

People Skills: Implementing Strategic Goals—A Change Management Perspective

Robert E. Levasseur

MindFire Press, St. Augustine, Florida 32084, drl@mindfirepress.com

This is another in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), also known as change management, a discipline that offers much to the OR/MS practitioner who is determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions. This article examines several options that the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS) has for engaging the OR/MS community in the accomplishment of the organization's strategic objectives, called big audacious goals, as set forth by the INFORMS Strategic Planning Committee.

Key words: decision making; leadership; organizational behavior; strategic planning.

Every organization needs to plan. We are fortunate that our INFORMS leaders think outside the box and define big audacious goals (BAGs) when they plan. These include ambitious goals related to "O.R. visibility and literacy," "changes to INFORMS products and processes," and increasing "the practice and application of operations research" (Barnhart 2008a, p. 6). Although change management principles would help INFORMS to achieve all these important goals, from an organization development (OD) standpoint the BAGs fall into two categories—those that are amenable to traditional implementation methods and those that call for a more modern change management approach. Of the latter, one that stands out is the goal to increase dramatically (i.e., to 80 percent or higher of the nonstudent membership) the INFORMS practitioner base. This represents a major challenge for an organization that "while it has evolved to include practitioners, was founded by academics, for academics" (p. 6). To illustrate the application of change management principles, we will examine in this article various ways of achieving this important strategic goal.

There are two basic ways increase the INFORMS practitioner base, either by heavily engaging current members who are practitioners in the process, or not. Because academics are not as likely to understand practitioners as other practitioners do, one would expect, much as form follows function in product

or structural design, that the choice of a method to achieve this strategic goal would favor a practitioner-focused implementation process. With this criterion in mind, we will compare (1) the process suggested by the INFORMS leadership for identifying alternatives for achieving each BAG to (2) a process based on modern change management principles; this latter process would, by design, encourage all current members, especially practitioners, to participate openly and actively in the ongoing process of increasing the INFORMS practitioner base.

The Proposal Process

The primary mechanism for engaging the INFORMS community in the strategic planning process is basically a request for proposal (RFP) process (Barnhart 2008b, p. 6), much like the process that one would use to solicit funds from a government agency for a research project. Although this process has many merits, not the least of which is its ease of application, it has some drawbacks for this particular BAG from a change management point of view.

First, it is a top-down process. Leadership requests, members propose, and then leadership selects the best alternative. Although this is a classic decision-making approach with which we are all familiar, this consultative process does not tap into the collective

intelligence of the INFORMS community, which is important to achieving this particular BAG most effectively. By that I mean that while the best proposal that an individual (or a small group of collaborators) can imagine will most likely be selected, this may not (and I would argue probably will not) be the best alternative that the entire community could come up with if it were somehow possible to tap into its collective creativity.

Second, the RFP process is arguably more familiar to academics than to most practitioners. Is it not likely that academics, who are much more likely to be comfortable with and good at writing grant proposals than are most practitioners, will (1) be more likely to submit a proposal, and (2) have a higher probability of presenting their case convincingly if they do? For some of the strategic goals, such as those that focus on restoring OR to its proper place in academe, this inherent “bias” of the RFP process toward academics might not be a problem. However, for this BAG, which focuses on practitioners, the fit between process and goal (i.e., form and function) is not very good.

Finally, the RFP process, in comparison to the one that the INFORMS Strategic Planning Committee used to develop the BAGs, whose only ground rules were “that each goal should be ambitious, and that constraints imposed by current culture or behaviors should be ignored” (Barnhart 2008a, p. 6), is not very ambitious. Although this is understandable given the culture of INFORMS, it nonetheless suggests that a big audacious process (BAP) might be appropriate in solving this particular BAG (or all of them if our leadership so chooses).

A Change Management Process

What might qualify as a BAP? The answer is Kurt Lewin’s three-stage change model of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (Levasseur 2001, Schein 1999). Transformational leaders frequently use this simple and elegant model—in its original, three-stage form, or in a modified form with each basic stage expanded to include several substages (Bradford and Cohen 1998, Kotter 1996)—in their OD and change management work. Hence, it is encompassing (i.e., big) enough to inform and facilitate any change effort, including the implementation of strategic goals, such

as INFORMS’ BAGs. In addition, because applying Lewin’s change model would require a sharp departure from traditional, top-down implementation methods, such as the RFP process, toward the use of the more lateral, systemic, and collaborative approaches characteristic of change management processes, using it to facilitate the BAG change process, even if only for the specific goal of increasing the INFORMS practitioner base, would arguably be audacious.

BAP Meets BAG

So, how might we use Lewin’s three-stage change model to engage the INFORMS community, particularly the practitioners, in the process of dramatically increasing the INFORMS practitioner base? Let us examine some possibilities, beginning with the first or unfreezing stage, to illustrate how our leaders might use change management principles and processes to effect such a change.

Unfreezing. The essential leadership task in this first stage of the change process is to figure out how to engage the INFORMS community in a way that makes the desired outcome (i.e., a broader representation of practitioners in the organization) important enough to each member to want to participate actively in an effort to make it happen.

There are two basic ways to initiate change—by creating or capitalizing on a crisis, or by creating a vision. Both are powerful mechanisms for creating a sense that major change is necessary. For example, the current economic crisis facing the United States in 2009 calls for immediate and decisive action. Similarly, John F. Kennedy’s vision of putting a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s was captivating enough to inspire the creation of a space exploration program that succeeded in meeting its ambitious, although viewed by some as impossible, goal.

According to John Kotter, an expert in planned, large-scale, systemic change, “in every successful transformation effort...the guiding coalition develops a picture of the future that is relatively easy to communicate and appeals to” the organization’s stakeholders (Kotter 2007, p. 98). This is the first task for the INFORMS leadership: Develop an exciting, engaging, inspiring vision of a new, transformed

organization—one in which practitioners, who constitute a much broader percentage of the total membership, work collaboratively with academics, students, and other members to move the mountains that we need to move if we are to have the most profound effect possible on individuals, groups, organizations, and society in the 21st century.

The second task for the INFORMS leadership is to communicate its vision in every way possible. This is crucial according to Kotter, who maintains that many transformation efforts fail because leaders are guilty of “undercommunicating the vision by a factor of ten” (p. 100).

Movement. The essential leadership task in this second stage of the change process is to ensure that the INFORMS community, particularly practitioners, actively participate in a collaborative, system-wide effort to determine and make the necessary changes.

Once leadership has overcome the organization’s inherent resistance to change and people are on board, the opportunity for meaningful change exists. The absolute key to success at this stage is to engage the community in a collaborative process of jointly developing and implementing strategies for achieving the goal(s) and desired outcome(s), which in this case is to broaden the practitioner base of the organization dramatically.

One way to do this would be to use a proven, powerful group consensus-building process to involve as many INFORMS members as possible in an interactive, facilitated dialogue (both face-to-face and online) designed to elicit and jointly prioritize alternatives and strategies for achieving the goal. Following on the heels of a concerted effort to create and communicate a new vision for INFORMS, this activity would both reinforce the desire of INFORMS leaders to engage the community as a whole in the change process and provide a mechanism for them to do so effectively. It would also set the stage for joint action on the part of the membership to actualize each of these strategies. Other proven change management methods and tools could then help to facilitate the implementation of these strategies.

Refreezing. The essential leadership task in this third stage of the change process is to ensure that the necessary changes identified and implemented in

the movement stage “are rooted in (the) social norms and shared values” of the organization (Kotter 2007, p. 103). For INFORMS, this would mean (1) continued reinforcement of the new, inclusive, collaborative processes, and (2) continued selection of leaders who believe in and are committed to this new strategic direction.

Another way to view this final stage and the entire change process is from the perspective of organizational learning (Schein 1999), whose proponents view the completion of a change cycle (i.e., of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing) as an ideal opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned from the change effort and to decide what, if any, new initiatives are necessary to continue the organizational transformation.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined two options available to the INFORMS leadership for engaging the OR/MS community in the accomplishment of the organization’s strategic objectives, which it calls BAGs (big audacious goals). The first, the RFP process chosen by the Strategic Planning Committee to implement the INFORMS strategic goals, is a traditional approach. The other, Lewin’s three-stage change model, is a modern change management approach designed to enable leadership to engage the entire community in a systemic, planned process of achieving any strategic goal.

The motivation for this article is the belief that it is time to match our big objectives (BAGs) with equally big methods (BAPs), as well as a desire to share some thoughts about how we might do this by using modern change management principles and processes.

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