

Making things happen

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In the words of John Harvey-Jones, former head of ICI, a manager does not 'do' things, a manager 'makes things happen.' This handout offers a framework for making things happen which can be used by anyone, whether or not they are called a manager. All the stages are important but each stage will be easier to accomplish in some situations and harder in others.

To make things happen, you must know:

1. why you are in business;
2. where you are now;
3. where you would like to be;
4. how you will know you have got there;
5. what is hindering them from getting there;
6. how you might get there;
7. which of the ways of getting there are most likely to enhance (or have the least adverse effects on) human and physical resources in the process; and
8. how you will check and evaluate what is happening.

1 Why are you in business?

Before you can make anything happen you have to be clear about the business you are in and what you are expected to contribute to the organisation as a whole. You may have had this vision handed down to you, you may have contributed to it or you may have had to create a 'mission' or 'vision' statement. Whatever the case, you must be clear about the business you are in and the philosophy and values that underlie that business.

A number of approaches are available to help you determine why you are in business. In complex or messy situations, or where there is little or no agreement about the philosophy and values of the organisation, a sophisticated approach may be required. In relatively simply situations, the *why* technique may be all that is needed.

Start with something the organisation currently does and ask *why* it does it. Write down the answer and ask *why* of the answer. Write that answer down and repeat the process until you reach an answer which is a general principle or statement of values for which *why* is a meaningless question. Now start again with something else the organisation does and you should find that, at some point, you get an answer which is identical to one given in the first



Figure 1: The 'hard systems' approach

sequence of answers. Repeat this process a few more times and you should be able to construct an objectives hierarchy which at one of its levels gives a reasonable answer to the question 'Why are we in business?' If that doesn't work, either your organisation is doing a lot of pointless things or you need a more sophisticated approach.

1.1 Are you committed to this?

Once you have an answer to the question 'Why are we in business?', it is worth asking whether what the organisation is doing and why it is doing it is something you are committed to. If you aren't, you may be able to persuade your colleagues to review the organisation's objectives and include ones to which you can be committed but, if in the end that is not possible, you would be far better looking for another job as you simply will not bring the commitment to your present job which is necessary for you to be successful in it.

A framework for making things happen

The Steps 2–7 in this handout draw on a cyclic framework (Figure 1) developed by the Open University for T301 *Complexity, management and change: applying a systems approach* which was intended for people managing change within an organisation where the values are already agreed but *what* people should do and *how* they should do them need to be revisited whether because of a threat or an opportunity for the organisation. However, the principles are applicable to setting up something from scratch once the values are agreed.

2 Where are you now?

First, you have to be clear about where you are now. Without an understanding of where you are, you cannot

1. make any worthwhile plans to go in any particular direction, or
2. assess the extent of your progress in a particular direction.

This understanding should have at least three elements:

- the relationships the organisation has with other similar units and/or organisations, with its suppliers, with anyone with whom it collaborates and with its customers;
- trends in demand for your services, and for similar services provided by others, and possible changes in, or new, services which might affect current demand for services;
- the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation's existing resources, human and physical, and any likely changes in these resources which may affect the capacity of the organisation, whether for better or for ill, to carry on its business.

You should consider any 'hard' data you have on:

- the current activities of the organisation and their outcomes,
- trends in demand for and in the provision of services, and
- the resources, human and physical, available to the organisation

and collect lots of 'soft' data on what people both inside and outside the organisation think or believe about the present situation. This will be even more valuable if you are able to compare data collected over time (and thus demonstrate trends in the organisation's performance and/or people's perceptions of it) or compare data collected about the organisation with data collected about other similar organisations (and thus be able to understand its situation in relation to other organisations).

3 Where would you like to be?

If people are very dissatisfied with where they are, it can sometimes be quite easy to answer this question. In this case, your difficulty lies not in knowing where to go but in knowing how to get there (see below). However, sometimes people are:

- dissatisfied with a situation but unclear about where they would like to be, or
- perfectly satisfied with their present situation but unclear about the impact of an internal or external change on their situation.

In any case, whenever people are unclear about where they would like to be, they need to spend some time thinking about this; they can:

1. develop an overall picture of where they would like to be at some unspecified future date
2. identify in general what they would like to be different at the end of the next six months

3. look at the specific elements in their understanding of where they are now and consider what they would like to be different about:
 - a) the relationships they have with others
 - b) the level and type of demand for their services and/or
 - c) the current situation in their organisation
4. create an objectives network in order to identify where they would like to be.

Creating an objectives network can be helpful where an individual or a group has a number of ideas about where they want to be but cannot decide on an overall aim. First, use a brainstorm or similar technique to generate a number of ideas about what you would like to be different; then sort the ideas in one of two ways:

1. by the time it will take each of the ideas to be achieved, or
2. by which ideas will need to be achieved first in order to achieve other ideas.

Of course, there may be a time element in the second approach if some things have to be achieved in order for others to be achieved; but it is possible that some things can be achieved independently and some things will depend on two or more other things being achieved first. So different parts of the network can have ‘dead ends’ or multiple connections.

Similarly, it may become clear from putting a group of ideas into a timescale that some will contribute to the achievement of others and you can develop an objectives network from these ideas even though you started with a list of ideas arranged by the time it would take to achieve them.

If you have difficulty building up a network, use the *why* technique outlined earlier: ask *what* your objective is in doing anything — the answer can always be restated as another objective and you should be able to ask *why* of every objective until you reach the meaning of life, though you should be able to stop when you get to something which looks like a reasonable overall aim. As mentioned earlier, asking *why* is also useful because, if you get an objective which conflicts with your organisation’s ‘mission’ or ‘vision’ statement, you know you need to go back and check whether what you are seeking to achieve is consistent with the philosophy and values of the organisation.

3.1 An overall aim

Once you have some idea of where you would like to be, you need to turn this into an overall aim. An overall aim describes what will be different as a result of what you do; it must be related to the ‘mission’ or ‘vision’ statement — your philosophy and values and why you are in business — and it must say more than simply what the organisation is hoping to do.

You can only prove to yourself or to anyone else that you have achieved your overall aim if you can point to measurable outcomes of your unit and/or organisation’s activities. In technical language, you need *measures of performance* and *criteria* against which you will measure your performance.¹

¹For example, if you want to reduce weight, you normally use your weight as a *measure of performance* but the *criterion* for success could be number of pounds lost or number of pounds lost *versus* weight at a previous weighing or the change in your body mass index. The criterion you choose may affect how difficult it is to achieve your objective but, if it is not stated clearly, you may not be able to convince people that you have achieved something.

4 How will you know you have got there?

Sometimes you can create a SMART overall aim, that is, one which is:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant and
- Time-limited.

and leave it at that. But more often than not, it is more useful to break down an overall aim into a number of key objectives reflecting different aspects of what you are seeking to achieve (and sometimes defining different activities which you will need to engage in in order to achieve your overall aim).

If you find it difficult to identify appropriate key objectives, try the *what and how* technique. Regard the overall aim as *what* you hope to achieve and write down *how* you are going to achieve it. Try turning each of these *how* statements into SMART key objectives. Now treat each key objective as a *what* objective and write down a list of *how* objectives which will enable you to achieve the key objective and so on. You should end up with an objectives network which started from the overall aim and worked back to what you are going to do today to achieve your overall aim. Each key objective should be SMART, with its own measure of performance and criterion, so that you can tell when you have achieved each one on your way to achieving your overall aim. This is effectively the reverse of the *why* technique.

5 What is hindering you from getting there?

Before thinking about how you might get there, it is worth pausing to think about what might hinder you from getting there. You may already have some ideas about this if, for example, your relationships with another organisation are likely to be problematic, you are unsure of trends in external demand or whether you will have the resources to get you where you want to be.

It is always worth trying to re-frame a constraint as an opportunity. For example, you may not have the human resources to achieve what you want and you may be thinking about recruiting some new staff; but this may be the opportunity for you to argue for some extra resources to develop your existing staff. You may not have the physical resources to achieve what you want but you may be able to use a proposed change of function to justify new physical resources. Though it shouldn't be, it is always more difficult for you to persuade people that you need new resources if you have been making do with unsatisfactory resources for years; it is much easier if you can present the new resources as essential to enable you to do your new job even when they would clearly have helped you to do your present job better.

Before going on you may possibly want to go back to the previous stage and amend one or more of your key objectives to make them more realistic in the light of the constraints you have identified. But it is more likely that what you have considered in this section will be more useful in the next — thinking about how you might get there.

6 How might you get there?

Different operations need different types of organisation; different people need different types of relationship if they are to work productively; different situations need different approaches. Moreover, there is never one, right way of doing things. There are always several different ways and you need to select the one which is best suited to the situation.

To get somewhere within your organisation, you need to think about:

- *who* will be involved,
- *what* you will expect them to do,
- what *you* will do,
- *how* you will communicate about what is being done,
- how you will get feedback on progress,
- how you will motivate people,
- how you will keep them to task and stop them going all over the place, and
- what sorts of advice and *support* you will make available to them.

You may also need to establish or develop relationships with those outside your organisation. They may be other members of your organisation, members of other organisations, customers or suppliers, individuals or community groups. How are you going to persuade them to do the things you want to enable you to achieve your objectives? What support will you expect from them and what support will you be able to give them? Indeed, what are your support needs?

6.1 Support needs

All organisations require support from those who supply resources including the directors, trustees or senior managers. Some people may only require information; others will require training and development resources; others will require material resources. Whatever the resources, including information, which you need, they should relate directly to what you hope to achieve and the ways in which the activities of the organisation have been organised to achieve this. If you are unable to gain the resources you need, you may need to think about re-organising your activities to achieve your desired outcomes using a different combination of resources.

7 Which ways of getting there are likely to be most appropriate?

Choosing the most suitable way of achieving something can be difficult because it usually involves trying to imagine something which doesn't exist at the moment. You can, for example,

1. develop a number of scenarios including detailed plans for their implementation and simply decide for yourself which one you think is most likely to get you where you want to be most quickly and efficiently;

2. develop a number of scenarios which you share with a range of people in order to seek their views on which one they would most like to be adopted;
3. tell people what the overall aim and the key objectives are and ask them to develop scenarios for achieving the overall aim/key objectives (in the UK this is often done competitively with different groups asked to create their own scenarios, one of which is then selected; in Japan it is more common for a single group to cooperate in developing and comparing a range of scenarios);

You also need to check how a detailed scenario or proposal will fit in with the philosophy and values of the organisation and how far it will enhance the use of human and physical resources. For example, a scenario that involves hiring new staff or buying new equipment may lead to existing staff losing self-confidence and existing equipment standing unused. Equally, a scenario which requires existing staff to use unsuitable equipment is less likely to be effective than one which provides them with the equipment they need to do a good job. As a rule, any scenario which is likely to reduce staff motivation is likely to be more expensive and less likely to be implemented than one which enables staff to do their jobs better.

8 How will you check and evaluate what is happening?

Once you have chosen what you (and others) believe to be the most appropriate way of getting there, you need to check that you are getting there and you need to evaluate your choice when you get there.

Many measures of performance allow you to check progress along the way; you can then make adjustments if you are going in the wrong direction or too slowly and you can use the evidence you have of progress to show people that things are happening and encourage them to support what you are doing.

When you get there, it is worth asking three questions:

1. did you really get where you intended?
2. was the route you chose the least costly in terms of human and material resources?
3. was it the right place to go to?

Chris Argyris (1976) argues that organisations typically fail to ask the third question and therefore fail to learn from their own experiences.

In addition to being useful when introducing a particular change to an organisation, Steps 2–8 in this handout are particularly suited to repeated use over fixed or variable intervals as part of a continuous development approach (Deming, 2000) to quality in an organisation. Step 1 can be included whenever there are serious questions about the fundamental direction of the business.

References

Argyris, C. (1976). Single loop and double loop models in research on decision making. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21, 363–375.

Deming, W. E. (2000). *Out of the crisis: quality, productivity and competitive position*. Boston: MIT Press.

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