



Figure 3.9 Percentage buy-in to decisions

To get around these problems, take a few moments to remind people of these traps. Ask the group for their own ideas on getting around them. Normally, people will suggest making a variety of sensible strategies. For instance, restricting the list of actions to no more than some small number; spreading the load between the group; devising a method of accountability; making the actions specific and measurable; and suggesting short-, medium- and long-term actions.

A familiar grid will normally help this process (see Figure 3.10). Your role in the discussion is to challenge any tendency to overload individuals, to insist on specifics and measurables, to raise the whole question of how progress will be tracked and to ask the question, ‘What might sabotage these action plans?’ Then depending on the answer, ‘What needs to happen to ensure that there really is follow-through?’

Ask who is going to type up and distribute the notes from the day. The quicker these are sent out, the more likely it is that the action plan will actually be implemented.

Large group interventions

The most familiar form of facilitated event is the small group that is planning for some kind of organizational transformation in a traditionally top-down

Action	Whose responsibility	By when
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Figure 3.10 Action planning

process. Typically, this will be the executive team. But there is another whole genre of events, usually known collectively as *large-group interventions*. Like so much else in working with groups, the philosophy and practicalities originated with the Tavistock Institute (p. 29). In 1959 Eric Trist and Fred Emery, two Tavistock consultants, ran a five-day conference in Bristol with the newly created Armstrong Siddeley company. It was based on the principle that the group itself would know what was best for its future if it worked on establishing a vision of how it wanted to be and then worked on how to close the gap between this desirable future and the present. The number in the group was small. However, the thinking behind it, and the way that thinking was translated into a workable methodology, was the forerunner of all the types of large group events from which we can choose today.

Devotees of large group interventions point to the many reasons that conventional approaches to change do not work: for instance, how they perpetuate the fantasy that leaders can control all the deciding and problem-solving, or that change can and should be based on the cascade principle. This is why conventional staff conferences will tend to have such a stiff, over-produced feel where information is meticulously combed of anything that could seem risky, taboo areas are carefully skirted and participation is kept to a respectful minimum. The whole event reinforces the idea that there are authority figures who know best and that change can be planned.

Large group interventions are based instead on 'systems thinking' – the idea that 'the system' is broader than just the organization or the immediate team: it will include clients and customers, competitors, regulators, partner organizations and other social networks. Change is assumed to be messy and complex with no easily discernible causes and effects. When you do not take the system into account you may make lopsided and short-range decisions. Large group interventions aim to tackle all these shortcomings by working instead from these principles:

- Change works best when you involve all the stakeholders even if there are areas of violent disagreement among them.
- Long-term change is more likely when the people who will have to implement it are also involved in diagnosing what the problems actually are.
- Even if it is difficult, cooperation works better than domination.
- Going with the flow is better than wasting energy on the futile task of trying to be in control at all times.
- It is more productive to create optimism by working on possibilities and then working backwards to the present than to work 'cold' on solving problems.
- People want to take responsibility for anything that affects them.

Involvement produces superior ideas and is more likely to produce change that sticks.

At the event itself, the principles are also the opposite of the overgroomed, tightly managed traditional conference. At a typical large group intervention the assumptions are that all perceptions are valid and all participants equal. Numbers of participants may be anything from 10 to 2,000. Open, frank dialogue is the core of the event. People come as volunteers not as representatives. You do not need ice-breakers, presentations or games. It takes an enlightened client to commission one of these events. Clients have to be prepared to acknowledge a counter-intuitive truth that where they do not know 'the answer', it is better to let it emerge from listening to others. Indeed, in my own experience, selling the idea of this kind of event to a client who is understandably freaked by the apparent risks is harder than anything you will need to do on the day. These approaches have been widely used in communities where there are large numbers of people who would be regarded as marginalized; for instance, an aboriginal group in Australia working to improve access to education by their own people. Equally, they have been successful in hard-edged commercial environments such as Ikea where junior staff have generated many commercially successful ideas.

Types of large group event

Many different types of large group event have emerged in the last 30 years, all closely related to each other.

Future search

This normally involves 60+ people with the aim of replicating 'the system' and then 'bringing it into the room' for the purpose of strategic planning. It was developed by Marvin Weisbord (Weisbord, 2004; Weisbord and Janoff, 2000). Usually, this is a two-day event with five phases:

- 1 reviewing the past as a giant timeline where personal, community and organizational events are tracked and charted
- 2 mapping the present where people sit in their professional or interest groups (typically eight people sitting at round tables) and examine their relationships with the question/organization commissioning the conference
- 3 creating the ideal scenario, often presented as a skit, this time working in so-called max-mix groups
- 4 identifying the common ground and creating a shared vision
- 5 drafting plans to implement the changes that will make the vision real

Pluses: this is a highly structured framework inside which a great deal of variation is possible. It is ideally suited to any project that needs major impetus at its start; for instance, an organizational merger. Drawing on multiple perspectives and mixing people constantly from different parts of the system means that barriers are dismantled and common ground is identified.

Minuses: the hard work is in the planning. It needs a dedicated project group that can give it enormous amounts of time. As a facilitator, this is where you will add value. As with all such large-scale events, logistics are complex; for instance, group membership is constantly rotated during the day according to a pre-agreed plan and this needs to be carefully considered in advance and then clearly signposted on the day. Staff time and the time commitment of those attending can also be a deterrent so it needs a zealous and influential in-house sponsor; ideally, someone who has already seen the benefits as a participant elsewhere.

The Conference Model

The purpose of the Conference Model is to fast-track the redesign of an organization. Usually, the need for this will have been made apparent by some kind of crisis. Like Future Search, it usually involves between 60 and 80 people for each event, but unlike Future Search, there are four consecutive events, each lasting two days:

- 1 The visioning conference: this resembles a future search event.
- 2 The customer/supplier conference where the focus is on how customers and suppliers currently see the organization and how they would like it to be in the future.
- 3 The technical conference where business processes are tracked with a view to simplifying them and improving quality.
- 4 The organizational design conference that gathers feedback from the other three events and decides on the new design of the organization.

There are many other variants of these events, including Real Time Strategic Change and Simu-Real.

Open Space

This is my personal favourite. Compared to other large group techniques it needs no elaborate planning. I find Open Space exhilarating – and terrifying. Every time I run one I wonder if this will be the time the model doesn't work – but so far it always has. Open Space was invented by Harrison Owen (1997) in the 1980s when it struck him that people constantly described the coffee breaks and mealtimes as the most productive parts of any meeting. Why

not, then, turn the whole event into something informal that tackles all the subjects that people really want to talk about? It is a method that is designed to solve complex problems in the shortest possible time and can work with as few as 10 people or as many as several hundred. It may last half a day or as long as three days.

What happens in an Open Space

The organization has a perplexing problem, possibly one that is full of conflict and which has defeated everyone. The problem is posed as a set of questions. Typically, this would be: What is the future of X? (the issue). What do we need to do to resolve it? An invitation is sent out to everyone who might care about finding the answers, but attendance is voluntary and no one comes as a 'representative'. The group sits in an open circle or two concentric circles. The facilitator stands in the middle and introduces the 'rules'. These are:

- *Whoever comes is the right people.*
- *Whatever happens are the only things that could happen.*
- *The law of two feet* means that if you are not getting what you want, move on to somewhere else.
- *Butterflies and bumblebees are fine:* butterflies are people who stand around looking beautiful and may attract others to come and join them. Bumblebees go from group to group bringing ideas with them as they go.
- *When it's over, it's over.*

The facilitator describes what will happen during the rest of the day, then reminds people of the question/problem and invites anyone who has an idea that they feel is related to finding the answer to the problem to come forward, say their name, briefly name the topic and write it on a piece of paper. At first only the most confident come forward but through encouragement, patience and perhaps a little coaxing, eventually many dozens of possible topics are identified. This process may take up to 40 minutes. There is a large blank timetable running along one wall and 'The Marketplace' follows. This is where the people who have nominated topics choose a room and stick their piece of paper to the blank space on the timetable. Many topics will be similar so some negotiation takes place at this point. People then take themselves to the rooms and topics that interest them, roaming from room to room if they wish. The groups facilitate themselves and produce a flip chart sheet of recommendations. These in turn are attached to another wall. In a one-day Open Space, about three-quarters of the way through the event, the whole group will reconvene. As facilitator you and your client will have met at some point and identified the main themes. You may then go through the whole

process again or it may be obvious which the action points are. Project teams are then assembled around these themes – again on a volunteer basis – and discuss next steps. The event ends with a ‘closing ceremony’ where anyone who wishes to speak can walk into the reassembled circle to pick up the ‘talking stick’ (a microphone if it is a large group). All the flip charts are typed up and swiftly distributed to everyone who attended, together with progress reports from the action groups.

Advantages and disadvantages of Open Space

The beauty of the Open Space approach is that there is no place for cynicism or acting out. There is a buzz of optimism and energy. If as a participant you have a topic that you feel is vitally important, then you will have your chance to raise it and if you do not take that chance then you have to live with the consequences. You cannot moan that ‘no one ever pays attention to the real issues’. Senior people in the organization can get some salutary shocks. In one organization where I ran an Open Space, the executive team discovered that far from being the heroes to their people that they had imagined, they were widely held in disrespect – and they found out why, then what to do about it. In another company, complacency about customer service was well and truly banished as the most junior staff enthusiastically redesigned the delivery process, resulting in a 100 per cent increase in profit the following year. One of the most moving Open Space events I have ever facilitated was for a British organization operating in a country that had formerly been part of the Soviet bloc. The question for the event was: *What do we need to do to guarantee a successful future for this operation?* The event ran in four languages: English, Russian, the language of the country and German. It involved every single person on the staff from the most senior managers to the cooks and drivers. On the second day, several staff approached me shyly to ask whether it was really true that they could choose which groups they went to, and really true that they could wander from group to group. As one of them said, ‘You’ve got to remember that memories of the Soviet era die hard and democracy is still very young here’. In two days this organization had created, or possibly recreated, commitment to its overarching purpose, had sketched out a viable business plan, had involved all staff in what it should contain, had planned improvements to its services, had agreed training plans for everyone and had also enjoyed itself hugely.

The disadvantages of Open Space are that it cannot work when senior managers secretly believe they already have the answer to the question. When you describe it to clients, it can sound flaky: ‘Hippy heaven’ as one of my clients snorted in response to my first attempt at persuading her to undertake it. They may feel uneasy about the apparent lack of structure, or tell you than ‘no one’ will come forward with ideas (I have never known this happen). In

fact, there is an underpinning structure, but it is a *process* and not a *content* structure and this can unnerve people who like to feel in control. As a facilitator you have to be able to hold on to your courage at the point where the 'Marketplace' starts. It can seem chaotic and noisy, but trust the process: it works, and miraculously people quickly go off to their chosen sessions. Follow-up to the event is important, but this is no different from the care you need to take at any other facilitated event to ensure that the energy and impetus of the day is not lost in good intentions that never result in change.

Large group logistics

These are powerful approaches to problem-solving. However, they create logistical demands. If this is not your forte, you will need to work with someone specializing in these troublesome practicalities. You need at least one very large room – hotel ballrooms or public assembly rooms are ideal. You will need one well-equipped breakout space for every 10 people and enough wall space for substantial numbers of flip charts. With a large group you will need many sets of flip charts, dozens of pens and also microphones. It helps to have several laptops available so that the output of sessions can be keyed in immediately and then emailed to every participant.

There is only space for an introduction to these methods here. For a comprehensive account of the various large group interventions and how to run them, consult the excellent book by Barbara Bunker and Billie Alban (1996). Even better, beg or blag your way into another facilitator's session in order to see at first hand how powerful the methodology is.

Note

- 1 My own book on the MBTI (2007b) gives more information on the 16 personality types.