Chapter 17

Some Tools for Engagement

CHANGING THE WAY we engage is nowhere near the whole story, but it is a key leverage point for the consultant. As consultants, we are not around for most of the client's interactions, but if we can help them engage differently when we are around, it will spread into the rest of their working.

Change will occur to the extent we use each particular event as a sample of the way we wish the larger implementation to proceed. Each moment becomes an example of the destination. If you are holding a meeting to discuss a new set of measures for a telephone call center, for example, this meeting on measures needs to encourage all of the major principles of implementation:

- Balanced participation

- Real choice on the table

- Difficult questions dealt with publicly

- Connection and vulnerability built into the conversation

- Physical space based on the circle.

Enough theory. What follows are examples of concrete ways I have come to rely on for engaging people, regardless of the setting or the expectations they have on entering the room. All together, these methods embody all the elements of engagement and lead to flawless implementation, for they confront the emotional work that this phase requires. There is great emphasis on structuring and conducting meetings because the way we meet becomes a metaphor for the way we work together day to day.

Methods You Can Really Use

We draw conclusions about the culture and decide whether to trust it by the experiences we have when the culture is convened. If we want to change the culture toward greater accountability and commitment, we can do it by transforming our gatherings.

Here are practical ways to structure a meeting. Each one embodies most of the five elements of engagement:

- High-intensity participation

- Transparency and the public expression of doubt

- Placing choice on the table

- Changing the conversation

- Co-creating structures to fit purpose

And each structure includes activities that affirm the metaphor of meeting as an expression of culture. The structures, theories, and practices here are powerful in themselves, but even more so as concrete examples that carry the larger message. Having people engage one another this way, either by doing the activities as described here or in some form of your own creation, will build accountability for bringing to life the changes that your client has chosen.

Structure 1. Open with Transparent Purpose and Level Playing Field

Whoever convenes the meeting needs to describe the concerns that began the process, define where the change effort is at this moment, describe what the organization needs from us right now, and give some idea of the structure of this step.

Most of us are familiar with the need for this kind of information. The key is to tell the whole story. This includes weaknesses and failures. Don't protect people from bad news in the name of protecting them from anxiety. Anxiety is the natural state, best handled in the light of day. My only caution is to keep it short and informal. More from the heart than from the head.

What is *not* needed are upbeat motivational blessings or homilies from managers or important sponsors who will not be part of the whole session. To have an executive show up for the beginning, express commitment to the process, and then leave is oxymoronic. To say, "I care, I am committed, and I'm gone," does not play well. It is regal and patronizing behavior, demeaning the proceedings and those who stay.

Structure 2. Renegotiate Expectations About Participation

We go to meetings expecting something to happen *to* us. We are programmed for entertainment and wonder how good a meeting they are going to run. The forms we use to evaluate a meeting

ask questions about its leaders: Were they prepared? Were their objectives clear and well met? What was the quality of the visual aids? How many evaluation forms have you filled out that asked you about your contribution to the meeting? Meeting leaders always say, "What we get out of the meeting is up to all of us," but they usually don't mean it—and we don't believe it—and few really act on it.

I was in a bar once and the entertainers began by saying, "We are the Southern County Rounders … and you are the audience." I thought that they understood something profound about the relationship between them up front and us in the cheap seats. By naming us they declared that we, the audience, had a job to do also. That we had to join in creating the performance. The passive contract between leader and participant needs to be shifted early and dramatically. Here is a way to do it.

The Activity

After the opening, tell people you want them to answer four questions. The questions confront people with the nature of their participation in the meeting we are about to have. Embedded in the questions is the belief that the participants will create the experience they are about to have. Have them rate each question on a 7 point scale, where 1 is very low and 7 is very high.

- **Question 1. How valuable an experience do you plan to have in this session or this effort—not what kind of experience you want, but what kind do you plan to have?**

The Point

People are responsible for their own experience. Therefore they have the capacity to determine, up front, the quality of their experience at each moment. If we are going to have a disappointing experience, then let us name it in the beginning and get about the business of making it come true. In answering this question we are faced with deciding, even in a whimsical way, the success of our own future.

Each step of the way in a consulting project is a sample of the larger culture and the larger effort at implementation. If we can decide the quality of this step, then we can decide the quality of every step. And each person in the room has to be faced with this choice. It does not matter how people answer the question; once they answer it, they have taken a step in making the effort their own.

- **Question 2. How engaged and active do you plan to be?**

The Point

This is an investment question. We know that the success of implementation will depend on widespread ownership and care. We care for what we have invested in, complained about, spoken for. This question carries within it a demand for activism. If we say no, we do not plan to participate, we have at least defined that stance for ourselves and surrendered, a little, our instinct

to watch and blame others' participation. Plus, if people approach a process with cynicism and reluctance, naming the reluctance is the first step in shifting it.

For those who say they plan to be somewhat or very active, stating it early creates pressure to be true to the intent. And we are asking for the intent early, before the stakes are either clear or in play.

- **Question 3. How much risk are you willing to take?**

The Point

This is a question about learning. All learning, change, and transformation come from stepping toward tension. The important moments of our work have been ones of risk, stress, and anxiety. The institutional instinct is to stay calm, move according to plan, be in control, and, above all, don't be surprised. It is just this instinct that turns human systems into mechanical ones. Much of our reluctance to commit is grounded in our wish for safety.

This question is also a measure of our commitment and, as for the other questions, even the answer "no risk" is a starting point for accountability. When I become willing to be accountable for my own position, I have begun to be accountable for something larger.

- **Question 4. How invested are you in the quality of the experience of those around you? What is your level of concern about the well-being of the larger group.**

The Point

This is a Samaritan question. It is a question of accountability: To be accountable is to care first about the larger institution, then to ask what's in it for me. This is a radical stance in a culture that thinks self-interest is the only interest in town. We have listened to the voice of the economist and thought it was the only voice. We have constructed the workplace as a place of barter. Give only where and when you get. You get yours, 'cause I've got mine.

This question confronts the belief that people will consistently choose in favor of themselves over the larger system. It is the most difficult question for people to answer and therefore the most useful. It gets at the heart of implementation and change. Care for a larger purpose is all we have to invite people to go through the stress, loss, and uncertainty of real change.

These four questions have in them the seeds of what is needed for implementation to take hold. At their center, they begin to renegotiate the contract between the leaders and consultant and the participants. That is why they need to be asked early. True, they are just four questions, but they raise the right issues and trigger the right discussions.

When people have answered the questions, have them share their answers with three people around them. Urge them to be curious with each other. Forget the right answers; there aren't any. The process of simply answering the questions and then having to say the answers out loud changes the culture in the room. It communicates to each participant that something more is

required than just to sit in the audience. Even if a person does not want to engage and prefers to be quiet and listen, at least it becomes a choice and not a constraint of the setting.

Having done this many times, I can assure you that something always shifts. There is more life in the room. People ask more questions. Some people get irritated. Some would rather keep talking to their neighbor then return to the speaker. All signs of life.

Structure 3. Rearrange the Room

I want to repeat the core concept mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: Change will occur to the extent we use each particular event as a sample of the way we wish the larger implementation to proceed. For example, in our earlier telephone call center example, the meeting on measures needs to encourage balanced participation, real choice on the table, difficult questions dealt with publicly, and the other major implementation principles. The topic of the meeting may be hard measures of telephone center effectiveness, but for them to have meaning people will have to agree to them and be creative about which measures really relate to better customer service and cost. There needs to be dialogue about how the prior measures worked and what doubts people have about the new ones. And most important, those being measured should have some voice in deciding either what the new measures are or how they are to be used, what is done with variances, and for whose sake we are measuring. All business questions, all dependent on employee commitment and care to really take hold.

These steps not only address the content of the meeting, but, regardless of the particular device you use, are important above and beyond the impact in the moment. You may say why make such a big thing out of a small activity like four questions, or rearranging the room? It is because these particular activities carry the message about the change in vision and culture that we have in mind. I am calling them the means of engagement, but they could easily be called the means of transformation or a change in culture.

So, back to the specifics.

The Theory

This particular meeting is a sample and leading indicator of all future meetings. The room, then, becomes a metaphor for the institutional change we have in mind. If we can change the room, and the way we inhabit it, we can change the institution and the way we inhabit it, also.

The Practice

Explain the Theory to the Group If we come together to explore a shift in the organization, we need to begin with this room and the space in which this exploration will take place. The task then is for us to rearrange this room to better fit the purpose for which we came. Now, we all did not come for the same purpose. The conveners of the meeting certainly have their purpose, but so does every other person. Some came to listen, some came to meet with their peers, some do not want to be here, some came to speak and be heard.

Give the Group Five Minutes to Physically Rearrange the Room to Fit Their Intent Tell people to move themselves, move the furniture, walk around, decide where they want to be and who they want to be with to best approach the task and achieve their goals. Then be quiet. Avoid eye contact. Leave the room. Do not be helpful. Let them struggle. They will not be sure whether to decide together how to move, or whether to allow a wide range of settings.

After a few moments of what seems like chaos, they will take over the room and it will look more like a makeshift flea market than a meeting to plan their future. Some will sit in circles, some will stay where they were, some will want tables, some not. Some will stay close to the door because they have leaving on their mind. Some may stand around the edges, postponing the commitment of where they plant themselves, or … maybe they just feel like standing.

You decide, also, where you want to be. You might want to change the "front" of the room. Move to the middle to continue. Or keep shifting where the front is, where the leader is, who is in charge.

Ask Them Questions About Their Personal Experience Take a few minutes to let them reflect on their individual experience with a few others. Have them consider the inertia in getting moving, deciding who to be with, finding others in the spot where they wanted to be … whatever. Let them stay in the new configuration and talk in small groups. Then ask them to share their comments with the whole group.

Ask How the Room Has Changed In what way is it different? Elicit as many viewpoints as possible, even from those who thought the whole thing was a waste of time. Keep in mind that, at the core, what has shifted is the ownership of the room. When they arrived, the convener, or the organization, or even the facilities people who care for the room had arranged the place. The room belonged to those who had set it up, those—in a sense—who came before us. Now this has shifted. The room belongs, at least for this moment or even today, to the whole group.

This shift is profound and may be the whole point of building emotional support for change or implementation. The room becomes a visible expression of how we collectively want to be together. And always a statement about who will create the structures and practices we need to proceed.

The Point

Rearranging the room is a wonderful example of how freedom will create at first its own chaos and confusion, even irritation, and then its own order. It will do so quickly and collectively, and

do it in a way that fits the task. We can create things together without all having to do the same thing, think the same way, or even locate ourselves in consistent structures. The ongoing challenge of taking action, what we are calling implementation, is how to keep inventing new structures and practices that fit our intentions. Plus to do this in a way that leaves room for local discretion.

The important point here is that there is not a right structure. There is no right way to arrange a room. Tables or not. Circle or square, or lined up like a chapel. Centralization or decentralization, functional or matrix or geographical organization. Is the leader at the front, behind a podium, on a stage, sitting in a circle? They all can work.

What matters is that everyone is engaged in adapting the structures to the task at hand. When we know that each of us can make the shifts to fit our own purpose and still serve the purpose of the larger organization, then the world has shifted. We no longer need to live by the rules of the economist and engineer. We become the architects, designers, authors of the institution in which we live. We have chosen to be accountable for the institution and no longer have to be held to it.

Structure 4. Create a Platform for Doubt

If doubt and even cynicism cannot be publicly expressed, then internal commitment cannot be offered freely. Some doubts give guidance for improvement, others don't. The engineer in us wants to answer every doubt. When you are building a bridge or airplane, you need to know that all the doubts and questions have been answered. Human systems are not so orderly, and many doubts will go unanswered. It is the expression of doubt that counts, not its resolution. We cannot construct a plan that eliminates all doubts, but we can always acknowledge them. We can acknowledge cynicism and make room for it without being paralyzed by it.

People can trust a system only when they see it can handle conflict and skepticism and not become punishing or collapse. An important task for the consultant is to give permission for the expression of negative feelings and to see that they are responded to in a respectful way. Designing time for public doubts and concern is the way faith in an institution is restored.

The Practice

Any Question Will Do Break people into teams of six to eight people and ask them to share with each other their doubts or reservations about whatever is the focus of the meeting. A colleague of mine, Kathie Dannemiller, one of the inventors of high-interaction methods of working with large groups, likes to ask people what excites them and what scares them. She also uses two other questions: "What did you hear?" and "What is your reaction?"

Ask Each Group to Report Do not require agreement or consensus within the teams. We want a wide range of reactions. The main purpose is to support open dialogue, not to decide anything. There is no need for the leaders or consultant to do anything more than listen, maybe clear up questions of fact, and support the expression of doubt.

No Solutions Allowed This is a time for listening and speaking. Postpone action and recommendations. If we make decisions before there is connection, dialogue, and some commitment, the decisions that we do make will be corrupted by the isolation, caution, and distrust that exist at the beginning of the efforts.

The Point

The way we react to doubt, cynicism, even anger, tells the world whether we want negative feelings spoken or not. Our response becomes either an invitation or refusal for the next discussion. In fact the stronger the negative reaction, the more acknowledgement is required. Many of the skills of dealing with resistance outlined earlier in the book are appropriate here.

Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly do not become real except in moments of conflict and disagreement. The fact that the most alienated people in the organization are given a platform to speak does more to build commitment from those watching the conversation than any compelling presentation or financial incentive program ever can.

Structure 5. What Do We Want to Create Together?

There is no more powerful question than this one. And none more difficult to answer in any meaningful way. It is the question on which real accountability hinges. There are two parts to the question: One is the question of creation, the second is the question of together.

… Do We Want to Create? This is the dangerous part of the question. If I answer yes, I am no longer reacting to what has been handed to me. I am now beginning to define a future that ultimately I will be responsible for. Our institutional history has valued reacting and responding over creating and initiating. We have the rhetoric of innovation and initiative, but we are hardly organized to provide it. We use grades in school, appraisals in the workplace, and spin doctors in society to keep us in line and under control.

When we decide that we want to create, we are emotionally joining the organization in defining its future and in that way moving against the culture and our own habit. This may be why when we ask people to define their vision, the first try is quite dull. What you hear is a series of fashion statements fed back to you. People say their vision is continuous improvement, great customer service, a humane workplace, and, of course, economic success. My all-time favorite vision statement was a heartfelt commitment by a quality group to "accurate gauging."

When the question is "What do *we* want to create?" the demand is for an answer that is unique to this group. That is the work: to ask each group to construct a unique future that is right for their function. This is another way we confront people with their freedom. Asking people what they want to create forces the issue, even if the response may initially be pale.

… Together? Do we want to create something together? This is also a difficult one to answer. We may be used to creating something on our own, or in our unit, but when you say, in effect, what can we create together that we cannot create alone, you are asking for another level of collaboration. Most of the time when I have asked groups what they can create together, they return with a list of cooperative actions that each group can do alone.

To create something together, we have to cross boundaries and possibly yield territory. Most change efforts and implementation steps require this, and it is hard to do with any depth. This question opens us to the possibility and faces us with the reluctance of attending to the larger institution first and our own unit second.

The Practice

Simply Ask the Question, "What Do We Want to Create Together?" This task should be done in small groups that are mixed by level and function. You can focus the question on whatever the goal of the meeting is—could be a vision, could be a strategy for changing the measurement system, could be how to communicate with the rest of the organization. Whatever the specific focus, the discussion now is about a joint future.

Collect the Answers in the Larger Group Let the groups share their ideas. Post them on the wall. Look together at what they have come up with. Discuss common themes. This is the starting point for a co-created future.

A Tip

Sometimes it is hard for people to find the right words to say what is in their minds. Urge them to use language that is theirs alone. If they have heard a phrase before, they cannot use it. If they continue to have trouble finding the words, have each small team create a mural on a piece of flip-chart paper, using images, colors, anything *but* words. The images are always compelling and if posted on the wall bring some life into the room. If you have a long roll of paper, all the teams can create their mural on the same piece of paper. It takes them all one step closer to the idea of creating something together.

Structure 6. Creating a New Conversation

A change in action is preceded by a change in the conversation.[1] Old conversations lead to old actions. The challenge is to have a task-related conversation that people have not had before. Holding onto the old conversation, the old way of naming problems or explaining answers, is a way of seeking safety and maintaining control. We each have our favorite answers: clear roles, clear goals, more structure, less structure, higher standards, more training, better communication—and everybody's favorite theme that someone else has to change before this will work. All of these ideas have value, and none of them is that helpful.

Answers that were helpful at one point in time become obstacles after a while because they keep us from moving on. They got us this far but, if we hang onto them too tightly, we cannot move forward. Old conversations are a way of holding to a position that we know we can defend. We want people to take positions that they cannot defend. Then we know we are in new territory. Plus, optimism is born the moment we are surprised by what we say or what we hear.

The Activity

Step 1 *First create circles of eight.* Get rid of the tables, if at all possible. Tables are good for leaning and eating, but having no tables is best for surprise and unrest, which is the essence of change. Ignore the typical complaints that they will have no place to put their water bottle or notes or elbows. Just use chairs. If they feel too exposed, tell them to cross their legs and arms.

Step 2 *Conversation as usual.* Let them discuss the agenda in whatever fashion they are used to. After ten minutes, ask them how it is going. What are they learning? What has surprised them? What you will mostly hear is that the conversation was business as usual.

Step 3 *Knees nine to twelve inches from your neighbor.* Tell them to sit in a circle with their knees nine to twelve inches from the person to their left and right. Not seven inches, not fourteen inches. Nine to twelve inches. This is a physical way to illustrate the kind of new conversation you want them to experience. It forces the experience of the circle; it gets people close enough so they have to be aware of and see those around them, and it counteracts the instinct to withdraw to the fringe of the action and be an emotional spectator to the game others are creating. Meetings are neither entertainment nor a spectator sport. This structure makes that clear.

Walk around the room to urge them into this configuration. You will notice that this forces them to lean forward and engage. Diabolical, but effective. For those who complain, smile and offer a glazed look. Think of the last meeting you attended and the look will come naturally.

You are going to feel a little foolish being so controlling about something so personal. Live with the feeling. There is something about the specificity of a nine-to-twelve-inch space between each person in a circle that is so absurd it is hard to defend against. It may be just this absurdity that gives an excuse to try a different conversation.

Step 4 *The new conversation.* Now it gets interesting. Tell them that for the next few minutes you want them to have a conversation they have not had before. It has to be related to the purpose

of the meeting. But tell them that any hope, change, or growth they might have come for will only occur through a new conversation.

Tell them they have twenty minutes to have a conversation, related to the agenda, they have not had before. If they cannot think of anything new to say, ask them to sit in silence. Better to be quiet than return to a routine that has no meaning. This is the space where we stop digging deeper the hole that we are in.

Step 5 *Stop the conversation.* After ten minutes, stop the talk, and ask them how it is going. Many of the groups will say that it is still the same old conversation. Tell them you understand, but this time you are serious. Have them continue the conversation, but you will be coming around to check on them. Restart the groups. Now walk around and ask each one if it is a new conversation. If it is not new, ask them to be silent until it is.

Step 6 *Reconvene the whole.* Ask, What was different? What did they learn? What new came out of it? If nothing else, the task will bring some life into the room. Even the groups that stayed with the old conversation are now confronted with something new: their own reluctance to move forward rather than their "leaders'" reluctance to change. This puts the attention where it belongs—on all of us.

If this activity does nothing else, it gives hope that each time we come together, we have the capacity to transform our experience. This is how culture changes in the moment, and if we do it often enough, we learn more, risk more, and move more quickly. Change and its cousins, surprise and unrest, are always within our reach. They are just waiting for us to design them into existence.

Structure 7. Choosing Commitment and Accountability

We build capacity when commitment and accountability are chosen. In this modern society we have lost faith in our willingness to choose to be accountable. We think we have to legislate accountability, or we have to "manage accountability," or purchase accountability with incentive schemes. These low-faith strategies create their own dead weight, so we have to keep propping them up over time. They create a cycle in which the more management and legislation, the more resistance and loopholes are created, and this evokes a new wave of management and legislation. This is true of the workplace and the larger culture.

The alternative is to have faith that there are conditions in which people want to be accountable: They want to set high goals, care for the well-being of the larger organization, and know how they are doing. One of those conditions is a crisis. In a crisis the rules are suspended, status and self-interest are put aside, and the task and purpose override habit. The challenge is to find the same willingness without a crisis.

There are two conditions of accountability that support high-commitment implementation strategies. The first is that we need to be accountable to our peers first and our boss second. The second is that we need to commit without negotiation or barter.

Peer Accountability

There is a power among peers that bosses can never approach. For one thing, we have a lifetime of practice in managing bosses. It begins with our parents. As children we may have felt that our parents were in charge, but once we become parents we know that was not true. Parents can give orders and administer consequences, but at the end of the day the child decides when to clean the room or put the dishes away. We work hard at managing and, at times, manipulating those who have power over us. Over the years we become maze-bright. We learn how to handle our parents, teachers, and finally bosses, so that we can do what we want and not have to pay a price for it. When our bosses are upset with us, we have learned how to say "thank you for the feedback" as a way of defending against their disappointment, and not really having to change.

Our peers, however, are less likely to tolerate this sort of maneuvering. They see us more clearly, and they are around more, so they are harder to manipulate. This is one reason being accountable to peers is a more demanding proposition. Also, our interdependence lies with our peers, not our boss. It is their work that is eased when we do well and made difficult when we do poorly. They have to pick up the slack and operationally live with our mistakes. Peers are the ones we are functionally accountable to, no matter who conducts our performance review.

We have begun to recognize this interdependence in our attention to teams, team building, and team pay schemes. The next step is to initiate more formal peer conversations about commitments and consequences. We want to adhere to the principle that accountability needs to be a voluntary act, and this has more power with peers.

Peer accountability also means that it is up to peers to speak for the well-being of the organization. It is not just the bosses' function. Peers need to tell us whether we have committed enough to meet the promises of the unit and larger system. This requirement to think of the interests of the whole system has as much impact on the peers listening to the commitments as on the person making them.

Commitment Without Negotiation

A second element of implementation via consent is to explore what *commitment* and *promise* really mean. We are very much a negotiating culture. We like to bargain for goods and have the concept of *quid pro quo* deeply embedded in our relationships. The ideas about contracting outlined earlier

in this book are a good example of this. I want to make a distinction, though, between living up to our contractual agreements and making an emotional or personal commitment.

A personal commitment means that we agree to do something that is not conditional on the response of someone else. That is why the word *promise* is so appropriate. If we make our commitments conditional on the response from another, they are really not commitments; they are contracts or other forms of barter. They become conditional agreements that can be withdrawn if the other side does not deliver. Throughout this consulting process we have been seeking the internal commitment required to get past the rhetoric and cosmetic change that surround us. A commitment is a promise or a pledge to do something. Even in its dictionary definition, there is no mention of anything received by the person making the pledge; it is only about the choice to be made.

If we commit in this spirit, the discussion about how the top needs to change, how other departments and people stand in the way, how systems and practices don't support the change—it all disappears. At the moment of commitment the institution becomes ours to create, and in that act of committing we can find our freedom. We now proceed on our own, and with others we have freely joined. Something has shifted for us and the institution.

There will still be obstacles and disappointment, but they will not breed cynicism, for we were not choosing on the basis of another's action. If there is an affirmation or loss of faith, it will not be in others but in ourselves.

The Activity

Accountability and commitment take form in the promises we are willing to make. The language of promises is quite different from goals and objectives. Strong language, difficult to make. Yet there is something sacred and freely chosen in a promise. Here is an activity that confronts and cements people's will to proceed.

Step 1 *Sit in groups of up to eight people.* The groups should be people who have a future together. A work team or people working together on a project. The boss joins the circle and participates as a member.

Step 2 *People state their promises.* Each person states two kinds of commitments or promises: One is the results they agree to deliver, the second is their actions and behavior that will support the team effort. Remember that these promises are voluntary. There are no weapons on the table, no implied threat of punishment, and virtue alone will be the reward. Have people actually use this language: "The promise I am willing to make is…."

Step 3 *People state the measures that have meaning to them.* This may take more than one conversation, but it is good to begin it. The measures for each person need to fit with those of the others in the group and meet the requirements of the organization. The language to be used is: "The measures I choose and that have meaning to me are…." Enforce the language if you can. It makes a difference.

Step 4 *Peers answer the question, "Is that enough?"* The team decides whether each person's promises and measures are enough to meet the common goals. If not enough is promised, the person is asked for more. If the measures seem too soft, the person is asked for tougher ones. What is important is that all are speaking as owners of the unit. All are forced to think about the whole change or implementation and not just their own piece. The value of this discussion is in the dialogue as much as in the outcome.

Step 5 *The group picks a time to review their commitments.* The promises and measures should be put in writing and copies given to each member. It is best to have the documents be handwritten and signed at the bottom. This way, they are not technological and have some symbolic value. Have the handwritten promises/measures copied and bound and give each member a copy. Every few months, or sooner, the group meets to review them. Making promises to peers can mean unusual and very difficult discussions. It will take a few iterations before people get used to initiating with their peers real questions of performance. There are no formal punishments if people do not meet their targets. The team needs to confront the problem, but they do not need the formal sanctions of pay, probation, and low ratings to have influence on their members. In extreme cases the team and the boss may have to revert to some punitive action, but let that be the last resort instead of being built into every discussion, which is what happens when each subordinate negotiates commitments privately with the boss. These discussions can replace the usual performance review, but that is a bigger and more volatile subject than belongs here.

Structure 8. Positive Feedback

There is a need to bring closure to each meeting that acknowledges the effort and care brought into the room. One good way to finish is to focus on the strengths and value each participant brought to the proceedings. We live in a world that is much more interested in our weaknesses and deficiencies than in our gifts. This is so common that we have even come to believe that it is useful. Not so. Most of us have been working on our deficiencies for much of our life, and look at the progress we have made.

If negative feedback were so useful, we would have it together by now, and we don't. The primary impact of focusing on weaknesses is that it breeds self-doubt and makes us easier to control. That is why it is so compelling and popular. We fear that if everyone really understood their strength and value, the system might not hold together. Everyone might exploit their free agency, become too expensive, and hit the road. Or stay and become unbearable. If they stayed, what would they demand? And as employees, we are so used to looking at our weaknesses that it has become a comfort to us.

As adults, we have harvested all the learning we can from focusing on weaknesses. And we are blind and embarrassed by our strengths, our capacity to forgive ourselves, our affirmation of the value we bring. Despite this, change comes more quickly from capitalizing on our strengths. This is true for an organization as well as for an individual.

The Activity

One of the joys of getting older is that you come to accept yourself as you are, deficiencies and all. You put aside your self-fix-it projects and become more effective because of it. Why wait? Why not institutionalize attention to strengths and capacities? At a minimum it will stimulate another new conversation.

Here is an activity that does just that. I have ended most implementation efforts this way and it rarely disappoints. It is never comfortable, but invariably useful.

Step 1 *Back to the circle (optional at this point: knees nine to twelve inches from your neighbor).* The group is made up of people who have worked together in this session this day. It does not matter whether people have a long or short history with each other.

Step 2 *Name the value each has brought to the session.* Focusing on one person at a time, take three minutes for each person. The rest of the group states what strengths the person embodies and what value was brought to this meeting. Be specific. Everyone does not have to speak, but each has to have a full three minutes in the sun.

Step 3 *Embarrassed Listening.* This is a new skill you can add to active listening. When you receive feedback on your value and gifts, maintain eye contact, take a breath, and say, "Thank you. I like hearing that." It may be the most honest thing you have said all day. Then let the group know when you cannot stand it any longer by saying "next" or simply pointing if that is easier.

Checklist #9. Preparing for Implementation

Here are some reminders on working the elements of engagement into the implementation process.

1. What will you do during each implementation event to tilt the balance away from presentation and more toward participation?

2. How are you planning to provide the space for people to voice their concerns and opinions? What will you do to promote openness and telling the truth?

3. Consider how you may be able to help define choices for the client. How could you help open opportunities for real choice at many levels of the organization? How can you structure time for serious dialogue on how things will change?

4. What will you do to help people get unstuck from the same old conversations and begin new ones about the hopes and doubts the proposed change generates?

5. How will you bring the power of place into your design for each event?

Mixing Metaphor and Methodology

These structures and activities are both methodology and a metaphor of a more universal possibility. Each symbolizes the larger intent and in that way has more meaning than its momentary effect. Implementation is not a universal, clear path stretched out before us. It is more complex than the phases of contracting and discovery, for it is more particular to each situation. The practices I have described are more a menu or a starting point than a series of steps, and each is an example of how to treat engagement as the central issue in implementation. We all wish for a simpler path, as if decision were followed immediately by action, so we could see corrective action taken and then measure. This rational, problem-solving conception of how ideas get embodied into a living system presents a world that does not exist.

The world we live in is a political system, driven as much by the wish for safety, predictable territory, and a home-cooked meal as by analysis and reason. If something different and more adventurous is being forced on us, then we need methods that build relationships, that encourage local choice and more distributed governance, that value the importance of assembly, free speech, and the common purpose that these things foster.

This mind-set is what a consultant is in a unique position to offer. We are not so embedded in the culture that we cannot see it, nor are we so different from our clients that we cannot help them change it. If, however, we simply become a reflection of the way they have always brought their ideas to fruition, we will have left little behind.

Checklist #10. Reviewing an Implementation Event

Here are some questions to ask yourself after an implementation meeting. Use them to assess your own learning from each meeting and to prepare for the next one.

1. What was the outcome?

2. How was it like or different from what you expected?

3. How did people choose to engage in the process? How active were they? What kind of risk taking did you observe?

4. What happened when you rearranged the room? (Or did you?)

5. What doubts and reservations were expressed? How was the discussion handled—A rush to agreement? A search for solutions? or Was it possible for the group to postpone decision making?

6. How did the group determine what they wanted to create together?

7. What did people do to make new conversations occur? How did you help? What did they learn?

8. What promises were people willing to make? Were they enough?

9. What did you do to end the meeting so that each participant's effort and contributions were acknowledged?

10. What effect on your relationship with the client did this event have?

11. What would you do differently next time?

[1] Joel Henning has been a teacher of mine in understanding and articulating that you change the culture by changing the conversation.