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Transparent Strategy

R. Brian Stanfield

A transparent strategy emerges seamlessly from the group, rather than being imposed from the outside. It keeps the group balanced, gravitating between nitty-gritty reality and wild possibility.

Each person's view is a unique perspective on a larger reality.
– Peter Senge

Follow your plan, rather than your next good idea.
– ICA Research Paper

There was a rock in the middle of the road.
– Anon.

Action will remove the doubt that theory cannot solve.
– 4th Century B.C. Chinese philosopher

When people first encounter an ICA planning process, they tend to see the method as a set of steps to get a group neatly participating in dialogue, problem-solving, or planning. At first, they learn to use the techniques somewhat mechanically. After further practice and reflection, they begin to see beyond the steps, gimmicks and techniques to the underlying method. It takes a while to realize that the methods come from a different paradigm; one where everyone is assumed to have wisdom to communicate, where everyone is responsible for the outcome, and where nothing is real until you have participated in it. From this paradigm, what happens to a group in facilitated planning is just as important as what the group produces.

Many Edges readers have seen the Technology of Participation (ToP™) method of strategic planning used in their organization, and some have taken the course, Facilitated Planning. Some have read a description of the steps in Laura Spencer's book *Winning Through Participation*. This article digs deeper into the dynamics to explore both the science and the artistry needed to bring off these sessions within a group.

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ToP™ Strategic Planning rests on certain assumptions:

- Like most ICA methods, it is highly participatory. It presupposes that everyone knows something that the group needs; that everyone has a piece of the puzzle.
- It does not start from scratch. The group or organization will already have clearly stated its mission, know its objectives for the year or four-year period, and understand its operational values.
- It assumes that those people who have to implement the plan are participating in the planning. Top-down planning does not work very well, as has been shown time and time again.
- Top management will be involved in, or at least aware of, the planning so that they will not feel threatened by the impression of losing control of what is going on.

ToP™ Strategic Planning includes these 4 major elements.

- **Practical Vision – creating a shared group vision**
- **Underlying Contradictions – identifying underlying issues blocking accomplishment**
- **Strategic Directions – focusing ideas for new directions**
- **Action Plan – organizing a specific practical plan of action.**

When a group decides to take two or three days of TOP™ strategic planning, it is committing itself to a substantial reality check. To develop a practical vision, a group has to be willing to examine its true situation and consider a range of future possibilities. To discern the underlying contradictions, the group has to be prepared to look at all the places where the vision is being negated. This is tantamount to admitting that something has to change...and it starts here! To create strategic directions requires creativity and risk. To forge action plans, the group needs each person's commitment to put wheels under the new directions through precise deeds and timelined assignments.

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“Humankind cannot bear very much reality.” T.S. Eliot reminds us of the evasive characteristics of human consciousness when confronted with overwhelming possibility or creaturely limitations. So it is that some groups do not allow themselves to hope and dream for the future in the vision workshop. Other groups shy away from looking at real contradictions, obstacles and other negations. Still others revel in clarifying all the blocks they face, but pull up short when it is time to make proposals to deal with those blocks. Then again, some groups and individuals participate strongly in the first three parts of the process, but, when it comes time to decide actions, suddenly lose all interest, or become confused or non-committal.

There is nothing abnormal in these responses. It is just as the poet says. This is why groups who get stuck often call on outside consultants to help them deal with their real situation, to help them get unstuck and move forward.

Let’s look more closely at the dynamics of each of the four parts of ToP™ strategic planning.

PRACTICAL VISION

We begin by looking at the desired future...the vision is a snapshot of that. The orientation is toward the positive—the situation we want to create and develop.

Seeing the Forest and the Trees

“You can’t see the forest for the trees” goes the well-known saw. The “forest” is the big picture and the vision of the future. Developing a practical vision is a way to see both the woods and the trees. People in organizations often get so involved in the nitty gritty details of their work that they forget why they are doing it. Creating or returning to their practical vision helps them “re-see” the whole, and do the whole along with the nitty gritty. Some organizations or parts of organizations have no vision at all. Others have the vision of doing what the boss says. Companies are finding that when their employees don’t help with planning, they deprive themselves of a rich source of information. When an organization gets participation in developing its practical vision, everyone gets a chance to “bracket” the trees for a while in order to see the woods, and to get fired up again over the possibilities of a future they want to help build.

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A Vision Is Latent

The hopes and dreams that make up the practical vision are usually latent. They are hidden, concealed in the depths of the subconscious, underneath all the daily workplace complaints. A participant might say, "Vision: I have zilch. But complaints, just listen to me." Underneath those woes is vision in disguise waiting for a chance to get into the open. You generally find the vision by asking people what they hope and dream for; what they need, long for, or anticipate. Indirectly, you can discern it in stories, symbols, styles, and architecture.

Sometimes visions jump out and suddenly appear in "Eureka!" fashion. Sometimes they seem to crawl down through the roof, out of the walls, or up through the floor in a painstaking process. The consultant's job is to help participants make overt their own consciousness and so express their operating vision, so that they can see new possibilities, fresh alternatives that answer to specific needs. A good vision is practical, full of specific things you can see. A good vision makes your heart groan with hope at the very thought of it: "Employee profit sharing'—oh, yes!"; "Introduction of teams'—My! O My!" "Permanent water supply'—Glory, alleluia!" To get to this stage, facilitators sometimes use visualization techniques to go beyond linear thinking and get the right brain imagination going. No group gets fired up about a knee-jerk vision of the future.

Element of Wildness

A good vision should have some elements of wildness. The facilitator needs to encourage a certain freedom of imagination in the group so that it can express its real hopes and dreams. The vision covers both real needs and felt needs. It must go beyond the tame and fairly predictable to include items that provoke a few Wow!s.

This wildness is in tension with the objectivity of the consultant and the objective dimension of the vision: that the hopes and dreams of the group are always expressed on behalf of the next generations—the group's children and grandchildren and beyond.

Organizations seem to understand when they need outside consultants. It was once said that no local community or organization could know and understand its operating vision until it encountered something "outside" or "other." To create the practical vision requires both the objectivity of the consultant and the subjectivity of the local participants. The consultant or planning facilitator has to play this "other" or objective role.

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UNDERLYING CONTRADICTIONS

The next step is to state what is getting in the way of realizing the vision.

Terminology

In ICA's current literature and courses, we refer to this process as locating the obstacles. Prior to 1986, we called it "underlying contradictions"—a somewhat weightier term than obstacle, which does not quite communicate, but one some clients found confusing. In this article, both terms are used. Obstacle or contradiction analysis is the linchpin of the ToP™ strategic planning process.

A third name we have used for underlying contradiction is block—in the sense of a logjam. The vision is to get lumber prepared and to market to bring in revenue. But the picture is of logs floating toward the mill, jammed together halfway down the river. Not only are they not going anywhere, but future logs coming downstream will also be blocked. Unless the logjam is cleared, nothing can happen.

Philosophy

The contradiction is the realm of that gap that any sensible person knows about—the gap between one's intention for a situation and what actually comes to be. In Western philosophy, Hegel came closest to describing what a contradiction is. His philosophy was based upon thesis and anti-thesis out of which emerges synthesis. Out of the tension of a thrust and a counter-thrust comes the "not yet". T.S. Eliot said it best: "Between the idea and the action falls the shadow."

The contradiction is the shadow that intervenes between what we want to do, and getting it done. The contradiction is whatever says NO to the Practical Vision—contradicting and negating it. You know you have a contradiction when you are driven to write proposals.

What a Contradiction Is Not

A contradiction is not a problem. A problem might be: "We're losing fax messages, because we've run out of paper and no one has ordered a fresh supply, because we haven't paid our stationery bill." Problems are dealt with by solving them: "Well, let's pay the bill, and get the copier paper." Contradictions run a lot deeper than that.

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Contradictions are not psychological, but sociological. They are related to structures, policies, patterns and forms that are saying “no” to the vision. Encountering unlikeable qualities in people can be unpleasant, but they are not contradictions. That certain people hate each other or don’t get along is not a contradiction—it will always be the case. Racial discrimination in the workplace is a contradiction. A contradiction does not deal with symptoms, but with sociological structures and policies that cut a group of people off from their desired future.

Similarly, contradictions should never be stated as moralisms. “Students are lazy” is not a contradiction. You have to dig deeper to find out why they might appear to be lazy. Maybe they’re being sent to school without any breakfast and need to be fed.

Contradictions are never stated in the negative. They are real entities; hence, it makes no sense for a contradiction to begin with the phrase “a lack of.” A lack of money is not a contradiction, while wasteful spending priorities might be.

What is a Contradiction?

A contradiction is a real locus in current society, or in an organization, that is a lever for the whole society or organization. It is a locus, or place, of social paralysis. No one knows what to do about it, because no one knows how to talk about it. It is like a family ashamed of their idiot son whom they keep locked up, so no one else will know about him.

Although a contradiction can be the source of great pain for many people, a contradiction is not negative. In fact, it can become the doorway to the future. When people come to terms with it, it can leverage an organization or a whole society into the future. Tiny, marginal farms were the painful reality that led to the creation of the cooperative movement.

It is a complex phenomenon—a vortex of underlying irritants, deterrents, and blocks. It is a coagulation of factors that transparently reveal the focal point of social paralysis. A “vicious colonial salt tax” was the doorway to Gandhi’s Indian revolution. It is always a struggle to capture a contradiction in a memorable three- or four-word phrase.

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Contradictions are not what people talk about round the water fountain. In fact, one definition of a contradiction is the unmentioned item in every conversation. It's what everyone shies away from, yet it permeates the whole community. In this sense, a contradiction is a timely social truth which, if allowed into the light, will shake the rafters and create a new situation.

The obstacles part of planning, like a root canal, is often the most painful part. But it is the key to any creative change. It is important to take enough time to discuss and name each contradiction carefully since the rest of the planning process builds on them as the foundation for a futuristic plan.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The third task in ToP™ strategic planning is to create strategies to deal with the contradictions. It is about creating the new.

Getting out a full raft of contradictions can overwhelm even the stoutest soul. In some situations social scientists give us statistical reasons why nothing can be done. The situation seems to say to the vision, "No, no, impossible!" It takes a great deal of courage for the group to pick itself up off the floor to look at where possibility might lie.

One big gift of ToP™ strategic planning is that as soon as you become aware of an obstacle, you get a hint of what can be done about it. A group can, therefore, look through a contradiction to see what will begin to move the whole situation into the future. Strategic directions become, not things to wish or dream for, but things which must be done because of the situation. As soon as you know that wasteful spending priorities exist, you have a good clue as to what must be done.

We use strategic directions rather than goals because they are built on our discernment of the real situation. A goal is a kind of abstract idea that is superimposed on the real situation. We use strategic because people are asked to go beyond their latest good idea to respond to the obstacles. Strategic directions represent judgments and decisions made by the group which will put it in an advantageous situation in the future. Moving into fundraising would help secure your future if you knew that your 100% government funding was due to end in a year.

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Laura Spencer, in *Winning Through Participation*, describes strategic directions as “broad directions or proposals that deal with the underlying contradictions. They may be direct, addressing a contradiction head-on to remove it, or they may be indirect, circumventing the contradiction. They often take the form of new programs, projects, campaigns, or systems.”

Like the practical vision, a strategic direction is never something that is performed. It is, rather, a pointer to a crucial arena of action; action plans must be forged and implemented or projects planned. It is a pathway towards breakthrough. Strategic directions are not created in relation to the vision. An organization, if it is to be successful, must be driven by its vision; but great leaders are always contradiction-oriented: they are obsessed with models and scenarios that will break the logjam of the contradictions by creating models for new directions. To get rid of the British in India, civil disobedience was Gandhi’s strategy, not his vision for the future.

The focus question in a strategic directions workshop is: What can we do to deal with the contradictions? Strategic directions point to the arenas or ball parks where the game is to be played, but not necessarily to a specific match. In a community development consultation, new directions and proposals can be turned into projects—palpable structures such as a preschool, a health clinic, a snail farm. Organizational planning uses action plans. Just as the contradictions stem from the operating vision and the proposals stem from the contradictions, the action plans stem from the proposals.

ACTION PLANS

The final task in facilitated planning is to forge clear, step-by-step plans for each strategic direction, creating a coordinated action plan which the group has decided to implement. The commitment goes beyond mere buy-in. The group has invented a totally new plan, not just giving agreement to a plan that came down from higher-up.

ToP™ action planning takes the group out of the realm of routine implementation and cog-in-the-fog operations. After determining measurable accomplishments for the strategic directions, the group prioritizes the most catalytic ones for the entire plan. They make a conscious decision to win on those actions that will irrevocably alter the future, selecting those that could break through the inertia that has kept them mired in the past. The challenge, therefore, is to design a manoeuvre that will really make something happen, that will qualitatively transform how things are done.

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If some participants seem to be talking only administratively, operationally, or abstractly, they may be back peddling into the status quo. This is natural. When it comes time to name exactly where individuals are going to spend their time and energy, certain human proclivities can turn the most relevant and useful strategic directions into mush by letting vagueness and ambivalence set in. ToP™ action planning cuts off this possibility of retreat by listing measurable accomplishments for the strategic directions, listing specific actions to be done, putting each action on a timeline, then naming the people who will implement the action. Finally the cost of each action is written down.

When people are allowed to pick the action they are really interested in, and work with others who are similarly motivated, the creativity and energy can be explosive. They often come up with imagery, code names and slogans to support their work. “Jump ship and join the Pirates” was the slogan for a team whose action plan was to hold celebrations toward creating a new culture in the workplace. The “Search and Rescue” team was assigned to recruit a new communications manager.

ToP™ strategic planning does not pretend to be a panacea for all of an organization’s ills. There are some situations that require more than planning. The group may need to think through all over again what their mission is. Others may need to articulate their corporate values in the face of new consumer demands. Still others may need conflict resolution experts. Then, of course, there are situations that are so far gone that not even Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi together could do a thing with them. Fortunately, those are few and far between.

Strategic planning is more than a technique for a group’s operational planning. Strategic planning, at its most transparent, can release people from stories of it can’t be done, free people up from blame games, and catalyse them into taking responsibility for the future. The ToP™ strategic planning facilitator is like the Music Man responding to “trouble in River City,” going in with method and personal authenticity instead of music, and moving the group through its blocks into concerted action for a new future.