

# SMART WORK: GETTING THE WHOLE SYSTEM TO WORK!

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## *Executive Summary*

Many organizations are struggling today to change their culture – their fundamental operating assumptions, style and beliefs – in order to respond more effectively to our dramatically fast-changing economy and fluid, fickle markets. Typically, after a lot of serious thinking and planning, such change efforts are rolled out top-down, with pronouncements and training sessions. Leadership then expects to see behavior change. They often fail to understand that almost no one else in the organization has recognized that there is a problem.

The Smart Work Company has found that what works instead is building collaborative relationships early on for such an effort, engaging employee and stakeholder ideas and insights, and building broad-based ownership. We say that “*you need to meet people where they are*” before trying to lead them. Until leadership and employees take the first steps *together*, there will be little forward motion.

In recent decades, as the demand for rapid change in organizations has escalated, new methodologies have been developed to speed up organizational awareness and flexibility. Labeled “large group interventions” or, more often, in reference to their common concern for making sure everyone in the organization is involved, “whole systems work,” these efforts intend to build mutual understanding of an organization’s current situation and of what is needed to do its work effectively.

Smart Work colleagues have spent 20+ years helping organizations such as H-P, EDS, Intel, Taiwan Semiconductor, Rockwell, Allied Signal, Oracle, Cisco and CIGNA develop highly effective and flexible behavior patterns in order to increase commitment, productivity and collaboration. These skills, when combined with a “whole systems” change approach, enable organizations to make timely and cost-effective culture-change interventions that are uniquely suited to today’s economic and workplace environments. This White Paper offers a brief introduction to these methodologies, and offers a sample description of how the combined process works.

After discussing some **Background/Context**, in the **History** section that follows, we look at the developmental roots of both “whole systems” work and the Smart Work approach. In the **Whole Systems Event Model** section, we walk through, in some detail, a sample intervention, including the follow-on activities needed to reinforce the intervention. The **Conclusion** observes that such an undertaking is not trivial, and requires a strong commitment to a truly results-oriented and sustainable approach to culture change.



### *Approach*

What is required for whole systems strategic culture change to work? Up-front and on-going involvement of the people who will end up doing the work. Smart Work combines the Syntax Framework for Collaboration with a Whole Systems approach. The results includes a clear message about why the culture needs to change, the path forward, and a clear understanding of the new assumptions and behaviors needed to support/sustain the change. These are developed across the whole organization simultaneously, and then supported with practical, real-world behavioral skills reinforced with feedback and mutual accountability. In addition to Smart Work’s methodology for collaborative skills development (currently used at Intel, Taiwan Semiconductor, Hewlett-Packard, and EDS, among others), we use a combination of Whole Systems approaches (that have been developed and used in Ford Motor Company, R.J Donnelly, Kraft Foods and Boeing, among others).

Paul McNutt, Professor of Management at Ohio State University, studied strategic decisions made at 356 American companies, and found that over half of them were ignored, abandoned or only partially implemented. The most frequent reason for this was that *executives failed to build a front-end consensus, and tried, instead, to impose their “will” on the organization. When a more collaborative approach was tried, those strategic decisions were adopted 96% of the time.* As McNutt comments, “If you involve people in at least some of the steps of the process, they will become missionaries for you.”<sup>1</sup>



### *History*

**Whole systems** efforts broadly derive from two major strands: the work of Fred Emery and Eric Trist at the Tavistock Institute in London, and the work of Richard Beckhard, Ron Lippert and Marvin Weisbord in the U.S. Each of these incorporated two other strands: theory about organizations as systems or living organisms, and technologies for working with very large groups of people. The work began in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Fast Company*, Oct./Nov. 1997

early 50s, and slowly gathered steam through the efforts of the National Training Labs and the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in the 60's and 70's. The methodology frequently, but not always, includes the development of a "preferred future" in ways that involve all the stakeholders of that future.

*In large organizations, many workers with long company histories have difficulty comprehending or believing the radical shift that has occurred in the environment outside the organization. The large-scale event provides a technology for getting the message to the total system by enhancing everyone's understanding of the organization's situation and its context. This re-framing leads to a common recognition of the changes required and becomes the impetus for concerted actions.<sup>2</sup>*

Here are descriptions of variations of this practice:

- 1.) Dannemiller & Jacob's **Large-Scale Technology** was designed with the purpose of getting "all of the arrows pointed in the same direction" so that real-time implementation for fast change was possible. Design criteria include small groups as the key building block, ensuring that "all activities add to the common data base," and building a living learning environment where everyone's contribution is recognized. The process has been run with groups of 600-800 people.
- 2.) Axelrod's **The Conference Model®** includes a series of four conferences, run with a cross-section of the organization, and reported to the whole organization. The 1st is a visioning conference, followed by a customer conference to determine external and internal customer requirements, then the technical conference to develop the organization's key process flows, and finally the design conference, at which organizational structures to enable the vision are developed. A second series of conferences to design the implementation would follow. Two critical teams help to steer the process: a data assist team to synthesize the information and a steering committee.
- 3.) Weisbord's **Future Search** again focuses on getting the whole system in the room, usually through representatives of every conceivable stakeholder group. The process begins by generating data about the organization's past that creates a kind of common background and allows people to practice data analysis skills. Then the groups move their focus to the present, generating lists of current programs and capabilities, and doing a SWOT analysis, with an eye towards identifying what is worth continuing and what that aren't. Third, diverse interest groups are asked to express a bold vision of the future. Themes and priorities are identified and integrated. Finally, planning for implementation is addressed.

**Smart Work's history** begins with the development of neurolinguistic programming in the early '70s – the study of what star performers understand intuitively about how

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<sup>2</sup> Bunker, Alban, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, V.28, No. 4 p.477),1992

the mind takes in and processes information. Utilizing the early work of Bandler, Grinder, Dilts, DeLozier and others, the Syntax Framework for Collaboration was developed as a simple, elegant framework for accomplishing good work. More recently, the work of Flores, Ollala and others in utilizing “language for action” – a process for making clear requests and powerful commitments in order to ensure good work getting done -- has been added. The Framework has been used to customize training designs for team building, leadership development, change management and customer service.

Both of these approaches share an intention to create communities of learning, where breakthroughs in awareness and understanding can happen quickly and effectively – creating a “significant emotional event” which heightens motivation and commitment for a sustained change effort. What follows is a sample, integrated version of such an experience.



### *Smart Work Whole System Event Model*

#### **Generic Project Plan**

While various customized applications are possible, a generic project plan includes these phases:

#### I: Clarification of the current situation

Using a series of “Strategy Audits,”<sup>3</sup> or other strategic planning processes, a cross-section of the organization and its stakeholders comes together to clarify and align their sense of what the organization’s business is and its position vis-a-vis customer needs and competitor threats. The outcome is a grassroots “straw plan” -- company-wide priorities, objectives and strategies that leadership supports, wants broad stakeholder feedback on, and expects to revise. Smart Work and Stanley C. Marshall, Inc. develop pre-session information requirements and facilitate these sessions.

#### II: Development of the Whole System Event and Internal Change Agents

A core team of approximately 10% of the employee population, depending on the organization’s size, is recruited to serve as internal event planners and provide a nucleus of “change agents”. This group of people is a cross section of the organization’s manager-employee base, chosen to represent the broad experience and wisdom of the whole organization. Chief among their tasks is to serve as participants for a draft whole system event, designed and facilitated by Smart Work colleagues.

This draft event provides the organization’s leadership with an opportunity to explore the straw vision-goals while demonstrating their commitment to a collaborative

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<sup>3</sup> Strategic planning process developed by Stanley C. Marshall, Inc.

approach. This event therefore serves as a rehearsal and pilot for the later full-fledged whole system event program rollout.

### III: Program Roll-Out: Whole System Event(s)

Our sample Whole system Event accommodates 960 people. The setting is a large convention center with a main room set up for full group sessions and four additional large “breakout rooms” that accommodate smaller groups which will involve up to 240 people per room. Structured discussions are held among the participants. These discussions are held first in small groups of 8, evolve to larger group discussions of 80 people, and finally to four groups of 240 that then report to the full session. Presentations and question-and-answer sessions are held in the main room.

#### **Sample Three-Day Format**

Because the model is based on the philosophy of individual input (acquired through small group work and “rolled up” through larger groups), the whole system event requires some time, with three days being the most frequently used time period.

*A. The First Day*, after opening remarks, immediately starts with discussions among the participants, thereby demonstrating that this meeting is not a passive sit-and-listen session. Instead, the clear expectation is conveyed that everyone is a fully active participant. Additionally, this is the first use of the structured discussion process to be followed throughout the event, thereby providing a practice run with (relatively) less volatile content.

The content of the first structured discussion, although highly dependent upon the overall focus of the meeting, could be:

- ◆ What do you find most successful and compelling in your organization’s culture?
- ◆ What about your organization is most frustrating and gets in the way of fulfilling customer expectations?

The responses to these questions are “rolled up,” using electronic feedback tools, first from the smallest groups (of 8), next from discussions within the mid-size groups (of 80) and finally to the last subgroup (of 240). Each of these final groups then presents their findings to the full group for the last rollup. This concludes the first round of structured group discussions and development of findings.

Next comes a clearly and succinctly delivered version of the “straw” message about the future changes needed. Questions for clarification (only) are taken from the audience before the second round of structured discussions take place. The structured discussion uses these questions:

- ◆ What did we hear?
- ◆ What is our reaction?
- ◆ What questions of understanding do we want to raise?

Responses are rolled up in the same fashion as in the morning.

At the end of Day One, leadership has a very clear understanding of whether their message was heard in the manner they intended (an important, too frequently missed step in organization-wide communication strategy), and what peoples' reaction was to the message. They will also know what else people want to know about or discuss. This information is digested overnight and response-reactions given the next morning. Syntax consultants coach the leadership on their response content and style.

B. *The Second Day* starts with the leadership response to the Day One's feedback. Depending upon the feedback, leadership may further comment on the straw plan or elicit additional information from people. In either case, another round of structured discussions will facilitate the communication between executives and employees.

Questions are designed to elicit information such as:

- ◆ "What did you hear you agreed with?"
- ◆ "What did you disagree with?" and
- ◆ "What should be changed/modified?" in the plan/goal.

The Second Day ends with information for leadership about what to keep, change and delete in the straw proposal. This information is again digested and synthesized overnight.

C. *The Third Day* starts with feedback on all participants' reactions and comments regarding what was presented the morning of the Second Day. Because of the amount of give and take that took place in the First and Second Days, this is an effective point for leadership to indicate what changes will be incorporated and give the rationale for those that will not. With this information in mind, participant's attention is now fully shifted to, "How do we want it to be?" This is the transition point for moving people's attention from the "what" to the "how."

In structured sessions and small groups of one quarter the total size, techniques such as affinity diagrams and/or mind mapping are used to capture the participants' many views of a desired future appropriate to the revised outcome, and approximately one year away. This activity focuses participants on desired outcomes, and not on barriers or endless looping of problem exploration. Four visions are now available in four different rooms. Through participants touring the four areas, plus discussion and voting, the visions are consolidated into one and subsequently translated into action objectives.

Finally, in groups representing their "back at work" real life interactions, people work again in small groups to plan their next steps and clarify what they need from others. Sample questions for structured discussion include:

- ◆ "Based on this plan/goal, what actions do we need to take?"
- ◆ "What have we accomplished to date?"
- ◆ "Where do we want to be a year from now?"

- ◆ “What do we have to do more of, do differently, or do better to get there?”
- ◆ “Of those, which can we commit to?”
- ◆ “What behaviors would support our doing them?”
- ◆ “What help do we need?”
- ◆ “What kinds of processes or structures do we need?”

This information is again captured and rolled up. Participants at the same time sign up for the tasks that they are ready to begin.

Reports from the “back at work” groups about their planned activities and the resources that will be required, with direct leadership commitment to follow through, provide closure to the whole system event. A date is set for progress reports.



### *Post Event Activities*

After the event, various follow-up activities are conducted. These include documentation and distribution of the outcomes of the event. There needs to be continuous communication from leadership as to actions taken and results achieved, as well as any change in strategies. It is strongly recommended that there be an update event in no later than one year.

In addition, key new behaviors – ways people are to perform differently than in the past – are identified, and opportunities to learn and practice those behaviors created for the entire organization. These behaviors may be learning to focus on what is wanted, not what isn’t wanted, or consistently building clear outcomes or visions for work undertaken. Just writing down the organization’s new vision, however, doesn’t tell people how to act: the change process must be supported with clear identification of how to do what the vision says needs to be done. Rollout of training and/or coaching programs in support of that vision – participated in by all levels of the organization, give a clear message to the whole organization of the degree of commitment to the culture change effort.



### *Outcomes*

The Smart Work Whole System model is based on the philosophy that buy-in is more likely to occur when employees have an opportunity to influence the system or plans that they are expected to execute. It is highly participatory and requires acceptance by leadership of this philosophy.

The focus of the whole system event is largely determined by the desired outcome – the front-end consensus – that the executives who championed the change want the event to achieve. This is the “what” to which we referred earlier. These desired

outcomes also determine the design choices and sequencing of events for the next gathering. The less these outcomes are predetermined, the better. An outcome of “developing ways to move this organization into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” gives more room for buy-in and creative accomplishment than “how to do fast turnaround contingency planning” or “how to close this plant,” although all can be handled by this process.

For example, if leadership (wherever they are in the organization) holds a vision, and knows they need people to understand and develop that vision, then content activities would include customer-stakeholder input as well as that of employees. In this case a great deal of time is spent on an environmental scan and review of draft objectives and strategies. On the other hand, if leadership has (or circumstances have forced) a clearly focused goal, objectives and strategies, then there is a concentration on implementation needs and tactics. In any case, our approach is to focus on developing internal capacity in order to foster on-going ownership of both the data and the processes that are developed. In other words, Smart Work’s role is traffic manager, not decision-maker.



### ***Conclusion***

No aspect of this process is trivial in terms of investments of time, energy and money. If it seems daunting, however, consider the billions of dollars that have been wasted in change effort after change effort, from Quality Circles through Business Process Re-engineering. It was wasted because leadership wanted to skip steps, in particular the step of getting employee buy-in and the step of showing people how specifically to behave differently.

In the end, successful culture change comes from sufficient motivation and consistent messages – management’s ability to “stay the course” long enough that the whole organization comes to own the desired outcome as its own vision. If the leadership of the organization cannot support or sustain a participative management style, then this model for cultural change will not work (nor will any other). Utilizing Smart Work’s “whole systems” process for getting the whole organization on board simultaneously while teaching skills for effective behavior in the “desired state”, your organization has dramatically increased its odds of having its investment in culture change pay off. With both the “what” and the “how” answered, employees are free to turn their attention toward getting the job done well.