

The Oakridge Voice

God is in the details

We have a crisis of confidence at present in so many strategic plans or change initiatives. Strategy has become an endless stream of data collation, measurement and interpretation followed by complex planning and expansive but empty rhetoric. A fanfare of trumpets may well herald the launch, but the shuffling sound of silence is all that remains a few months later when plans go awry, targets are missed, and change initiatives fail to become embedded as “the new way of working around here”.

The problem is that strategic planning and ensuring change management programmes are relatively easy to design. Technology helps, of course, albeit with an over-enthusiastic bombardment of data. Processes and systems for planning such initiatives are well established and there is a body of received wisdom, from those hindsight consultants, to articulate past experience as if it is a guide to future performance. In fact there is fun to be had on MBA programmes and Strategic Planning away days imaging the future and designing it with increasingly colourful and complex charts, sonorous rhetoric and mythical targets. There is also some enjoyment to be had, although enthusiasm is beginning to wane by this point, in planning and running those formal announcements, the Company Days where everyone talks so optimistically about the future with a PowerPoint slide deck to show a logical and inexorable the route ahead.

Then the trouble begins. People, “our greatest asset” as one of the slides will invariably exclaim, have often only been consulted in the process at a very late stage after all the information has been gathered and charts prepared. They are the afterthought.

As an afterthought no-one has tapped into their knowledge, their expertise, and their commitment. At best they will feel irritated, at worst enraged. If anyone knows what is going on, what works and what does not work, then it is the “people” closest to the customer, closest to the production floor, closest to the markets, and closest to the numbers.

It is hard to own a process that is presented to you as a fait accompli regardless of whether it will work. So those “people” smile, clap in the right place, say a few fairly non-committal platitudes of encouragement and then go back to the workplace uncomfortable with what is expected and with increasing concern that it will not work.

At the London Design Festival in 2013 there was a wonderful Design exhibition around the theme “God is in the Details” honouring the work of the legendary German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who originally coined the term and encouraged people to work in a thorough manner and to take note of details no matter how small they will be. We seem to be frightened of detail now, scathing of those who we say are “bogged down in it” but it is the details that truly count, and those who work closest to where the work gets done know that only too well.

Now for too many leaders the details are irritating and slow things down. They talk enthusiastically about giving an “overview” and talk as if the detail will follow. Sadly this misses the point. From the outset the detail needs to be considered and that means involving everyone in the organisation from the earliest possible opportunity. This will probably slow things down, possibly add to complexity and cost, but unless everyone is involved from the outset there will be enormous problems at the implementation stage.

Strategic Planners should start from this consultative position and should recognise with a degree of humility that their task is to facilitate implementation. “The people” should not be seen as bystanders or spectators clapping at the Company Launch, they should be seen as the designers deeply involved from the outset, challenged and challenging, ready for change, certainly, but change that will work because “the detail” has not been over-looked.

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