

People Skills

Change Management Tools—Ideal State Analysis

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This is the second in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of the OD trade. OD stands for organization development, a discipline that offers much to the OR/MS practitioner determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions.

(Decision analysis: theory. Organizational studies: decision making.)

Successful change enablers rely on a handful of tools that work. One of the most powerful tools in my toolbox is ideal state analysis (ISA). Because of its power and universal applicability, ISA is an absolutely vital tool to any professional problem solver. A few simple examples will illustrate what it is and why it works.

Man on the Moon

In the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy fired the imagination of an entire country by painting a picture of an American walking on the surface of the moon by the end of the decade. This compelling vision helped galvanize the nation to support a quest that seemed impossible by any logical measure. The rest is history.

President Kennedy's vision of a man on the moon is a classic example of an ideal state. In its purest form, an ideal state is a description of what someone wants, completely independent of what he or she thinks is possible. Springing from the right or creative side of the brain and limitless in scope, such a vision opens the door to breakthroughs of unimaginable proportions. It is the natural analog to the left brain's precise, cause-and-effect thinking, which so many of us pride ourselves on. Without it, we are yin without yang,

head without heart, left without right. Yet, many would-be problem solvers know it as "the vision thing," if they know of it at all.

The ISA Process

Creating a vision of an ideal future state is only the first step in ISA. The second step requires an honest assessment of the current state. The third step yields a number of creative alternatives to bridge the gap between the current state and the ideal state. While ISA seems straightforward in theory, it can include some serious difficulties in practice. One must apply ideal state analysis properly to avoid these pitfalls and capitalize on its remarkable power to transform.

Ideal State Analysis in Practice

If there is one thing that I learned about the analytical problem-solving process, it is that the first and most important step in the process is to define or specify the problem. I had a very successful career as a management scientist following this simple dictum.

Yet, today when I work with a client in my role as an organization-development consultant, I spend very little time defining the problem in the beginning. Once

I have a general idea of the client's view of the situation, I focus on discovering what the client really wants. Specifically, I ask my client to describe the outcomes that he or she would ideally like to see as a result of our work together. For the ideal future state, not the current state, is the key to unlocking the breakthrough solutions that so many people want today.

When you think about it, this is completely logical. Most attempts to eliminate the shortcomings of existing methods or processes can promise only modest gains, whereas radical new approaches, which more often than not render the current system obsolete, can promise order-of-magnitude improvements. If you want to limit yourself to incremental improvements, focus on the current state first. If you want revolutionary gains, focus on the ideal future state first.

Once you have helped the client to clearly define the ideal state, the next step is to use your analytical ability to help him or her specify the current state. While this seems straightforward and routine, to do it right in the context of ISA you need to do something slightly different than usual. Specifically, you need to focus only

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on those aspects of the current state that are directly related to the ideal future state, rather than trying to help the client specify the current state in its entirety. For example, I once worked with the top management team of the logistics function in a large computer company. The company had a number of problems with its current system that it desperately wanted to fix. After working collaboratively to develop a breakthrough vision of the ideal future system, the managers realized that investing time and money in analyzing and trying to fix the problems with the current system would be a mistake because the new system they envisioned represented such a complete departure from the past.

The second step in the process is to specify as clearly and objectively as possible the most important aspects

of the current reality that relate directly to attaining the vision. The logisticians I mentioned earlier identified the independent, control-oriented nature of the local inventory control specialists as the only aspect of the current situation that might seriously impede the performance of the new, computer-assisted inventory sharing system they envisioned. They felt strongly that they could live with the rest of the current problems until the new system was in place.

Determining the actions needed to bridge the gap between the vision and the relevant portion of current reality is the final step of the ISA process. To accomplish this, I facilitate a brainstorming and action planning process involving the key people responsible for the change effort. This is much more powerful and likely to lead to a successful implementation than the traditional approach. The approach most often employed by non-OD consultants and problem solvers is to develop and sell to top management a plan for bridging the gap, which they then try to impose on the rest of the organization. This approach generally creates enormous resistance to change. Avoid it at all costs.

Conclusion

I hope you can see now that ISA is another powerful process from the OD toolkit. In my view, it is at the core of problem-solving competency. Ignore it, and you unwittingly restrict yourself and your clients to largely mediocre results. Use it, and you open the door to the limitless capacity of people to create a better future.

I coined the term *ideal state analysis* to describe a specific application of state theory developed by my company and discussed in this article. For a more detailed treatment of how to apply basic state theory to the management of complex change, I recommend Beckhard and Harris (1987).

Reference

Beckhard, R., R. T. Harris. 1987. *Organizational Transitions: Managing Complex Change*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.