

Moving from Intention to Implementation: Follow-up Initiatives for 'Governing for Results' Workshops

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Action Planning Process in Training Workshops

Training has moved beyond the traditional paradigm where it was merely a limited instrument to adapt employees' skills to job requirements. It has become an important tool of organisation development for communicating and involving employees in the change process.

When a wide cross section of organisational members from different levels and functions come together in a training workshop, an opportunity is created for taking the initial steps in the organisational change process. Such a workshop can serve several purposes:

- a) *Raise the consciousness of the participants:* It makes people aware of the gaps between reality and ideals. It tells them that things can be improved by paying conscious attention to what should be changed and how it can be changed.
- b) *Provide a common platform to articulate shared problems and difficulties:* Getting employees at different levels involved in a common workshop makes it possible to capture the insights that exist at multiple levels. Individuals at senior levels acquire a heightened understanding of the perspectives and concerns at junior levels and vice versa. Thus everyone can get a larger systemic perspective on the problem.
- c) *Generate ideas for change:* In a training workshop, individuals from different levels and functions are empowered to think out of box, challenge prevailing assumptions about the way “we have always done things”, and come up with action plans for improving key processes. For example, they can think about how processes and procedures can be simplified, how greater citizen focus can be achieved in departmental working, how delegation can be improved, and how capacity can be built.
- d) *Build a certain degree of ownership and responsibility for making improvements happen:* Organisational change becomes possible only when individuals and groups take ownership of the problems and resolve to act in their own zones of influence. Training workshops can create not only superior understanding and analysis, but also enthusiasm and determination to act. After going through the training workshop, a participant may decide to move away from the stance of a ‘spectator’, and assume the position of an ‘actor’ with regard to the organisational challenges, and make a difference.

Why Action Plans may degenerate into Ritualistic Wish Lists

Prof. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a noted management author, explores a particular form of inertia that tends to afflict organisations. He refers to it as *knowing-doing gap*. He argues that this rather strange organisational malady can often be traced to a basic human propensity: the tendency to let talk and presentations substitute for action. When

confronted with a problem, people act as though discussing it, formulating decisions, and working out plans of action are the same as acting and solving the problem. So an elegant PowerPoint presentation may be thrown at a real problem almost hoping that it would make the problem disappear!

But we all know that preparing analysis of problems and putting together action plan presentations are easier than implementing the action plans effectively. Organisational experiences indicate that unless the following *difficulties* are effectively dealt with, action plans would end up as vacuous wish lists.

- a) *Enforcing accountability*: When action plans do not have a clear time frame or a designated individual or group with clear responsibility for initiating actions or keeping the process on track, implementation may not occur. As an old anecdote goes, ‘anybody could probably have done it, but everybody expected somebody to do it, but nobody did it’.
- b) *Translating goals and ideas into action with leadership guidance and support*: The initial action plans tend to be abstract statements of intent. There may be little clarity on how and when they are expected to be carried out, and by whom. Not much thought may also have gone into plans for tracking progress. These complex goals and ideas have to be ‘deconstructed’ so that people are clear about practical first steps, and therefore can approach change with greater confidence. In organisational change, we are not dealing with one problem, but with a bundle of problems. An ad hoc approach may solve one problem but aggravate another. As a result, with an ad hoc approach, an administrator may be caught in a reactive mode, responding to a host of signals from the organisational system, some of which may have emanated in the first place by the administrator’s own actions or inactions. In such a situation, goals get degenerated, opportunities for the future are forgotten, and routine day to day crisis management becomes all-important. To avoid this trap and be proactive in dealing with change, it is important to carefully examine how goals can be translated into a cohesive, well-planned sequence of steps to change. Leadership supervision and active support during the process is critical for effective execution.
- c) *Sustaining energy through different stages of action planning and implementation*: The following diagram illustrates the different levels of team energy and enthusiasm at the action planning stage and the weeks/months following the initial planning process.

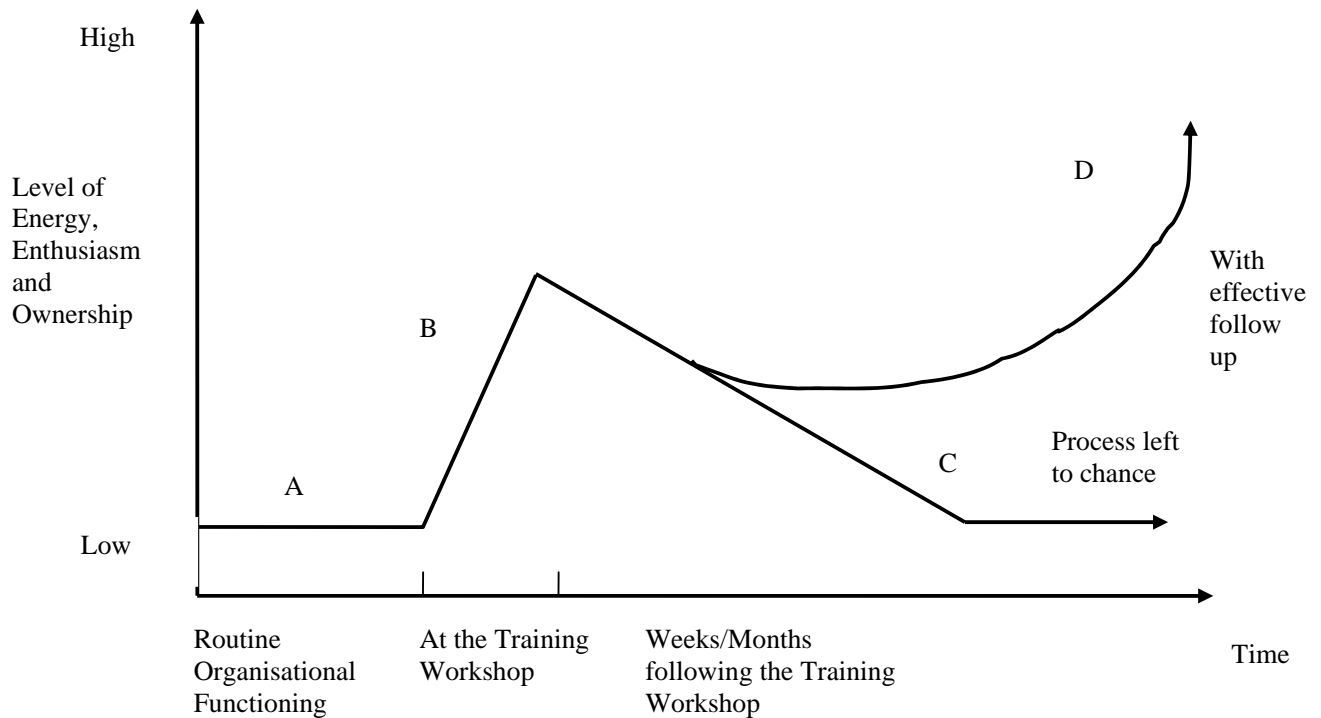


Figure 1: Team Energy and Enthusiasm over Time

During routine organisational functioning, generally there is not a great deal of energy and motivation for thinking out of box and making organisational improvements. This is represented by Part A of the graph above. As we have noted in the first section, training workshops present an opportunity to think afresh. Interest and excitement are created by the training environment, presence of top and senior administrators, discussions on future challenges and global trends. But experiences indicate that certain factors tend to act as dampeners on the energy and enthusiasm of the group. These factors include: doubts about training workshops and action planning exercises really yielding results, concerns about additional workload arising from improvement exercises, or questions about the opportunity or goal. So the extent of spurt in energy and enthusiasm can vary across different groups/departments. But generally, training workshops do tend to push up confidence, enthusiasm and ownership, as represented by Part B of the graph.

Organisational research indicates that within a couple of weeks after the training workshop, the energy levels wane as individuals perceive barriers to achieving the goals set during the action planning process. While some individuals may exhibit higher ownership of action plans and demonstrate greater willingness to invest time, energy and effort to implement plans, others may be less inclined to do so. This stage presents an important choice point in the change process.

At this stage, if matters are left to chance, effects of the training workshops and action planning exercises would be totally nullified over time, and the training intervention would end up as a mere ‘flash in the pan’, as shown by Part C of the graph. On the other hand, when there is *effective follow-up* to translate goals into actions, the energy tends to rise again. As people act, they would experience a sense of progress. They

