

# FROM VILLAGE TO BOARDROOM: PLANNING THAT EMPOWERS

by  
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*As companies enter the global market at a rapid pace, the workplace is becoming more international in scope and the workforce more culturally diverse. This article suggests that some familiar OD technologies bridge the gap of multiple cultures and perspectives because they address individuals and organizations at a basic human level. It describes a process planning approach that is effectively used in cross-cultural situations with a variety of applications.*



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**W**hat do a Westside Chicago ghetto and a village in India have in common with a Chinese banking corporation in Malaysia, a Taiwan subsidiary of a British chemical corporation, and a U.S. fast food corporation? Each of these organizational environments utilized an approach to planning in which they shaped their own future and became empowered and transformed in the process. Grounded in transcultural human values, the process bridged the cultural differences and the multi-perspectives that so often divide groups. An open, 'contentless' process was used that allowed the group to develop their own plans, drawing on their experience, dreams, needs, issues, strategies, and goals.

This is important in light of current discussion in the OD profession about whether the technologies we use in the western world are appropriate in other cultures. In working with national and multi-national corporations in Asia, Europe, and the U.S., and with rural development projects in Third World countries, I found this particular process easily transferable to different settings. It is

important to be aware of the differences between the world views, thinking modes, customs, and business styles of nations and cultures. The consequences of ignoring them in cross-cultural situations range from embarrassment and frustration to total ineffectiveness and hostility over unintended insults. The attitude of the consultant toward the people and the situation is always a major part of any intervention. What I want to emphasize here is that we don't have to learn totally new technologies to work with different cultures. Contrary to what many people think, some familiar tools are transferable because they empower people at a basic human level.

The transcultural planning process I use was developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs, an internal research, training, and development institute. The ICA believed that if an effective, self-empowering planning process appropriate for use with any community was designed, millions of communities and groups would not have to sit in hopeless situations waiting in vain for help to 'trickle down.' People would have a

process for constructively shaping their own destiny instead of being victimized by their situation.

In the mid 1960s ICA took the first steps in developing this planning process in a collaborative effort of the Institute and citizens of an urban ghetto on the Westside of Chicago. The neighborhood was full of neglected buildings, vacant lots overflowing with junk, unemployment, babies dying of lead poison, and angry youths running in gangs. The ICA asked groups of citizens, "If you could change all this, what would it be like here? What do you need? What's keeping it from happening? What can you do about these problems so that your future will be different?" They began to tell us their hopes and dreams — a safe place to live, jobs, good schools. The Institute staff became catalyst, resource, and partner as decisions about need, direction, and action were made by the people who would be most affected by them. Through this group process, solutions emerged and programs were created that met local needs and reflected authentic cultural style.

The ICA learned that a shared vision is key to lasting and effective community change and development. They discovered that when a community sees the interrelationships of problems standing between their current state and their vision and name the major blockages, it can begin to deal with them. They found that when people in consensus create a plan for themselves, commitment and motivation to actualize the plan comes from within the group.

#### HUMAN TECHNOLOGIES IN PLANNING

The flow of this process is a very creative, human way to approach change, for individuals and groups. It is the way people think in their daily life. "What is it we want and need in our future? What is blocking us from realizing that? What will it take for us to deal

with those blocks, and allow that future to come about? What can we do now to start moving in that direction?" This removes the victim stance and replaces it with an empowered stance: "We are in charge of our own destiny." The four basic parts of the process parallel these questions and utilize some familiar OD interventions.

The VISION is made up of the group's hopes and dreams, a picture of what they see going on in their future. The second part discerns the major problems and issues blocking actualization of the vision. Clusters of related problems are named as the MAJOR BLOCKS that must be dealt with. Then an integrated STRATEGY is designed to deal with these blocks, incorporating proposals that both utilize existing strengths and move in new directions. The final part focuses on TACTICAL PLANS and ACTION steps to implement the strategy.

This planning process works well in diverse settings because it is linked with some familiar dynamics essential in enhancing group creativity, commitment, cohesiveness, and motivation. The process is rooted in basic human realities and has seven characteristics which contribute to its effectiveness in groups with diverse perspectives.

1. Planning is done by the people who will carry it out. This process is not what someone outside the organization or community, often a 'Euro/American expert,' or top leadership alone thinks is needed in the situation. However, support of top leadership is crucial if not included in the planning group. This approach assumes the team has the wisdom and experience necessary to decide what is needed in the situation, and gives a systematic way of making those decisions. Real issues and problems are dealt with, authentic solutions are created, and people become motivated and committed to action.

2. The process is structured, yet highly participative, open, and contentless. It assumes each person has a piece of the puzzle, a part of

the mosaic the total group is creating. This allows the culture of the group to shape the plan. Various methods used by individuals, small teams and the total group to elicit and share data and make decisions allow all to participate equally in building the consensus of the group. The focus of the discussion is always on the data and the wisdom of the group and does not 'spotlight' the persons with the best ideas, most senior position, or most dominating style.

3. Decisions are made by consensus. Many cultures traditionally use consensus to arrive at decisions; Americans have difficulty with it. Yet it is critical for multi-cultural management teams to reach a common ground on which to base their decisions and actions. Many joint ventures have fallen apart because this did not occur.

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4. The planning is practical. It is not a case study or theory. It focuses on a major issue that the group faces and must resolve creatively in order to move forward. The future depends on what the group decides to do for itself, not what it hopes someone else will do. Those involved in the planning must invest their time and energy in implementing it.
5. The process deals with the total system and produces an integrated plan. In today's complex world, a

system-wide analysis of key issues and multi-dimensional responses to them are necessary to meet the challenges of rapidly changing situations for any organization or business.

6. The use of both rational and intuitive planning methods allows the process to work regardless of the dominant modes of thought or cultures of the group. The particular methods used with this process strike a balance between different thinking modes (visionary, analytical, strategic, and tactical), left and right brain activities, commentary, discussion, and workshop, which makes it effective in many cultures. There is opportunity to reflect on the values, purpose, and meaning of situations and options as well as to build timelines and action plans. These diverse elements keep the approach from being experienced as totally 'western.'

7. The facilitator brings a genuine human concern for the organization and the outcome of the planning as well as expertise in process to the group effort. The facilitator honors the culture(s) s/he is working with, but doesn't 'go native,' keeping a professional (could we say 'global?') objectivity. S/he is sensitive to the different perspectives and cultural nuances as much as possible, and doesn't let the tensions get the planning off track or the discussion become discordant. S/he keeps the group focused on the common vision and the goals of the session, helping them build consensus every step of the way.

### THE VILLAGE AND THE BOARDROOM

Over the last twenty-five years this approach has been used effectively in thousands of communities around the world. In over 30 nations it has helped people deal with basic human issues of self-sustenance, self-reliance, and self-confidence. Though the basic form used was much the same, the process took on the flavor of the particular culture and locale.

Four hundred years ago the village of Maliwada, India, had once been a thriving agricultural center, producing fruits, vegetables, and wines. In 1975, there was very little water, no sanitation, few crops. Over 1,000 villagers barely eeked out a subsistence living. There were Hindus and Muslims and many different castes living with centuries of mutual distrust. The villagers knew about their prosperous past, but it seemed long gone and hopeless to recreate.

Facilitated discussions began based on two questions: "What would it take to have prosperity exist again in this village? What can you do to make that happen?" Slowly and gradually, as ideas began to pour forth, perspectives began to change. Hindus and Muslims began talking together excitedly about how to clean out the ancient well. Brahmins and Untouchables came to the same meeting and discovered they both despaired at the lack of medical care for their sick children and wanted to create a health clinic in the village. Hope began to creep into voices, eyes. What had seemed totally impossible suddenly seemed doable. People organized and tapped resources they had forgotten they had. They acquired loans from a bank and received government grants. They built a dam, a brick factory, and the clinic. The shared vision of what they wanted for themselves and their community allowed them to go beyond their personal and cultural differences and continued to motivate them. Each success made them stronger, more confident, more self-assured. Today, Maliwada is a prospering village.

When transformation such as this takes place, news travels. Nearby villages wanted to know how they could do this. The ICA project grew to encompass hundreds of villages in the state of Maharashtra in India. Projects were begun in Kenya, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other nations. This effort evolved into one of the most

successful micro socio-economic development programs in Third World countries.

Corporations, agencies, and other organizations involved with projects asked the Institute to do this kind of systemic planning. Would it be possible to take this process out from under the tree in a village plaza into the boardrooms and conference centers of the corporate world? Would it be appropriate? Would it break through the barriers that divide people in organizations as it did in communities? With questions like these, three colleagues and myself began working with a modified version of the process. We discovered that some of the basic human dynamics of communities around the world also existed in the culture of the corporate community.

We successfully used the planning process with corporations in Malaysia, with its Indian, Malay, and Chinese workforce, and in Indonesia and in African nations with multi-tribal workforces. It was effective in former colonial nations, where many corporations are owned and managed by Euro/Americans. It worked for agencies with huge multi-levels of bureaucracy and pulled together the thinking of diverse groups, departments, and geographic regions. It was effective in creating unity between management and labor.

The focus, decided on by senior management with the consultant, deals with any major issue facing the organization. Sears-Roebuck created strategy for the new export department in the international division. McDonald's designed a national marketing plan with their regional marketing directors. The National Sugar Board in Indonesia created a plan to double sugar production in five years. IBM used the process to design new training curricula for planners. Malaysian banks created strategic plans with both corporate and branch management. ICI subsidiaries in Asia used the process to develop strategic

thinking and total company responsibility in their national management teams. Time-Life Publishing created a more cohesive team of Asian distributors.

The process is effective because it gives a way for any group to step back from its immediate work and consider its long range directions, and to step back from its usual modes of operation and consider how it works together. People of any culture experience an approach that honors them and takes their ideas and experience seriously, no matter what their role or level is within the company. It creates an open space where new modes of communication and new patterns of information flow are used. All levels of management are able to discuss in a free and neutral place issues they rarely talk about with people they may have never talked with. They may find themselves teamed with a traditional adversary or rival excitedly planning how to implement a vision they both designed. A common mind is created, a common bond is formed, a new synergy of action infuses the whole management team. A transition time is experienced that bridges the way things were, the no-longer, and what will be, the not-yet. A new perspective on the future emerges.

#### **CHALLENGE FOR THE 90's**

The next decade holds major challenges for the planet. As we work with clients involved with transnational programs we have the opportunity to help shape their response to these challenges. It is important to use methods that bridge cultural gaps and tap the diverse wisdom and experience of cross-cultural teams. Developing managers with a global perspective, building consensus with cross-cultural teams, and honoring the diversity of a multi-cultural workforce will enable clients to meet the challenges of the 90's effectively and have a positive affect on the future of the planet.

