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TOP™ SECRETS OF IMPLEMENTATION: AN INTRODUCTION

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The Issue of Implementation

It is generally far easier for a group to create a good plan than it is for them to successfully implement that same plan. As facilitators, we place our primary emphasis on helping people develop good plans. To be sure, we get them to think about what it's going to take in their situation to make all this happen and share some insights about how they might get things started. We let them know that we are available should they have need of us and encourage them to call us in when the time comes to roll the plan over.



Beyond that, however, as facilitators we are not likely to be very involved in what occurs after the planning sessions are over. This is not because we don't care--indeed, often we'd like nothing better than to be able to support the groups we've worked with as they get into executing their plans. It has more to do with the prevailing image (one we largely share) that the facilitator's work is now essentially done, and the responsibility for implementation belongs to the group. And yet it is precisely in those weeks and months following the high energy event that created the new directions that even the best laid plans are likely to stumble and fall.

As facilitators, there are things we can do to prepare people to more successfully implement the plans we help them build. There are ways in which we can become more skilled at implementing our own plans. There are insights we can share out of our own experience about things that can derail plans even as they are being implemented and about ways to deal more effectively with these realities.

The Journey of Implementation

ICA understands implementation to be a journey that people take. As in the rest of life, no two groups will experience exactly the same journey as they go about implementing their plans. At the same time, they will experience some common dynamics characteristic of this special kind of journey. An understanding of these dynamics allows people to recognize them when they show up and to have some ideas about how they might respond to them appropriately.

There are four dynamics or dimensions of the implementation journey that we have identified and help groups work with through ICA's Technology of Participation (ToP™). These have both sequential and non-sequential aspects. In one sense, they point to the natural phases of a journey that almost any implementation process takes. There is a time for getting the new plan launched and a time for bringing any plan to a close. In between these points, there will be times

when at least the perception is that things have run out of steam and slowed to a crawl or come to a halt. There will also be events that radically call into question some of the expectations and assumptions the group operated out of when it built its original plan, to the point that some serious rethinking and reshaping of that plan is in order.

From another perspective, these four dynamics also show up repeatedly and out of "sequence" as we implement our plans. We have to get things started and bring closure and pick up the pace and deal with unanticipated realities again and again. These situations just pop up in an apparently random or chaotic fashion. So these four dynamics function as a way to help us operate out of a larger picture and have some idea of where we are on the overall journey. Equally important, they also help us spot realities that show up whenever and wherever they will in the course of implementing our plans.

The Dynamics of the Implementation Journey

These are the four dynamics that we find present in virtually every journey of implementation.

I: Getting Things Going

The time right after a planning event, when people return to their workplaces and normal routines, is an occasion filled with possibility and danger. Unless something dramatically different happens that first day back on the job, all those great plans may be in jeopardy right from the start. We know the tremendous inertia and resistance our ordinary operating patterns can generate in the face of any proposed changes. It takes something like 70% of the space shuttle's total fuel supply to overcome gravitational forces and achieve just its initial launch orbit. Both the group that has been directly involved in the planning and the larger organization need immediately afterwards to experience at the worksite the drama of launching something



new. This is a time for high energy and making a few rapid but clearly visible changes. It is essential for everyone to see that the plan is being taken seriously and has the necessary support required to succeed. People involved in the implementation must understand how their new responsibilities are to be integrated into the existing systems and demands on their time. The practical coordinating structures, roles and operating patterns that are established in this early stage of implementation can make the difference between life and death for the plan.

II. Sustaining Momentum

After the initial excitement of launching the new plans, the challenge becomes that of sustaining the efforts to bring the new into being. Sometimes, in the midst of all the "urgent" things that need to be done, it feels as if everything is conspiring to relegate implementing the plan's new directions to the back burner. Task forces and their leaders need ways to hold themselves and others accountable for the commitments they've made, despite feeling stressed out in the midst of everything that's already on their plates. Critical here is the care and support of individuals and teams, including providing the kind of training and development that adds to and deepens their individual and collective capacities. Simply continuing to let one another know where things are through tracking systems, progress reporting and cross team communications becomes an enabling discipline that keeps the momentum going.

III. Remaneuvering and Making Adjustments

Effective implementation requires that groups find or make the time to regather at points to review and evaluate their overall progress to date and decide where to go next. These can be scheduled times such as a 90-day plan rollover or simply times when external or internal realities have changed to the extent that a significant reconfiguring of the original plan is required. People need to report to their colleagues with ruthless honesty what did not get done, while at the same

time recognizing and celebrating together all that really has been accomplished. These are times when fresh creativity is called for, where aspects of the task have to be refocused and recast. The dynamics here involve acknowledging real turning points as they occur in the journey of implementation and insuring that these become opportunities for people to learn things about themselves and their group and about what works and what doesn't.

IV. Bringing Closure

The ending of a great journey should be taken as seriously as its beginning. If some drama is key to the launching of an implementation plan, it is no less essential at its conclusion. The entire endeavor and overall victory need to be celebrated and those who made it all happen appropriately and visibly recognized by the organization and its leadership. This is a time for retelling the sometimes humorous, sometimes painful, all too human stories of how it really happened. In doing so, the larger significance of the effort that has been made can be understood from the perspective of its successful accomplishment. Often overlooked but of great importance here is the documenting and publishing for all to see of the measurable results which are now the product of that original planning event. Bringing powerful and meaning-filled closure to a group's journey of implementation allows people to see that planning and implementation together are a life process—a realization that gives them the confidence to take up the challenge of building a new plan the next time.