap of reaching out at the wrong time, of asking for people to give opinions on issues that have already been decided. The result is cynicism and resistance.

Axelrod proposes a paradigm that compels organizations making changes to cast a very broad net when identifying who should be involved. For example, when a school district asked for Axelrod's help, he had to persuade reluctant administrators to look beyond the group they always turned to—faculty and a few articulate volunteers—and to let all types of students into the process. The point of this, says Axelrod, is that when more of those who are affected by change are actively involved in the planning and execution, the changes actually get carried out and they stick. "When people understand the issues, when they see they are not being manipulated, they become ready and willing to act." Also he encourages organizations to invite those who are likely to be opposed to a new course of action, including those whose jobs might be eliminated, to participate in its development.

So when Axelrod works with a manufacturing organization, for example, he rounds up customers, suppliers, chamber of commerce personnel, the president of the local

bank, environmentalists, government officials—sometimes even families. They sit down with hundreds of employees from all levels of the organization. A series of

group conferences ensues, aimed at the redesign of the organization. Of course, this is not an uncommon approach to large-scale change. The difference is that these stakeholders are encouraged to participate as full partners, working side by side with organization members to develop solutions.

He describes the four overarching principles of the engagement paradigm:

- Widening the circle of involvement. By "going beyond the dozens that are typically involved in current change practices and involving hundreds, even thousands, of employees," this principle can create a critical mass for change, thus raising the odds for innovation and learning. Including stakeholders—people from outside the organization, such as customers, suppliers, citizens, patients in hospital settings, and so on—makes them full partners. How-

ever, cautions Axelrod, it is critical that the stakeholders not be hand-picked but chosen in other ways to ensure a variety of perspectives and lack of bias.

Widen the circle of involvement.

- Connecting people to each other. To ensure creativity and action, you must remove barriers to the flow of information and ideas. This means bringing together a microcosm of the organization, representing different levels and functions but with a common purpose. Many will resist the consensus and fight back, and yet they can be among the most valuable advocates for change. "Expect them to push back," Axelrod says. "If they do not, beware."

Creating communities for action. Moving beyond personal connections, the group acquires a will to work together toward a collective goal—what psychologists call "the tribal instinct." Axelrod likens it to the well-known behavior of neighbors in a farm community who collaborate to build each others' barns. "Commitment occurs in the mind, the heart, and the hands," he says. "It happens as a result of our mind being at-

tracted to an idea, our heart finding that commitment fits our value system, and our hands enjoying working toward a common outcome."

Embracing democracy. This principle works because imposed change is no longer acceptable either in a political context or in an organization. People want a say in their own destiny. Democratic principles produce trust and confidence in the change process and in the people leading it.

Of course, getting the right people at the table and for the right purposes is critical, but it doesn't ensure success. What happens at the table makes all the difference. Axelrod has devised various techniques to ensure that everyone has a voice and the more outspoken don't dominate the process. "We'll have a maximum of 8 or 10 people at a discussion table, and sometimes we'll break it down to pairs," Axelrod said. "We'll let them put the various roles in a hat and draw for them. That way, the loudmouths and the quieter ones have equal weight in the group. For example, one member is randomly chosen, using the hat, as the principal reporter and spokesperson, to represent the group in other occasions up the line." Other duties are similarly assigned and no one is left out.

As for the leaders involved in the change process, Axelrod finds they will usually support the democratic ideas at the heart of the engagement paradigm in principle. But then they will often object to the cost of involving the many, with the concomitant loss of people-hours spent at the meetings. "The question often not asked, though, is how much it costs when a strategy is not implemented or is implemented half-heartedly," Axelrod counters.

In fact, it is when leaders can completely embrace and implement the paradigm that organizations see the most success. For example, when Axelrod was called in by Hewlett-Packard's Microelectronics Operation, he trained a group of leaders in his techniques, and these leaders themselves implemented the change process. Nearly 100 percent of the personnel took part in group sessions, and out of these sessions came new approaches for managing change, including one they labeled the "throttle concept." This was a way of alternately speeding up and slowing down the process to allow breathing space for each change to sink in, instead of piling one change initiative after another.

Also at HP, leaders themselves decided to bring in local people as "coaches," whose mission it was to monitor the leadership's behavior

and provide feedback. To the entire company, this demonstrated that the leaders were not above change. Too often, says Axelrod, "Business executives usually assume that change is most needed at the lowest level of their organization, but that's not the entire picture. Employees sense manipulation, and get tired of 'the flavor of the month' idea being foisted on them.

Another problem among top executives is unrealistic expectations. "Often," says Axelrod, "executives don't get it. They think, 'We'll fix this and never have to change again.' But that's not the world we live in today. You have to take the long view. It's only 15 years since we have tried to give a voice to the actual work producers in an organization, and we're still refining the process. I'm the last to claim that the engagement paradigm is the only answer, but it just represents my best thinking. We surely will have to add or subtract something."

But working off the set of the four principles is more important than any expedient methodology. "People, once involved, become inventive," Axelrod noted. "Once, we could get only 20 people from a critical department of a large company to attend an initial plenary meeting. They talked about how to expand their reach, about how to

better coordinate with other parts of the company. And they figured out a strategy: Each of them would bring a person from a different level of the company to the next session. It worked. As long as people are affirmed, then stretched, they will understand the process and get aboard."