Change Management and Consensus Building

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Issues:

*What is the role of consensus building in the change management process?*
*What can be done to facilitate the consensus building process?*

Background:

This paper provides a general overview of the role of consensus in the change management process, and some specific steps for the consensus building process. There are many sources of information on change management and consensus building; we reference several for further reading.

*What is Consensus?*

Consensus may be defined as follows;

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A state of mutual agreement among members of a group where all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed to the satisfaction of the group.¹
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In other words; "All members support the decision, even without universal agreement. Consensus is necessary to promote acceptance and ownership of a decision and for people to be willing to work toward common aims."²

Role of Consensus

A generally accepted tenet of change management is that stakeholder buy-in and consensus is crucial for achieving success in implementation. Stakeholder buy-in will build support and acceptance of change, as well as reduce resistance to change—one of the major reasons for implementation failures. Several examples of the role of consensus building are described below.

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GSA identifies the First Step of developing IT performance measures as *linking IT projects to agency goals and objectives*. The three principles of this step are:

- Establish clear linkage with specific business goals and objectives
- Secure senior management commitment and involvement
- Identify stakeholders and customers and nurture consensus

Another example of the importance of consensus and communication are the first two of Dr. Kizer's Key Principles of Transformation:

1. *Clearly articulate your vision, intent and principles of change.*
2. *The process of change should be broadly inclusive.* The top manager should allow all members of the organization to have their say in some form or forum -- and what they say should be taken seriously and sincerely."  

According to the Gartner Group, IT governance groups usually will have representatives (i.e., key IT stakeholders) from lines of business, the executive team and various IT units present to communicate via a consensus-driven process to reach agreement.

Readers should note that while consensus is desirable, it is not an absolute requirement. "To the extent possible, consensus should be reached. However sometimes consensus cannot be reached; That is the time for leadership to make decisions."  

**Building Consensus**

A basic operational rule is that any organizational entity, including an advisory panel may only affect change at or below their level of authority. Some key factors to success for any workgroup are:

- Clearly defined group mission
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for members
- A maintained focus on group mission, not members functional interests
- Open and candid communication
- Ongoing review and feedback

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3. GSA, *Performance-Based Management; Eight Steps to Develop and Use Information Technology Performance Measures Effectively*, page 7.
4. "*Health Care, Not Hospitals: Transforming the Veterans' Health Administration*" K. Kizer from Straight From the CEO, G.W. Dauphinais and C. Price, editors.
**Workgroup effectiveness**

The chart below illustrates the developmental phases that many teams and workgroups experience before becoming truly collaborative and productive. Focusing on the key factors for success listed above will help push a group to Phase IV, enabling the interaction necessary for consensus building.

While the categorization of developmental phases is useful to understand the basic trade-offs between getting things done and building strong teamwork relationships, there are some weaknesses to this approach to workgroup strategy development. Workgroups have to decide whether their goal includes changing the basic culture-type of the overall organization, and workgroups must be prepared for the efforts required to functionally sustain organizational change.

Organizations tend to have their own culture-type (represented within the four developmental phases above). Experience tell us that the probability of success for a workgroup using an approach that is in conflict with the basic organizational culture-type is quite low when compensatory actions are not built into the workgroup’s efforts. In other words, if a workgroup is chartered within a non-collaborative organization AND it states that its goal is to develop collaborative decision-making, then for the workgroup to be successful it will have to expend resources in:
- creating an environment conducive to decision-making;
- maintaining an environment conducive to collaborative implementation; and,
- performing the original core work that is its charter.

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7 Work Teams That Work: Skills for Managing Across the Organization. A. Montebello page42
If that same workgroup adopted a strategy that was consonant with the developmental phase of the overall organization, its path to success would be easier. This workgroup would only have to create an environment conducive to decision-making and perform its core work. Experience tells us that most workgroups underestimate the amount of work required to maintaining the functional sustainability of a collaborative implementation in a non-collaborative organization.

Collaboration is not a necessary condition of successful organizational performance. There are examples of the appropriate use of non-collaborative decision-making and organizational culture. A key to the success of a non-collaborative approach appears to be that it thrives in well-regulated organizations. Well-regulated organizations allow employees to thoroughly understand the rules of operation and to maximize the opportunities for achieving perquisites and promotion. It may be that in well-regulated organizations the employees can themselves trade-off the disadvantages of non-collaborative decision-making for perquisites they can gain by helping decision-makers execute business decisions. In this way, employees may not suffer from the "frustration, anger, and resistance to goals" because they know that the business rules tell them that they can get ahead by executing decisions of their seniors. Those same business rules also allow employees to understand those decisions that are worth experiencing frustration and those that are not.

**Change Can Only Be Affected By Those Who Can Make it Happen**

What if a workgroup called a meeting and no one came? What if a “decision” was made and no one cared? The Random House College Dictionary First Edition, 1982 defines *decision* as:

> The act of deciding, as on a question or problem, by making a judgment.

Whereas the word *decisive* is defined as:

> Having the power or quality of determining; putting an end to a controversy.

Given these two definitions, it follows that workgroup effectiveness would be enhanced when it is focused on achieving decisive actions more so than a focus on achieving a series of decisions. For decisions to be decisive they must have backing by those in the organization that can put an end to the controversy. The workgroup must define those people as key stakeholders, and they must be brought along with the workgroup through major milestones.
How to Proceed

Once the basic charter and appropriate group membership is determined, the process can move ahead. In most cases, facilitated consensus building meetings are appropriate. Some basic steps for successful consensus building meetings:

- Understand the meaning of consensus
- Agree on group purpose, values and authority
- Understand the proposal/issue
- Resolve concerns
- Summarize decisions
- Evaluate outcome of consensus process
- Identify follow-up issues

Current Situation:

A new VHA IT advisory committee, the Information Technology Advisory Committee, has been established to:

- Establish the business goals and IT support needs
- Develop an inventory of current IT assets (including infrastructure, hardware, software, and personal services)
- Assess IT needs in support of VHA business goals and objectives
- Prioritize current and future IT initiatives
- Recommend initiatives and projects to be funded to the National Leadership Board

The committee has broad representation from VHA IT stakeholders, including 6 Network Directors, Medical Center Directors, Network CIOs, Clinical Managers, Financial Manager, the VHA Director of Policy and Planning, the VHA CIO and VHA ACIO for Technical Services. This group has the authority to make decisions and recommendations on the above charter.

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9 That is, understanding the degree of consensus appropriate to the organization
Recommendations:

The limitation here is that the Clearinghouse staff are not positioned within the organization to make process changes of this type, and cannot directly influence overall process. However, there are a number of actions that can be taken in order to indirectly influence the consensus building process.

Given the context outlined above, we present the following options to assist in the process:

1. Build relationships with those having authority to modify process;
2. Communicate regularly with committee representatives;
3. Present the current status of the Clearinghouse and the existing process to the committee, or to the department representative on the committee;
4. Proceed with existing plan, present output to committee and demonstrate value-added.

Guidance from senior management is now needed on business drivers and the new process for IT initiative submission. Once business drivers are approved, Clearinghouse staff can incorporate them into the Strategic Ranking Model, an administrative change management tool.