

THE TECHNOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING UNIVERSITIES IN TRANSITIONAL ECONOMIES

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Group process methods for problem-solving and planning are now widely used in organizations in the U.S. Such methods, which involve active participation by employees, are not often used in Russia. We believe these methods would help Russia move from a centrally planned, authoritarian style of management to a more participatory, information-sharing style of management. Accordingly, two training sessions were held with faculty members at universities in Irkutsk and Novosibirsk. This paper describes how these meetings were arranged, the results of the planning activities, and the implications of participatory methods of decision-making for organizations in Russia and in other transitional economies.

***KEYWORDS:** participation, facilitation, empowerment, problem-solving, planning, organizational development*

PARTICIPATORY PROBLEM-SOLVING AND PLANNING

Improving the performance of an organization, such as a university, requires the participation of many people. Leaders of organizations need to involve the members of their organizations and supportive people outside the organization in order to use all of the knowledge and resources available. How can such involvement be brought about? In the U.S. group facilitation methods have proven to be quite effective. This report focuses on one set of these methods called the Technology of Participation (ToP). These methods were developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA).

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (www.icaworld.org) began doing community development projects in the 1960s. They developed a set of facilitation methods for leading people in a community or organization through a problem-solving or planning conversation that are now used around the world. For a history of the Institute of Cultural Affairs, see Umpleby and Oyler (2003) or Stanfield (2000). Also available are descriptions of ICA's years of social work in urban communities and rural villages (Bergdall, 1993; Pesek, Elizondo and Dunn, 2000), ICA's methods of participation (Spencer, 1989; Williams, 1993; Stanfield, 2001; Stanfield, 2003), the use of the methods in business (Troxel, 1993), in government (Troxel, 1995), in education (Nelson, 2001), and in civil society organizations (Burbidge, 1997). In 1994 the International Association of Facilitators (www.iaf-world.org) was created by ICA staff and volunteers and many practicing consultants.

The ToP Methodology

The ToP group process planning methods can be used with any group of people who share a common interest. They may be residents in a community or an apartment building, members of an association, employees of a business or a government agency, volunteers working with a non-governmental organization, or members of a university department (Umpleby, 1989). A facilitated problem-solving or planning activity involves people in identifying problems as they see them and in devising solutions that they think will work (Umpleby, 1994). Hence, this method leads to strategies and actions that are suited to the local culture.

Strategic planning should be repeated at regular intervals, about every six months or year. Before the second planning activity begins, the group should review the report from the earlier planning activity and discuss what actions were implemented and what actions were not implemented. What plans were easier or more difficult to implement than expected? There should be a conversation about what was learned since the first report. The group then repeats the conversation. As the size of the group becomes larger, more time is needed. For a group of twenty people or less, small group break-out sessions are usually not necessary. For larger groups, small groups allow more opportunities for people to express themselves and to listen to the views of others.

TWO PROBLEM-SOLVING MEETINGS IN RUSSIA

These methods are now beginning to be used in universities in Russia. (Some earlier work using ICA methods in Russia was done by David Dunn.) The work with universities began when Stuart Umpleby was invited to Irkutsk for a week of consultation and lecturing as part of a World Bank grant to Baikal State University of Economics and Law. As one instructional exercise, he led a problem-solving meeting as a way of illustrating the Technology of Participation. Tanya Medvedeva attended the meeting and in fact conducted most of the discussion in Russian. A few months later she decided to lead a similar discussion with the members of her department or cathedra in Novosibirsk.

These two meetings were the first facilitated conversations held at these two universities. The two meetings were primarily introductions to a different way of holding a meeting. Each meeting was intended to acquaint the participants with this method of organizational improvement and to give them an introduction, during the orientation part of the activity, to the range of situations in which facilitated group conversations can be used. The subject of the planning activities was "improving the university." Both meetings used two steps of the Consensus Workshop, see Figure 1. The participants first defined the problems or challenges they were facing. The participants then formulated strategies and actions to deal with the problems. The result was a list of problems and a list of suggestions for actions that could be taken in the following months.

Context: *set the stage, state the purpose, describe the process*



Brainstorm: *generate new ideas*



Cluster: *look for relationships among the ideas, group the ideas*



Name: *discuss the largest cluster first, give each cluster a name*



Resolve: *confirm the resolve, discuss the significance of the consensus, discuss next steps and implications*

Figure 1. Elements of a Consensus Workshop

Due to limited time the planning activity had only two parts – problems or challenges and strategies or actions. In a one-day event the morning could be devoted to opportunities and challenges and the afternoon to strategies and actions. A two-day planning meeting could discuss the vision of the organization in the morning of the first day and obstacles to achieving the vision on the afternoon of the first day. Strategies to remove the obstacles would be discussed on the morning of the second day and actions to implement the strategies on the afternoon of the second day (see Figure 2). Each step of the Strategic Planning Process is conducted using a Consensus Workshop. At the end of a two day event an organization has a written statement of its vision, a list of obstacles to achieving the vision, a set of strategies for removing the obstacles, and a list of assignments of who should do what, when and at what cost in order to implement the strategies. In the weeks and months after the planning meeting, progress in implementing the plans should be communicated to the whole group. Communicating achievements both celebrates successes and subtly reminds others of unfinished tasks.

PROBLEMS FACED BY RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES

The problems of Russian universities are primarily due to the current time of transitions. There is constant change and great uncertainty. Universities are searching for new ways of operating. They now have to work in a situation of high economic risk. They are looking for new partners for cooperation in the educational process.

In this time of large social and economic changes, the style of management in universities needs to change as well. In the former Soviet Union, the centrally planned, authoritarian style of management could be described as a mechanical model of management. That is, managers tried to control everything, and they saw the goal of management as creating a system which would work without further involvement in it. They wanted to create a management system once and for all and never disturb its functioning. But in a market economy it is impossible to control

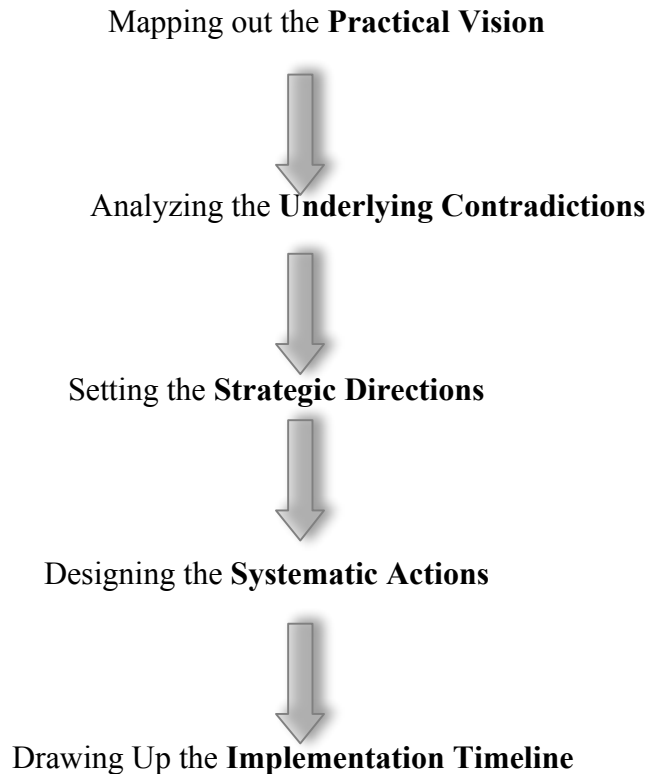


Figure 2. Steps in the ToP Strategic Planning Process

everything. Strict management is unrealistic in a situation when many solutions are possible, when there is a rapid rate of technological and structural shifts, and when productive relationships are becoming more dynamic and complicated.

Another aspect of the transition is that people in the Soviet Union had to accept an authoritarian, repressive style of management, which suppressed individuality and initiative. Consequently, people came to believe that nothing depended on them in their country. The Soviet Union developed high technology but conserved the old, czarist style of social relationships among people, including a repressive style of management.

The present combination of problems produces inconsistent results. Often top managers of Russian universities are willing to accept market rules in society in order to survive in the new social and economic conditions. But they are not ready to accept more competitive, market rules among employees in order to change the climate inside universities, for example by paying and promoting people according to the quality of their work.

USING ToP METHODS IN RUSSIA

Before doing two ToP exercises in Irkutsk and in Novosibirsk the authors had discussed the possibility of using ToP methods for making changes in Russian universities. Umpleby was optimistic and believed that these methods could be very helpful for Russian universities in the time of transitions. Oyler had conducted facilitation training programs in Tajikistan and many other countries and was confident the methods could be used in Russia as well. Medvedeva was pessimistic because her knowledge of Russia, Russian culture, Russian history, Russian mentality and current conditions told her that Russians are not ready for such experiments. Her view was shared by some foreign experts who were skeptical about using Total Quality Management methods in Russian enterprises for the same reasons (Medvedeva and Umpleby, 2002). Schneider and Barsoux (2003) expressed a similar opinion.

Participation is less likely in cultures where power is in the person (personal versus instrumental). Sharing power in this context is more difficult. Efforts to empower employees in Russia have often led to frustration. Russian employees expect strong and paternalistic management. Individual initiative is suspect, and information sharing is considered dangerous.

Medvedeva's decision to try a ToP exercise in her cathedra resulted from the successful meeting at Baikal State University of Economics and Law. She was impressed by how easily Russian people became involved in the discussions, how well they worked together, how deeply they understood the problems of the University, how sincerely they wanted to solve them, and how clever the solutions were that they proposed. Her reaction might be surprising, but it is understandable if one recalls the social and political history of Russia.

The problem-solving meeting in the Cathedra of Economics at Medvedeva's university was successful as well. First, there was a fruitful discussion. Second, the members of the cathedra organized themselves to solve their problems. Third, hope increased that it is possible to make positive changes. Fourth, a plan was constructed for making the changes.

For Medvedeva this meeting had an unexpected result. She was invited to the Management Department of the West-Siberian Railroad for several conversations about the problems of railroad management in the new economic system. As a result of these conversations she was chosen to head a new management training center for the West Siberian Railroad. Now the Siberian State University of Transport has decided to reorganize its work to emphasize quality improvement. This decision was made after the ToP exercises, after the opening of the management training center and after a conference on quality improvement in education, which was held in Novosibirsk in May 2003.

WHY FACILITATION METHODS ARE USEFUL

There are several reasons why group facilitation methods are important for Russia today.

1. They help people work together to solve shared problems. Indeed they help people discover that they agree on the problems that need to be solved and on appropriate solutions.
2. They teach people a method of facilitative leadership as opposed to hierarchical, command leadership. This is important in the post-communist countries. People now have freedom to act, but they do not know how to work together without orders from a superior.
3. Everyone's ideas are accepted. When an idea is written down, it goes up on the board. Ideas can be clarified, but not rejected. Usually this is not stated explicitly. It is just part of the method.
4. Ideas that many people feel are important are mentioned more often. Hence, the issues people feel are most important become visible.
5. Attempting to implement the actions and then going through the exercise again teaches people what is easy, what is difficult, and where more work needs to be done in order to make progress.
6. Facilitation is not a highly technical method. Knowledge of computers and programming are not needed. Higher education is not needed. Paper, felt pens, and tape are available around the world.
7. The method works in businesses, government agencies, communities, universities, hospitals, etc.
8. People learn that there are things they can do themselves. They do not need to wait for the boss to act. Hence, the method increases self-confidence and initiative, both for the individual and the group. This is probably the most important consequence for the post-communist countries.
9. Managers like the method, because the organization makes progress without them doing very much. They can focus more on long-term and strategic issues and less on improving internal processes.
10. People learn the method while participating. No separate training is required, though it can be quite helpful. People move up from participant to small group leader to large group leader, when they are ready. Although experience is necessary to lead a group, no prior training is necessary to participate.
11. Each planning event can also be a marketing event by inviting observers from other organizations or parts of an organization.
12. It is important to include people who can provide resources. By participating they learn what the group intends to do and can offer to help in the most strategic way.

CONCLUSION

ToP methods are an example of how an organization or community can increase participation, enhance coordination, and improve morale. The methods are an effective way of team-building, of convincing people that their ideas will be listened to and acted upon, and of increasing motivation. These methods could be taught in universities around the world, and, through service learning programs, universities could become a “delivery system” for these methods to communities and organizations (Umpleby and Shandruk, 2003).

In the case of Russia, some universities still have an administrative, command style of management, despite 15 years of market reforms in the country. There were anti-bureaucratic reforms during the time of "perestroika". But currently there are an increasing number of bureaucrats in Russia. A repressive style of management is continuing. Bureaucrats have increasing power, and freedom for workers has declined during the time of democratic changes. But there is great potential for designing a new society based on the skills and vision of the people in the lower levels of Russian society. ToP methods can be used as an effective way of organizing people for constructive changes to improve the conditions of their lives.

The examples of innovations in Irkutsk and Novosibirsk show that participatory methods are increasingly accepted in Russian universities. However, the development of the new style of management is complicated. The paradox is that the managers of the University have concluded that the University is no longer effective and that it is now necessary to change the style of management. But the actions to realize the changes, which are so painful for the current system, must be implemented inside the system and by means of the system. Hence, change will not be easy. But it is underway, which is a source of optimism.

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