Confront and Engage for Organizational Development

By Robert Cunningham

Generate healthy stress and build group support at the same time. This artful technique is perfect for bringing much-needed change to a work group or company.

The United States is under siege. The country had a $175 billion trade deficit in 1986; the accumulated federal government debt is $2.3 trillion. Since 1979, annual productivity in the service sector has increased only 0.5 percent, according to an article by Patricia Galagan (Training & Development Journal, July 1987). Eighty percent of American corporations face competition from abroad. The public and private sector are not producing enough to keep up with buying and borrowing, and neither is effectively meeting competition from abroad. Will the United States address the situation or watch its standard of living continue to decline?

A chorus of scholars and practitioners sings in unison this theme: to assist in reversing the downward trends, organizations must do things differently—not the same things more efficiently. Organizational development requires change in the public and private sector. This article proposes confrontation and engagement as part of a microlevel strategy for change. Organizational development is viewed as a two-step process whereby the manager first confronts the group and then leverages individual knowledge by engaging the group's resources.

Confrontation

Accepting the challenge to do things differently requires that one actively confront present products and procedures. To confront is to speak the truth face-to-face, to vigorously invite comparisons, and to enter into open, healthy conflict. The confronter does not claim to possess absolute truth, but challenges others in pursuit of such truth, based on personal perceptions and understanding.

The choice of confrontation style is governed by a paradox and a principle. The paradox is that organizational development should simultaneously generate stress and build group support. Stress can stimulate learning and build a security nest within the organization so that novel ideas are considered thoughtfully. Members of an organization are confronted with failure, but are provided the support and security that encourages expressing, advocating, and testing new ideas. If sacrifice is demanded in times of drastic change, surviving members will be welded into a foundational community, one grounded in that common stressful experience and based on faith in and commitment to the group. W. Torbert calls that phenomenon "foundational grouping" in the book Managing the Corporate Dream and uses as examples IBM's restructuring and Mao's long walk across China.

The principle to be invoked in resolving the paradox is that people can learn only what they almost already know; a concept described by N. Agnew and J. Brown in a 1982 Organizational Dynamics article. Learning takes place in incremental steps. A teacher does not hand an advanced calculus book to a beginning algebra student, or lecture on arithmetic to a linear regression class. Learners may become defensive, anxious, or hostile if their "almost already
know” boundaries are stretched. On the other hand, too soft or gentle a stimulus will not confront sufficiently, and the person in charge may appear weak, insecure, or uninformed. The leader must confront employees at the boundary limit in order to generate acceptable stress; the challenge is to locate the appropriate confrontation level and build a base of emotional support.

Confrontation is often associated with aggressiveness, the polar opposite of cooperation; with being directive or task-oriented; and with mixing task with relationship behavior (termed “selling” by P. Hersey and K. Blanchard in Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources).

While confrontation should be active and may be aggressive, it should never rely on selling or telling. Selling and telling assume that the seller/teller knows the answer. If the manager knows the right answer, the problem is not organizational development, but implementation. The manager who facilitates, instigates, or confronts places no blame for the current situa-
tion, but pushes the organization to probe for basic truths about products, processes, competitors, and clients. Confronting is fundamental to ensure long-term organizational success in a changing environment. Choosing the mode of confrontation tests the manager’s awareness of member characteristics and group dynamics; effectively communicating the message of confrontation requires sensitivity to those affected. Confronting may be as gentle as a suggestion or as strong as a transfer or dismissal.

Engagement

Having resolved the stress/security paradox and confronted the group, the leader must engage the organization in the facilitator role—challenging and questioning rather than selling and telling—the manager can introduce external considerations, direct attention to the issue, and share the burden for defining and addressing the situation with those being confronted.

In confronting and engaging, a manager need not know answers. It is sufficient (and perhaps more conducive to creative problem solving) if the manager confesses incomplete information on the topic being addressed, but steers the group by asking questions in a manner that challenges and supports. The manager acts as facilitator or instigator, not judge, joining with the group in engaging the problem creatively.

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facing the issue. The highest insult is to be ignored, which degrades self-esteem by implying that one is unworthy and insignificant. Gentle confrontation followed by disengagement—allowing the group to go its own way—conveys the impression that the problem is minor or the manager is weak. Vigorously confronting and then walking off tells employees that they are seen as poor performers who cannot be expected to improve by themselves, or that the manager is just venting personal frustrations onto the organization.

“Selling and telling” is also a risky strategy, for managers facing uncertain markets, costs, and technologies rarely have immutable truths to impart. Even if managers possessed such knowledge, subordinates might not believe it, and an imposed solution can be killed by halfhearted implementation. Disengagement of the leader from the group will not work when the organization perceives threat and the solution is problematic.

The manager who confronts the employees and engages with them in tackling the issue acknowledges a serious situation and a shared concern. By engaging the group and adopting the strategy--engaging requires no technical training. They do demand that the manager be sensitive to individuals and group dynamics, and have some appreciation of external environment. Involving the group can leverage the manager’s decision-making power by expanding diversity to face present and future problems.

How is it different?

Confronting and engaging resemble other management and organizational development interventions, including the empowering leader, the decentralized organization, devolved decision making, and the psychoanalytic consultant. Decentralization, empowerment, and devolution do not mandate confrontation and engagement. Under those strategies acceptable group behaviors range from allowing employees to gaze out the window to authoritarian decisions by a single leader placed lower in the hierarchy. The psychoanalytic consultant may not be sensitive to external constraints, may operate from other assumptions of human nature, or may face implementation problems from an unsupportive superior. Confronting plus engaging demands that the leader speak truth—not symbols—and use the power of the group for collective problem solving.

Conclusion

“Business as usual” cannot be an acceptable motto for a society or organization under siege. Top-down dictums and quick fixes that do not consider future implications may debilitate rather than enhance. Confronting and engaging require no technical training. They do demand that the manager be sensitive to individuals and group dynamics, and have some appreciation of external environment. Involving the group can leverage the manager’s decision-making power by expanding diversity to face present and future problems.