



This is July 2009's newsletter, Changing Organisations, for my clients and other professionals interested in organisational change. Happy Year Ending if you have just finished a 30 June financial year.

This month's [changingorganisations](#) is in two parts:

- Do Your Meetings Inadvertently Sabotage Your Strategy?
- Hot off the [changingorganisations](#) Blog – Milestone: 10,000 Hits

Do Your Meetings Inadvertently Sabotage Your Strategy?

I have just been interviewed by [Dalia Farny](#) for US magazine [One+](#) about the role meetings play in corporate strategy. She is writing an article for people who organize corporate meetings. Subsequently, I have been thinking of how often managers brief designers, facilitators and organizers of meetings to produce a meeting that works exactly against the purpose it is expressly intended to achieve. I want to identify why this happens and offer five ideas to avoid this inadvertent sabotage.

In classic terms, the job of middle management is to interpret and implement, not formulate, strategy. Perhaps your strategy includes becoming more operationally efficient because you have reduced budgets.

When new strategy comes out, or a strategy is changed, you have a classic change implementation situation, i.e. the "coalition of the powerful" have something they want others to do.

If the job of middle managers is to interpret and implement strategy, it makes sense for the senior managers to ensure that the middle managers understand the strategy. So far so straightforward.

But what does it mean to "ensure the middle managers understand the strategy?" This is where the inadvertent sabotage can come in. A common way of ensuring the troops understand is to hold a meeting where the senior managers explain the strategy. Commonly this would be done with Powerpoint slides followed by a question and answer session. In larger organisations there might be a 'road show' where the most senior manager or the team visits the different locations to give the presentation personally to everyone.

While the sentiment of giving everyone the opportunity to be involved is laudable, there are some fundamental problems with the idea of "giving the presentation" if you are expecting to stimulate your organisation to change in your (revised) strategic direction.

First of all, the rules of such sessions are well known to the participants, and this is a problem. Formal presentations followed by questions and answers define what is on senior management's minds and subtly delineate the boundaries of what questions the troops can ask in this formal situation. The Powerpoint slides outline what is acceptable for the senior managers to talk about.

Almost unnoticed, the familiar situation of becoming an audience defines the parameters of the conversation and discussion that could potentially take place in that meeting. Immediately you can see that the road show treatment has inadvertently restricted the potential for something new to arise from these conversations, the boundaries of which have been subtly prescribed through the familiar norms of how to behave in these road show situations.

Second, another significant factor will be the norms amongst the troops as to what is acceptable, e.g. whether or not it is acceptable to speak up in a large group, whether one should not be seen as 'greasing' senior managers. Exclusion from the group via gossip is one of the most powerful ways that the restrictive power of norms is enacted. So those who speak up or are seen as 'greasing' risk exclusion from their group of peers, which is one of the most powerful sanctions that exist in human society.

A third problem with the road show approach is that the question and answer format requires the audience to format their questions clearly. The hesitancy, thinking aloud, and repetitiveness of normal conversation are not desirable in this setting. This hesitance and repetitiveness are features of the normal conversations that take place amongst trusted others through which people make sense of what is going on in. The Powerpoint road show format severely interrupts and restricts these habitual ways of making sense of the new strategy through ordinary, informal conversation.

Fourthly, new ideas that might help propel your strategy along are squashed in the road show approach. Let me explain. What say someone in the audience, hearing the plan, has a brilliant idea for an amendment to the plan that would take advantage of a hitherto-unknown opportunity, or that would significantly mitigate a severe risk? How would they express this? The formality of the occasion may well cause them to say nothing at all – the opportunity is then missed. In their thinking process they may well talk themselves out of saying something, especially if their thinking is not already well formed during the question and answer session. I know that while I can be quite animated in a situation where I am presenting something, as an audience member I am in quite a different space and will rarely speak up, even when I have strong views on the topic.

Let's say that instead they ask a question or make their comment. Perhaps they are not used to speaking in public and it comes across as a bit hesitant. Or perhaps they feel very strongly about it and it comes across as a bit abrupt or emotional. Depending on the situation, the emotionality of the response can be persuasive, or can lead the senior people to dismiss the message. I have been in plenty of change meetings where people have spoken strongly about their views on the matter. One problem is that in the immediate response they don't really understand the proposed new strategy because they haven't had time to reflect on it. So often the submissions are propositional or declamatory in nature, rather than being explorative.

Without the opportunity to informally clarify what is meant and tentatively put forward ideas, people tend to make declarations and positions quickly become entrenched, often before people even really understand the change or strategy in any depth.

An answer from the platform will deal to the question and the issue will be seen to be put to rest, at least by the senior people. But what happens in the crowd?

The question not being answered, it being slightly misunderstood, and the formality and power differential of the situation may well leave the questioner to decide not to pursue the issue any further. While the senior managers may think the issue has been dealt with, the person in the audience will inevitably discuss the event with a trusted other person, perhaps their team members, perhaps their colleagues.

Let's imagine the conversation.

"You were brave to ask that question."

"Well, I didn't really get an answer."

"No, what do you think is really going on?"

"I bet they're going to go even further than what they're letting on right now."

From there you as a senior manager have no idea what they will think is really going on. You have lost your connection with the informal conversations concerning your strategy that are taking place in your organization.

What you need to do is to create an environment in which these informal conversations can start to take place while you are present, so you can address what is important to your people and influence what your people think is really going on.

Here are some ideas for how you can do this.

1. Create a more informal environment where the power differential between the senior managers and the audience is not emphasized so much. Apart from de-emphasising the power imbalance, it makes everyone more relaxed and makes it more likely that people will participate. For example, include small group discussions or break out sessions that your senior people participate in.
2. Avoid reading power point slides – this signals that the conversation is not genuine. No one reads power point slides when they are trying to persuade their family or friends about something important such as a major change in life direction, which is, after all what you are trying to do for your organization.
3. Create opportunities for people to talk to each other, not just to the MC or to the slides.
4. Hear and respond to questions not as challenges or resistance, but as joint enquiry – attempts to understand or to make suggestions that will improve the implementation of the strategy.

5. If possible, stay on afterwards and participate in some coffee conversations.

In summary, when you are introducing strategy, the goal is for your people to understand it. They will not understand it at your road show where you "deliver" your message. They will understand it through their ordinary conversations with their peers and those around them in all sorts of informal conversations. Make sure that you do as much as you can to start to seed and participate in those informal conversations when you launch your strategy. Too often, corporate initiatives pay attention to formal communications through the communications strategy, but totally ignore the informal communication that can make or break your strategy, and your organisation's future.

Hot off the [changingorganisations](#) Blog – Milestone: 10,000 Hits

Taking 10,000 hits might not be a good thing if you are walking down the street. But the blog has now been going for a whole year now and nine of those have been record months as the number of "hits" has increased. At the end of June we reached the milestone of our 10,000th hit. Somehow this seems significant. Since the start of 2009 the number of hits per month has doubled – we are now getting over 1500 hits per month on average, i.e. 50 per day. Thank you very much for being a participant in this community.

Recent posts about the social process of learning have been attracting discussion about whether or not organizations can learn. I say not, and also that learning nevertheless is a social process that involves other people. If this is the case, can people then learn by reading?
<http://www.changingorganisations.com/category/learning/>

As always, thanks for your interest in our work.

Regards,

Stephen

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Hilary Kendall
Acting National Manager

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