

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Here are some tips of the organizational development trade that I hope will reinforce your ability to shape your organization with this end in mind: top notch staff providing excellent products and services to delighted customers.

The presenting problem is often not the root cause. Presenting problems are the symptoms that hurt; they make you say, “we’ve got to fix this.” For example, the leadership group in one client organization initially said they needed help sorting out priorities. When we conducted interviews and focus groups, we found deeper issues, as is often the case when people say that too much work and too little time are the problem. The root cause of the leadership group’s performance problems stemmed from a lack of clarity about the authority for decision-making and strategic oversight. Our client found that up front assessment and testing hypotheses save time, money and huge expense in staff resistance to treating symptoms only.

Training is often not the remedy, and yet training is the first place many leaders turn for solutions to performance problems. In the middle of an ambitious training program I co-designed and taught, my partner and I and our client had clear evidence that employees remained pessimistic about their ability to influence work place climate. These several hundred employees saw that fundamental aspects of the system would have to be modified in order to support individual and group efforts to change. Why? Organizational development practitioners understand that many performance problems have their root in poorly designed and malfunctioning systems that influence individual behavior. My experience with these discouraged employees taught me to seek the root of problems, for example, to study how the organization is organized and to ask what pressures it experiences from outside and inside. What are all the factors that suggest what changes are needed?

Carve out the resources you need. Before a planning or improvement project begins, some of the most important work involves gauging the time, people and processes that are needed to achieve success. A regular client recently said, “I started this work last year, but I just didn’t have time to stay on top of it.” While he has plenty of ability to lead the project, he has more profitable ways of leading. A project driver must take a panoramic view of the magnitude of the change, the people who need to be involved and influenced, group process methods that the project demands and the expertise needed for managing change. I’ve seen plans lay unheeded, initiatives sabotaged, projects compressed into impossible deadlines—and I’m sure you have too—sometimes because internal leaders have not envisioned and committed to what the whole journey entails.

Make and keep revising an organizational communication plan. What questions will people have? What are the best ways for you to communicate? As the project elapses, your strategy sessions should always include time to reflect upon and revise plans to communicate with people throughout your organization.

To adapt Stephen Covey’s maxim, “begin with the end in mind.”

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What is Organizational Development?

Organizational development expertise includes know-how in:

- How the parts of organizations work as interdependent systems
- How to design the organization (for example, leadership teams, business units or departments) to match work functions and meet customer expectations
- How to find the right processes and solutions for particular challenges, including guiding people through planning and change

Surprising Resources

One way I learn about organizational development and leadership is by reading biographies and (I confess it) military history. Some recent finds.

- *The Mask of Command* by John Keegan. Four leaders suited to specific contexts
- *Napoleon* by Paul Johnson. What went wrong in character and approach
- *Winston Churchill* by John Keegan. Early mistakes, then vision and commitment