

# **The Importance of Being Implementable: Moving Ideas to Action**

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Several years ago, when I first considered becoming an independent consultant, I was doing volunteer facilitation with a school district. Two large consulting organizations completed cost reduction consulting assignments as I began volunteering. Both consulting organizations left the District with a series of recommendations to implement. Neither had done much work to get input from teachers, principals, parents or administrators on the recommendations nor did they have any suggestions about how to go about implementing the recommendations.

When the reports were made public the reaction was fury. The District had to go about picking up the pieces and figuring out how to move ahead.

Time after time I see consulting organizations and consultants repeat this pattern. Go in, collect data, make recommendations and leave. It's about the equivalent of a one night stand!

The question, for me, is how we can do planning so that the plan we create moves us forward in our work or life AND is implementable. Here is what I've found that helps.

## **1. Involve the key stakeholders in the planning process.**

If you are planning a family vacation, include the children and those that may be going along. If you are a CEO include your leadership team and others that either have important input to consider or will be instrumental in carrying out the plan.

A few years ago I was asked by a School Board to facilitate a strategic planning retreat and they only wanted to invite the Superintendent. Imagine the experience and knowledge that would have been missed if we hadn't transformed the thinking from "the Board" to the "Leadership Team".

Frequently the President of a Board of Directors or an ED will call and only want the staff leadership team or the Board to do strategic planning. Almost always we are able to back up and consider who the leadership of the organization is and have them all participate.

## **2. Bring in outside perspectives - get data about what is known**

Sometimes we are like fish in water, we aren't aware of the water we are in. I've found that if you can bring in information to planning, we expand our context for understanding what we are doing. For instance, I often have a leadership team go out and interview customers. There are very simple questions that they ask - what do you require/want of us and how well are we doing at meeting these requirements. When we come back together, everyone shares their interview data and we create a requirements performance matrix. It suddenly becomes very evident where the organization needs to focus.

In one case, the customer data reflected frustration with getting clear answers. After looking at the situation we discerned that the 3 Principals had built their business on personal contact. They liked going to dinner with the customer, taking the customer duck hunting, solving the problems. BUT, the organization had grown from under 50 people to over 200. There was no way the Principals could continue to be the primary customer contact. They had put new people in place to work with customers. BUT the 3 guys at the top LIKED the direct link. Unintentionally they were undercutting their best peoples' efforts to better support the customer by intervening with the customers. Getting the data helped us to better understand the context of the issues that were surfacing with rapid growth..

## **3. Change your attitude about getting it perfect - think iterative, think continuous improvement**

When a black box (the power source) is put into a satellite it probably needs to be pretty close to perfect. When the satellite is launched if it is not perfect you'll have lost a lot of money and opportunity to do important work.

It's said that when Lockheed SkunkWorks first flew the U2, the ejection seat didn't work and the landing gear had problems. Needless to say the test pilot wasn't happy when he finally landed. Getting off the plane he said "F..... You" to Kelly Johnson, the plane's designer. Kelly is reported to have said "You too" U2 became the name of the plane.

Now the real point of the story is not that sloppy work is desirable. The real point is that sometimes you have to go ahead and fly the plane to see what happens. You see what happens and then find ways to make it better. You do iterative planning.

Often we are immobilized by the perception that perfection is called for when it is not. We often under calculate the costs of inaction.

Most of life doesn't require the precision needed to launch a satellite. Most of the time we can't predict with certainty what the future will be, even when we deeply desire predictability so that we can just GET IT RIGHT. But, if we wait for perfection, we'll most likely wait forever. A key principle of leadership is to know when perfection is needed and when it is not.

In most cases if we apply the principal "learning through doing", we sacrifice some precision for the sake of action. Action will enable us to move forward toward the direction we want to go. In accomplishing the action we'll know more about the future than we did when we started. We can then use that knowledge in our next planning cycle to get closer to where we want to be.

#### **4. Get to the "critical few" actions/initiatives needed to move forward versus everything that needs to be done.**

Lockheed's SkunkWorks<sup>®</sup> taught me a lot but about moving ideas to action. Two thirds of a plane is purchased parts, even a new plane. When the Stealth Fighter was built only a few of its features were "new" - these were the features that made it distinct and able to perform in new ways and in new environments.

But look at how we plan in most of our organizations. Most often we focus on creating a massive document which lists 30 goal areas, 10 to 20 objectives within each goal area and sub activities for each of the objectives (some exaggeration but not much). It's enough to give you a headache. Most often it's put on a shelf and never looked at again.

What we need to discern in our planning are the "critical few" factors that will make a difference in shaping our future. If it's a family vacation we are planning, maybe a couple of the "critical few" factors are having fun and staying in budget. Once those are determined you figure out how to put them in place and make certain that you do it. If your focus is on a pages long checklist or set of actions to complete, you'll probably miss out on what's most important to you.

When these few keys in *moving plans to action* are put together we can often have powerful results. An interesting example is the work that the Federal Government has done recently in the area of chronic homelessness.

In 1999 the Center for Mental Health, Homeless Bureau and a few other federal agencies hosted a conference of about 100 people, 25% were chronically mentally ill homeless consumers (*get all the stakeholders involved*). I had the privilege of helping to design and facilitate the meeting.

At the conference, 5 reports were presented about 6 model projects addressing chronic homelessness (*bring in outside perspectives*). We only spent a few hours hearing the reports, but we spent most of the first day applying the reports to the topic of the conference. Everyone had something important to contribute. Some of the most important insights came from the chronically mentally ill homeless consumers attending.

The results of that meeting were used to define what needed to be discussed at the next conference in 2000. In 2000, 250 people participated and 6 federal agencies sponsored the meeting. At this conference the participants identified the primary barriers to access to care and solutions that would help breakthrough the barriers (*don't worry about getting it perfect, worry about getting it moving*).

The outcomes of this meeting contributed to the design of Federal Policy Academies where State Commissions on Chronic Homelessness met with each other, Federal Agency representatives, and organizations that are having success in working with chronic homelessness. Each state developed a plan infused with information and inspiration. The plan is unique to each state and contains only a few major initiatives (*get to the critical few*). The plans are not long: they are not perfect, but they are a starting place for making major changes in State policy,

legislation, programs, funding streams and collaboration with federal and other partners. Each year the Plan will be modified to absorb new learnings, address challenges, and take advantage of new opportunities.

## Summary

Though there are certainly many times when these principles are not the ones to apply, in my experience in working with organizations of many sizes and shapes, most of the time they offer us a chance to think freshly, expand our perspectives, identify key actions required for success and move forward together with commitment and energy.