

Chapter 16

Strategies for Engagement

Feelings Are Facts

People choose to commit to a decision based on emotion, feelings, intuition, trust, hope. These become the playing field for change. Even the most concrete changes—such as restructuring, using a new information system, cutting costs—happen when individuals decide to support the recommendations and decisions and make the adjustments that are required at every step along the way. The decision to support change is not just based on logic and reason; we need to help our clients deal with attitudes and feelings as well.¹

A core strategy for building emotional commitment to implementation is to design new ways for people to engage each other. This may be more critical than the clarity or rightness of a decision. Results are achieved when members of a system collectively choose to move in a certain direction. It is this act of choice that is critical. Leadership behavior is not as vital as membership behavior. It is difficult for a patriarchal society such as ours to accept this reality. We tenaciously hold on to the belief that leaders can induce others to act. Leaders can no more induce action on the part of their followers than consultants can induce action on the part of their clients.

Supporting the Emotional Side

Consultants can help leaders engage others in implementing decisions by following the same principles for building commitment that we explored in the process of contracting and discovery.

The contracting phase was based on

- A deep understanding of the problem
- The clear expression of wants
- An exploration of concerns about control and vulnerability
- Giving support

The discovery phase emphasized

- Treating each interaction as a learning event
- Persistently asking what the client was doing to contribute to the problem
- Seeking language that gave clarity to reality without judging it

I now want to offer some ways to sustain that same spirit when you are dealing with groups at the moment of implementation and action.

The implementation phase centers around

- High intensity participation
- Placing choice on the table
- Changing the conversation
- Transparency and the public expression of doubt
- Co-creating structures to fit purpose

The greatest service of the consultant may be to raise the consciousness of the client about the value of engagement in the implementation process. Engagement has power regardless of the content of the recommendations. The most technical content will not be acted on without a different interaction within the client system. If the quality of the interaction does not change, no amount of rewards, standards, and measurement will have an impact.

The Meeting Is the Message

Implementation of any change boils down to whether people at several levels are going to take responsibility for the success of the change and the institution. This is it. Period.

We can broadcast our intent to give people at the bottom more choice and involvement, but if the meeting that broadcasts this intent is not, itself, an example of the content of the broadcast, the promise has little legitimacy. The nature, tone, and structure of how we come together is the sampling device people use to determine the credibility of the strategy.

It always surprises me how unconscious we are about the importance of the message communicated in how we come together, how we meet with each other. If the message was ever in the medium, this is it. There are libraries of books written about group process, but I want to focus on five aspects of how we engage each other. They are pretty straightforward and get to the heart of the matter. They also do not require a heavy investment of group process expertise. They are more about how to structure the meeting, rather than how to handle a difficult moment.

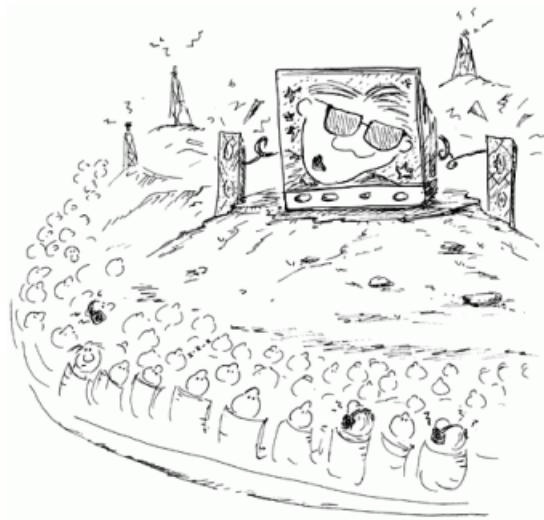
Innovative Engagement in Five Easy Pieces

The elements of innovative engagement look simple enough, but they are easier to list and to talk about than to practice. Successful engagement takes place when we have meetings in which we have:

- Balance between presentation and participation
- Full disclosure and the public expression of doubt
- Real choice on the table
- New conversations
- A physical structure of the room that supports community

The Presentation-Participation Balance

It amazes me how many new programs have begun their implementation with a management/consultant lecture/presentation about goals, strategy, methods, and measures. I have watched a manager or consultant stand in front of the room for long periods of time—sometimes hours—stating vision, defining terms, giving the whole picture of what is to come. The structure of a meeting is social technology, and we keep operating out of habit rather than changing the technology to better meet our purpose. We base our meetings on the thought that when someone is confused by what you say, repeat it again louder, as if turning up the volume will solve the confusion.



Sometimes there is not even room for questions or any contact with the audience. I have often seen top executives come in, give a prepared speech, and leave. In each case, the purpose of the meeting was to build commitment and give people a sense of the whole. This will never happen

from a speech, especially since most of us in consulting or management are not that charismatic. Even if we were great speakers, the impact of using broadcast methods for implementation is to increase passivity, deepen the dependency on the leader who just made a great speech, and reinforce the feeling that the program is buttoned up and predetermined—all characteristics of the day-to-day experience we are trying to overcome.

The other problem with most presentations is that they are so scripted and rehearsed that they are lifeless. Many are written by people other than the speaker, and it shows. And sometimes the executive has been dragged into a studio to videotape a message, which is usually sudden death.

All of these practices are more appropriate for a monarchy than a workplace. Granted some important information gets shared, but the emotional cost is too high and our attention is pointed in the wrong direction. A presentation-based meeting, even with questions thrown in as a bone, carries the message that only the top has something important to say and the employee's job is to sit and listen and politely question. The answers are on the stage and the people are here to seek them.

Implementation based on engagement and participation means that the important conversations are the ones that take place between employees. So when we meet, let the audience talk to each other. We feel connected to the institution more by our relationships with our peers than by our identification with the bosses. Granted everyone in this culture wants to hear from the leader, but in my mind this is more a statement of the problem than a solution. It is our dependence and passivity and willingness to give lip service that is the problem with implementation. Why collude with it? It may be important for the leader to speak, so let the leader talk for fifteen minutes, with no rehearsal or overheads. Let them write their own comments and talk from memory. Then we will know what is really important to them and that is good to know.

I get caught in this same trap all the time. During my brief career as the brand name in empowerment, a large electronics company held a celebration day recognizing the work of teams and the success of its employee participation efforts. I am the speaker and I'm talking about empowerment. Four hundred employees in the auditorium and they rope off the first row for the convenience of top management, who come in late and are ushered in like royalty. To add to the occasion, I am on a stage, five feet above the audience, with a moat of flowers surrounding the podium. I'm looking down at the crowd, bosses in the best seats, while talking about the importance of equality. So much for participation. Plus all those flowers make me think that perhaps I've reached my final resting place.

You may be thinking that the importance of the simple balance between presentation and participation is being overstated. Trust me, it has more meaning than we have realized: As straightforward as the concept is, most of the times when we come together we put great energy on presentation and attend to participation as an afterthought.

Transparency and the Public Expression of Doubt

Freedom of speech and the right to assembly are constitutional guarantees. What is true for the streets, however, is less true for the meeting rooms of our institutions. We all hear the claim in the workplace that if you stand up, you will be shot. We now speak the language of self-management, but it is still difficult for a group of subordinates to call a meeting that excludes their boss. We bear the imprint of the fact that in times past self-management was called mutiny.

Part of our task as consultants is to bring the right of assembly and freedom of speech into our organizations. In practical terms this means creating assemblies where there is an opportunity for all voices and points of view to be heard. Where reality in the words of the audience becomes as important as the reality spoken from the podium—perhaps more important. And where those at the podium tell the truth about failure and uncertainty.

Doing this allows for a restoration of faith that is central to any change or improvement effort. Until we can speak in public our sense of what is real, our doubts and reservations, and past disappointments, we are unable to invest in a different future. If we cannot say no, our yes has no meaning.

Sharing the Platform

People do tell the truth in organizations; it is just that they do it in private. In rest rooms, at water coolers, over a meal or a drink. If honest conversation stays private, the public conversations will be unreal and ultimately discouraging. The same is true in a large group meeting. If all the real discussions take place only in small groups, little faith will be built in the larger community.

The redistribution of power and accountability happens when honest, confronting conversations take place in public settings. There is a political power in having a wide range of viewpoints heard by everybody in the room, especially in larger group assemblies. If we believe the redistribution of power is critical to a shift in accountability, the shift will begin when the public conversations shift.

Up to now we have given the gift of public expression mostly to management. I have been in many meetings in which management has used the podium to “challenge” people. In one meeting the vice president declared during a motivational speech that if he had to grade his organization, he would give them a “C.” While clearly this grade was not a pick-me-up for his staff, and you can question the wisdom of his approach, at least he was given the platform to say it.

While somehow management has the right to express their “grade,” the reverse is not true. When employees express their complaints, it is called whining or a “bitch” session. If management needs to challenge their staff, fine. But there will be no forward movement until the staff in turn has the opportunity to challenge management. Providing public space for this to happen is the first step in shifting a culture, in implementing a change. And it is the task of the consultant to help make this happen.

The Straight Story

Openness and reciprocity need to occur each time we assemble. It cannot be relegated to sessions we label “team building” or a “large-group intervention.” Even when we are implementing a highly technical or business-oriented change, there has to be a relatively public platform for people’s concerns to be voiced and viewpoints to be sought. Every technical and business change destabilizes the human system in which it is embedded. Relationships change, influence shifts, boundaries are threatened, and dialogue, widely held, is the only way to find new stability. Management reassurances don’t help. Nobody believes them because it’s their job to reassure.

We waste meetings that are designed more to reassure, calm the workers, and tell a story than to have a conversation. They are lost opportunities. The question in people’s minds is whether they are getting the straight story. If the speaker does not speak of doubt and uncertainty, and talk about failure if it has occurred, there has been no straight story.

People will also not know whether they are getting a straight story until they have joined in the discussion. Too often in the effort to sell a strategy, problems are softened and positioned to promote confidence and win support. People’s trust in management comes down not so much to whether management is right, but to whether it is willing to tell the truth.

The truth spoken in public is a rare commodity in most institutions. The success of an implementation strategy will depend on the quality of the conversation that begins it. And the more public the setting, the more powerful the impact. Change begins at the intersection of freedom of speech and the right of assembly. It is not only good for democracy, but it begins to turn rhetoric into reality.

Placing Real Choice on the Table

The argument for the redistribution of power is that each of us is more likely to care for what we control. If this workplace, this project, this community belongs to another, I will do what is required and work by the book. Under conditions of fear or inducement, I may give a little more. If, however, this workplace or project or community is mine, I am more likely to give all I have, to do whatever is required, to care in a different way.

What makes this project mine grows not out of any logic, but out of my engagement with it. The more I join in its creation and its shape, the greater my accountability for its success. There are few ideas that are better understood and less acted on than this one. Even in this age of self-management and participation, our implementation strategies tend to be packaged long before they are presented. Often the only choice left to people is “How are you going to support this project?”

If we want people to be accountable for implementation, we need to push choice as far down in the organization as possible. We do this for the sake of accountability, not as a social movement.



We also bring choice into the engagement because when I have to decide something, I have to learn about it. Choosing demands a struggle. Seeing both sides. Understanding the complexity of the question. The design challenge is how to put choice on the table without everyone deciding everything, which is paralyzing.

In any change effort, there are opportunities for real choice at many levels of the organization in shaping its vision, standards, training, measures, and accountability. These do not have to be prepackaged and decided before the implementation begins. In fact, better that they are not predetermined. These elements are going to vary from group to group, no matter how much consultants and managers think that consistency is necessary for success. Why not view this variability as an asset rather than as a weakness?

There will always be limits to local choice, but the consultant's task is to support maximum reasonable power at lower levels for the sake of genuine change and implementation. The conventional wisdom is that top management is crucial and vital to the change effort and it is up to them to ultimately define how things will change. That is betting on an empirically fragile, and deeply held, myth. If all the critical decisions are made by management, then the implementation will most likely be politely contentious and cosmetic. Change efforts become the flavor of the month when they are embraced only by the top.

Also we talk a lot about resistance to change. I don't know that people are really resistant to change; I think they are resistant to change being inflicted on them. We get into a cycle in which consultants and managers think people are resistant, so we get more and more clever on how to "handle" it. The more clever we get, the more people know it, sense the cleverness, and defend against it. Redistributing choice and power is a way of avoiding this cycle.

Defining choices, then, is an essential element of designing how people engage each other. It is not that each meeting must decide something, but each meeting must involve serious dialogue about what to do about things such as vision, standards, training, measures, and promises. For important change efforts, the struggle is the solution.

Changing the Conversation

The texture and content of the conversation matter. We know that if this implementation is going to be innovative and compelling, then the meetings to plan and initiate it must also be innovative and compelling. Many of the conversations we typically design to increase participation are too cautious and analytical. We need to go beyond simply having people ask questions of clarification from the leader, or brainstorm ways the implementation might be successful, or discuss what are some of the new roles and skills people will need in the future.

These are relevant questions, but they are not demanding enough. They are mostly very heady, intellectual, left-brain exercises. At some point they may cover relevant content, but they don't evoke strong connection and they leave the personal and affective dimension out of the room. We need ways to invite people to personally engage and take risks that are not typical. Whatever new culture or attitudes we seek for the longer implementation, for day-to-day life, must be designed in—right from the beginning and throughout the effort.

The task of the consultant is to find ways to change the conversation as a means of moving the change along. For the new conversation to have meaning it needs to help employees feel connected to one another in this room at this moment. For this to happen we need to avoid the old subjects and provide dialogue where people can be vulnerable and personal.

Away from Familiar Refrains

Most of our conversations don't have these qualities. They are simply recycling positions we have taken before. We each have a habitual way of explaining and talking about our world, and our discussions are like tapes we replay each time something new is on the table. Here are some of the familiar conversations that keep us stuck in our old routines.

The Culture Made Me Do It Until we change the culture, there is little we can do. This is a culture in which short-term results are all that count, competition reigns supreme, and it is who you know, not what you know.

Leader Behavior Has to Change Until the leaders model the new behavior, what can you expect from the lower levels?

The Reward System Has to Change Until we are rewarded for the new behavior, we will keep pouring old wine into new bottles. Or is it keep pouring new wine into old bottles? Whatever.

Risk and Fear Have to Be Eliminated If you stand up here, you will be shot. We have to value failure and until we do, it is business as usual.

More Skills Are Required People are not equipped to make the changes. More training is needed. We need to define the new competencies and until we do...

Structure Has to Be Changed Even if the structure has changed, it did not go far enough. We still have too many or too few levels, too many vice presidents or not enough, the workforce is either too old or too inexperienced.

New Roles Have to Be Defined and Prescribed What is the new role of middle management? Until we clearly define the new boundaries and who decides what...

These are some of my favorites; you have your own. They are conversations of delay, held by people who think the business belongs to someone else. Each is somewhat compelling because it contains some truth. In a different context, each of these things will have to happen. The problem is they all are an expression of helplessness; they say that someone else has to do something before we can become players. Often consultants get seduced into these conversations and proceed to answer the questions, forgetting or ignoring the fact that all employees, with their peers, have the capacity to answer the questions for themselves. Do not take these questions at face value. They are test questions designed to see whether we will cooperate in helping people avoid their own freedom and choice to invest.

Toward a New Conversation

The real cost of our habitual conversations is the cynicism they breed. Not because the questions they raise have not been answered. It is the staleness of the discussion that drains energy. Old conversations become a refuge, a way for us to find safety. Here are some ground rules to stimulate new conversations that require some vulnerability and build connection.

Discuss the Personal Impact the Change Has on Me/Us Find some way of talking about how individuals feel about what is being proposed. Not how they evaluate it, but what feelings it generates. The intent is to surface doubts and reservations without reinforcing the helplessness.

Discourage Discussion of Anyone Not in the Room The instinct is to talk about who is missing from the discussion. When we require action from someone not a part of the discussion, we buy some relief for the moment, but that relief is purchased at the cost of our own optimism.

Be Careful About Discussing History The tendency is to begin with an analysis of what got us here, as if a discussion of the past will explain or soften the future. The antidote to history is to keep asking, "What do we want to create together?" Some history can be useful if it tells a personal story that brings us to the moment. Limit the time and make it personal. Use questions such as "What in your experience impacts your capacity to support this plan?"

Postpone Discussion of Action Plans as Long as Possible It is ironic that the rush to decide what to do is often a defense against real change. Change is the experience of changing our thinking first, actions second. If we rush to action, we stop learning and make tomorrow a reenactment of yesterday. The rush to lists and planning can be an indirect way of saying no to the deeper intent of implementation.

Discuss What Part We Have Played in Creating the Situation Owning our contribution to the problem gives hope: If we helped cause it, we can fix it. It triggers guilt for a while, but beyond that is our freedom.

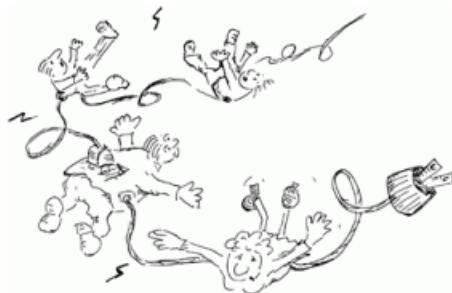
Caring About Place

The places in which we meet carry a message about our intentions as clear as any verbal presentation or agenda. The problem is that we have forgotten how important physical space is in influencing our actions. We know how we are changed when we walk into a church, or a courthouse, or an intimate restaurant or courtyard. There is a spirit, a statement of intent, a congruence between the space and the purpose, that reinforces our own reason for being there. Our work spaces, designed to carry the message of efficiency, hierarchical status, and restraint, fly in the face of engagement.

It is almost impossible to find a room in an office building or a hotel that is suited for dialogue and participation. They are mostly suited for instruction and persuasion. To begin with, most of the tables are rectangular. If you sit on either side of a rectangular table, you cannot see most of the people on your side of the table. It's hard to engage people you cannot see. Putting the tables in a U shape or a square still blinds us to a third or a fourth of those in the room. Boardrooms are the worst. The tables are fixed and monumental. It clearly was never expected that real conversation would be required.

Beyond the problems with the furniture, training and meeting rooms are primarily designed for persuasion and display, either with the speaker in the room or a speaker in another location. Most of the new money spent to design meeting space goes into electronics and projection equipment. In some cases, rooms designed for fewer than thirty people have over \$250,000 in the walls, floors, and ceiling. With this kind of investment in the walls, you are not about to have the seats facing each other.

What does this say about our beliefs about connecting and communicating? Each time the room is arranged for people to interact with the speaker rather than each other, we reinforce passive contact and the values of a bureaucratic culture. It doesn't matter, then, what is said, as the structure of the room carries its own message. We will spend a fortune on talking to someone we cannot see, and in the process arrange the room so that we all face the front and face the wall. These rooms are artifacts of an industrialized and electronic culture. We are in love with technology in a way that far exceeds our interest in connecting with each other. To say that the technology connects us is a myth. It confuses information exchange with human interaction. There is nothing wrong with the technology; we just exaggerate its usefulness.



In a broader sense, we are culturally blind about the power of the physical place. We are willing to meet in rooms without windows, walls without color or pictures, doors with no moldings. Windows, color, art, and architectural detail bring life and humanity into a setting. If you are in the business of change, running meetings, convening people, it is almost impossible to find a room for work that is designed for people to feel alive and really talk to each other.

The Auditorium, Cafeteria, Etc. and Other Places That Defy Engagement

The one room in our culture that most symbolizes the patriarchal nature of our ways of bringing people together is the auditorium—especially the corporate auditorium. We have a stage where the speaker is elevated and can be seen by all. We have several hundred seats in rows, bolted to the floor all facing forward. The lighting and the sound system are designed to illuminate and amplify only the speaker. There is usually a podium, which is its own command-and-control system. From these podiums you can control the screen, slides, sound, and computer-generated graphics. The podium has a button to raise and lower itself, so it can be customized to the height of the speaker. You can even control time itself, with clocks for actual time, elapsed time, and time to lift off. For the audience we have house lights and, at best, a remote microphone that can be hand passed for audience questions or comments.

If we convene over fifty people and don't use an auditorium, we move to the cafeteria or a ballroom at a local hotel. Both of these are designed for eating, not for meeting. They are a little more flexible than the auditorium, but if your intent is to bring groups of people together for the sake of engagement, you are fighting the space that is available.

Even when we have some flexibility to arrange the room for participation, we often don't do it. We don't even see that the space given to us interferes with our purpose. If our goal is to have all voices heard, to have peers treat each other as important as the leader, if we want the leader to come off of the pedestal and join the institution simply as a powerful member, you can't have the boss and the consultant standing on a stage talking down to the troops.

The Circle

The physical symbol for participation and engagement is a circle. Round tables put each of us in sight of everyone else. Seats in a circle do the same. Even a room full of round tables has an interactive effect. Don't worry about having some people with their backs to the front. The action is not in the front of the room; it is at the tables. Eventually we will have whole rooms and buildings designed to hold the circle. Some businesses are there already. Saturn and Harley-Davidson have understood the importance of the circle in the design of their buildings.



Other organizations are also experimenting with new communal space. The Boeing Company has “visibility” rooms designed to continually display the goals, values, and progress of large projects. A senior executive at Boeing started to experiment with the structure of his visibility room in order to get deeper participation. First he got rid of the large table and had only chairs with a few, low coffee tables to put stuff on. Then he brought in plants, to add some life to the environment. They then noticed that the fluorescent lighting was cold and institutional, so they brought in floor lamps. This, however, was going too far. It started to feel like a living room. Out came the lamps, but the chairs and the plants remained, testament to the intent to design a room for open dialogue and human encounter. Still, isn’t it interesting that a living room—a room for living, a room to nurture life—seemed so uncomfortably out of place at work?

The point is not that there is a right design for a room—it is about our consciousness about the importance and power of space. As we become more conscious about the impact of how we physically come together, we will start to redesign our common space. This will require the joint effort of furniture designers, architects, hotel executives, organizational real estate people, and those of us who convene the meetings.

The physical space for our implementation meetings is not just a question of flexibility; it carries a message of habitability, of whether this place was designed for human beings or machines. Most commercial workplaces are designed for machines, or machinelike efficiency. Blank walls, colored in gray or white, remind us that the human spirit has been institutionalized. There is little art or humanity on the walls of the corridors or meeting rooms or reception areas. If there is art, it is usually pictures of company history, products, or buildings. Kind of like the Stalinist art of the Soviet Union, where the only images allowed were the ones that glorified the state. Maybe I am getting carried away, but you get the point.

Whatever the space you are given to work in, you always have a choice. Even in an auditorium, people can talk to each other across the rows, or stand up, or move into the aisles or to the front of the room. If you do have a choice, try just chairs—no tables. You will get some complaints, but they are worth absorbing for the flexibility and the message that the space carries.

The Choice for Accountability

No change, no matter how wise and needed, will help if there is not a widespread and deep sense that each individual must make this work. This is real accountability—the willingness to personally

care for the well-being of the institution first, and of my unit and self second. This is a personal choice. The choice for accountability is most likely to happen when people feel attached to each other and have influenced the process.

I have talked throughout this book about how to bring responsibility and accountability into the interaction between ourselves and our client. The skills of expressing our wants, dealing with resistance, navigating the contracting meeting, are all ways of building responsibility. Creating high interaction among your clients is how to bring responsibility into the implementation phase.

If the goal is to build internal commitment, the means is to create connection, tell it all, have new conversations in habitable spaces, and finally to offer people a choice over how they do business. The choice we give people is critical and argues against our wish to package the future. Real commitment always entails the redistribution of power. And this is much more subtle than redoing the matrix describing which people decide, who advises, who offers input, at each point in the work process. A chart of decision rules does not shift power; it restrains it. The distribution of power needs to be present in how we live, not just in how we decide. It especially has to be embodied at those moments when we come together in the same room.

¹ I want to acknowledge how much I have learned about engagement from colleagues who have been part of the School for Managing and Leading Change. In particular, Dick Axelrod and Kathie Dannemiller understood engagement long before I took it seriously. They have been part of inventing the whole world of large-group methodology. Dick created The Conference Model™ with Emily Axelrod, and Kathie has been a mentor for all in the realm of real-time, high-interaction strategic change. They have offered their insights generously, and I am indebted to them.