Note reference to Great Teachers Seminar on p. 34

LARGE-SCALE EVENTS

New Ways of Working Across the Organization

BY STEVEN E. BRIGHAM

In the 1970s and 1980s, a generation of campus leaders learned that tough, institutionwide decisions could be enacted through powerful "big decision" committees. Need to close a program? Downsize departments? Freeze salaries and hiring? Recapture resources for a strategic venture? Decisions like these are a question of *power*—they require an authority and dispatch usually not available to a given administrator or standing body of governance. Once all parties reach an agreement, a high-level body of elders is charged to execute the hard, far-reaching decisions.

In the 1990s, a new generation of college leaders confronts challenges that are less about power than *culture*. They're told to transform undergraduate education, reshape faculty roles, practice quality, serve new constituents, work in teams, and honor diversity—all entailing deep changes of mind and habit that no committee, no matter how powerful, can simply order up.

To transform a culture, the *people* affected by the change must be involved in creating that change. This simple, fundamental insight—proved a hundred times over in academic journals and real-life settings—has led to an important innovation in the field of organizational development: "large-scale events." What's new is that these events—fashioned earlier in industry, health care, and government to meet the challenges of transformation—are now finding their way into higher education. This article describes what they are and looks hard at their initial use on campus.

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Large-scale events try to short-circuit the aimless patter and posturing of professional meetings with activity that encourages reflection, dialogue, and action.

Large-scale events aim to engage an organization's full range of stakeholders in longer, collaborative tasks of introspection and choice-making, all the while building new understandings and relationships among them. The events themselves may involve dozens or even hundreds of people meeting one to three days at a stretch; they are interactive and community-building in nature, and participant- rather than expert-led; and they try to short-circuit the aimless patter and posturing of professional meetings with activity that encourages reflection, dialogue, and action.

Large-scale events come in many shapes and forms, as we'll see. They do not replace regular organs of planning and decision-making (or "big decision" committees); indeed, they may depend on them. There's nothing sure-fire or cure-all about them. But in the right context they represent important new tools for campus leaders initiating deeper processes of change.

The short history of large-scale events dates back to the work of organizational practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1960s. At that time (and still today), consultants who worked with complex organizational systems typically focused on group-based problem-solving and planning for *separate* units or departments within an organization.

The work of Fred Emery and Eric Trist in Europe and of Dick Beckhard and colleagues in the United States began to change this. In 1960, Emery and Trist developed the first "search" conferences, in which many stakeholders (25 to 40) from across an organization, company, or community engaged in interactive strategic planning to develop a preferred future. Due to the success of these conferences, Trist and Emery broke the mold of small, elite groups drafting manual-thick planning reports that left little to the imagination or planned on the assumption that change happens slowly and predictably. The organizations they worked with—mostly in manufacturing—had begun to discover that when the environment external to an organization changes dramatically, the rules of planning must also change. Trist coined the term "turbulence" to describe this new, unpredictable, ever-changing environment. In the decades since, nearly every sector has been forced to confront the same reality—that the environment is unpredictable and the ground rules change constantly. Higher education institutions, only recently aware of this shifting ground, are now struggling mightily to adapt.

Beckhard also shifted the focus from the individual group or unit to relationships among groups across the system as a whole. In the late 1960s he began to convene "confrontation meetings" (not to be confused with encounter groups)—interventions that forced organizations to focus on how changes in one part of the system interact with and affect the rest. At these meetings, management from all levels of an organization (often four to five dozen in all) would come together for a day to do a quick assessment of its current circumstances and to set action plans for improvement. In this way, organizations could focus their attention on the most critical issues in a coherent way. (See Beckhard in box.)

Some years later, Eva Schindler-Rainman and Ronald Lippitt again proved the practicality of large-scale events as interventions when they developed what they called "collaborative communities." They would convene sometimes hundreds of members of a local community (often a town or small county) for two days to develop preferred futures for the community *and* sets of action plans to move the community in that new direction.

To all of these practitioners, large-scale events were a new way to quickly gather richer information, data, and perspective in order to enhance larger change initiatives they were trying either to launch or sustain.

Old and New Mindsets for Change

As mentioned earlier, these large-scale events have been tried in higher education, often with surprising success. But what are the reasons for using them? And can they really work in the slow-moving, status-conscious world of academic skeptics? Colleges and universities are being forced to rethink—among other things—their basic assumptions regarding planning and strategy, teaching and learning, the way they organize themselves, and their student body compositions. With strategies and systems changing, the ways of bringing people together to address problems or grasp opportunities will have to be reconsidered as well. Large-scale events—colleges are beginning to find—are one powerful way to initiate or sustain needed and systemic change.

Traditional approaches to change tend to make the following assumptions:

1. Take on what's doable and manageable, usually only a few discrete pieces of the puzzle.
2. Change cannot happen fast.
3. Only a few of the most knowing people can be involved at a time.
4. Plans should be hammered out in great detail by those who hold appropriate position and power.

5. Once *we* figure it out, *they'll* do it.

Although each of these assumptions appears perfectly rational, and organizations have used all of these for decades and prospered, the end result in today's environment is less and less convincing. The days in which a few people try to convince the many that change is needed—and in which those few take primary responsibility for making the change happen, leaving everybody else with partial, minimal, or no responsibility at all—may be numbered. These tried-and-true practices are not likely to endure in the rapidly changing environment Peter Vaill terms "permanent white water." They do not reach to the culture of an organization. (See Vaill in box.)

Peter Senge argues in *The Fifth Discipline* that the primary new discipline organizations need to acquire is "systems thinking." The essence of systems thinking is this: an organization is a whole system that cannot be divided into independent parts; thus, effective management of change requires focusing on the *interactions* of an organization's parts rather than their *separate actions*. Systems thinking, however, must account for how the permanent white water impacts the institution, thus requiring continuous reflection and dialogue about how the internal system fits together.

Systems thinking is incorporated into the more successful strategies we're seeing on campuses today. Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), when conducted thoughtfully (which it often isn't), embraces the new mindset. A focus on systems thinking is based on the following assumptions.

1. An institution is a complex jigsaw puzzle.
2. Nobody knows what the whole puzzle looks like, but everybody holds an important piece of the puzzle. Essential knowledge for changing the system is held by stakeholders inside and outside the system.
3. When taken together, these pieces build a more holistic understanding of the current system and its greatest potentials for change.
4. To understand this puzzle, larger groups than we're accustomed to will have to meet and work together productively and collaboratively.
5. If everybody is working together on developing the strategy, the work afterwards can happen more quickly and effectively.

Large-scale events (implied in point 4) provide an opportunity for systems thinking in action and can become key parts of a larger, holistic strategy for change. These events, in many cases, bring the "system" into the room to confer on strategic issues of concern to all. And they already have made an entrance on campus.

Eight Types of Events

Here, then, are eight types of large-scale events that have been used on campuses, and a few more that have not (to my knowledge) but have been used outside of higher education and are compelling enough for a quick review. In my study of these events in higher education I have found only isolated examples of each of the types I will discuss. The one used most frequently is "Future Search" (for which I found 22 examples in all); for most of the others I found only an example or two. For the last three, I found no examples at all but believe their use in other sectors will be instructive for campuses looking for new ways to bring people together to envision, plan, restructure, and reinvent.

1. *Future Search*

A Future Search is a large planning "conference" that brings 50 to 80 people together for three days, most often in a retreat-like setting, to develop a preferred (and commonly agreed upon) future for an organization. Future Search is task-focused, involves diverse groups crossing both departmental and organizational boundaries, and is—in part—self-managed. For colleges and universities, participants often include administrators, faculty, staff, and students, as well as employers, community organizations, alumni, parents, and other educational organizations. Why such a mix? As Marvin Weisbord, one of the early American proponents of Future Search, cautions, "If you have too narrow a group of people you miss the big picture." (See Weisbord in box.) Future Search strives to find common ground on values, issues, and directions upon which all can agree and not on solving an organization's chronic problems.

The reasons campuses have for using Future Search conferences vary. Most often, institutions use the conferences as part of efforts to develop a campus vision. However, two business schools used Future Search to begin redesigning their business curricula, while a community college in New York used it to lay the groundwork for completely reorganizing student services, and a college of education in Colorado chose it to reinvent its teacher preparation programs.

Here are two brief examples of how Future Search is being used on campus.

George Washington University School of Business and Public Management (Washington, DC). GW held a conference in 1994 to look at what the undergraduate business school experience should look like in 2004. Eight stakeholder groups participated, including business and liberal arts faculty; parents and alumni; students and staff; administrators; and business, nonprofit, and government employers. A new vision statement resulted and subsequently was endorsed by all the necessary groups and committees on campus. This new vision has since been used extensively in developing new programs and activities. But perhaps the most important post-conference result was that students really have begun to "feel that they are a part of making things happen at the school," according to the school's associate dean for undergraduate programs.

University of Minnesota-Crookston. In late 1992, Crookston was allowed to expand its mission from technical associate degrees to technical baccalaureate degrees, making it a four-year institution. A strategic plan approved by the Board of Regents included five strategies, one of which was to develop collaborative partnerships in six new, cost-effective baccalaureate programs. Building collaborative partnerships became the theme of the Future Search held in the summer of 1994. Conference stakeholder groups included not only staff, faculty, administrators, employers, and students—but also faculty and senior leaders from other higher education institutions in the region and from the university's Twin Cities campus.

At the conference, Crookston developed eight "consensus" themes that it has used since as a touchstone for a multitude of new activities. Soon after the conference, each of the six new BA programs formed improvement audit committees that now meet annually. They have been key to the college forging stronger links to its numerous external communities (the town, local and regional employers; other colleges). Crookston also has begun convening annual large-scale (100 people or more), one-day gatherings of internal and external people to revisit important elements of its vision.

But Donald Sargeant, the chancellor, believes the most important result of the Future Search did not come directly from a conference action plan. Yet, by convening the conference, it "helped fit us into the community and the region as a whole," says Sargeant. "Our institutions should not be in isolation. The conference made us involve the people and communities we should be serving and working with in the visioning process....I constantly refer back to these themes and try to practice them day-to-day and in big decisions."

2. *Open Space Technology (OST)*

Whereas Future Search conferences have agendas, tasks for groups to accomplish, limits to numbers, and ample advance planning, "Open Space Technology" (OST) has no upfront agenda (only a theme to rally around), no specific exercises, and no limit to the number of participants. Developed a dozen years ago by Harrison Owen, a former Episcopal priest, Open Space starts with nothing but dozens (and sometimes hundreds) of people seated in a circle, and four rules: whoever comes are the right people; whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened; whenever it starts is the right time; and when it's over, it's over. It sounds so simple (it is), but with these four Zen-like guidelines, a one- to three-day strategic meeting can begin.

Open Space events require a meeting space that can accommodate the whole group (whether 50 or 300), in addition to dozens of small breakout groups being held simultaneously. The events operate on the premise that the best people to discuss a subject are those who want to, and that once given such an opportunity, they are also the ones most likely to improve them. The agenda gets created from scratch by all participants—after only a 10- to 15-minute opening introduction. In a group of 300, as many as 75 different discussion sessions might get posted, scheduled, and convened. All sessions relate, in some way, to the stated theme.

Open Space has been used by companies, organizations, and communities alike to deal with issues ranging from the future of the Rockport Shoe Company to the distribution of hundreds of millions of federal highway dollars for Native American tribal lands. Happily, there are a few examples from academia to share as well.

Keene State University. In May 1996, Keene State brought together 350 faculty, staff, and administrators for three days of intense conversation—called *Speak Out*—to begin identifying shared and achievable goals and priorities for the future. As the president stated in brief remarks at the beginning of the Open Space conference, "This is very different from the way we have done planning in the past. Instead of appointing a committee to write an institutional plan, I am asking each of you to 'speak out' about the things you want changed and the things you value."

For three days, the campus became a hotbed of interaction, with 100 different is-

sues being discussed—sometimes in intimate groups of three or four, sometimes in rooms with people spilling out the door straining to hear the topic of conversation. As day three came to a close, everyone voted for the top 10 to 15 planning issues that Keene should begin focusing on in the near term. More than 100 people then took part in creating a 5-by-10-foot Interrelationship Map, which grouped the 100 discussion topics and "mapped" their relationships to one another.

Keene State saw *Speak Out* as a beginning point in a continuous, inclusive process of identifying issues of importance to the university's future. Late in the summer, the OST planning team held a half-day conference to continue the discussions about the top 15 priorities. The sessions were each led by *Speak Out* attendees who shared the work under way on each of the issues and engaged groups in further conversation and planning. Keene plans to hold a Future Search in the winter to build upon the activities and momentum generated from *Speak Out*.

Belmont University. Belmont's Liberal Education Team for the Summer (LETS), a group of eight faculty, worked diligently for nearly seven months to revise and reinvent the general education curriculum. Although LETS had reported its ideas in faculty meetings and had invited colleagues to four 60- to 90-minute "town" meetings throughout the fall 1994 semester, the faculty still had not engaged in the kind of thorough discussion that was needed to decide whether a new curriculum should be instituted. LETS decided that the only way to determine how to move forward was to involve as many faculty colleagues as possible in collaboratively exploring the general education curriculum. In January 1995, the team held a 10-hour OST retreat over two days with 67 faculty—titled "Issues and Opportunities for General Education at Belmont."

More than 30 sessions were convened, and during each 90-minute block, faculty had their choice of eight or nine discussion topics. The discussion was often passionate, occasionally heated. When the retreat came to a close, faculty heartily supported many of the changes being proposed and offered a handful of issues that needed continued exploration. Most importantly, 65 of the 67 faculty supported the LETS team in moving forward on comprehensive curricular reform.

3. *Interactive Design*

Unlike the first two types of large-scale events, "Interactive Design" is not an event but an ongoing, iterative, systems methodology developed by systems theorist Russell Ackoff for completely redesigning an institution. Based on the premise that an organization is a whole that cannot be divided into independent parts, redesign of a department, school, or entire institution requires the new "whole" to be envisioned first in terms of how all of the new parts will be integrated. (See Ackoff in box.)

Interactive Design often requires multiple large-scale events during the overall redesign process. The redesign moves through several phases during which the institution develops alternative "ideal" design options, eventually selects one, and, over time—during the planning and implementation phases—moves iteratively closer to its ideal design. In most of these phases, large-scale events (30 to 50 people) are organized to ensure that the new "whole" (the *new* organization design) does not get improperly and prematurely divided into parts working independently. In other words, the process starts with, continues, and finishes with an emphasis on a design that is integrated (and makes sense) across the organization.

One institution, Jackson Community College, has spent the better part of the last two years using the Interactive Design process, leading to a comprehensive reorganization around a new mission and vision.

Jackson Community College. In the spring of 1994, the senior leadership at Jackson decided to begin redesigning many of its "subsystems" to increase the college's effectiveness. However, early in the redesign process they realized that they, instead, would need to redesign the whole institution. At each step, Jackson brought in 30 to 50 faculty, administrators, and staff to tackle this major task—which involved analyzing the external environment, assessing strengths and weaknesses, conducting planning, and so on. Some of these meetings lasted a half-day; others for a day or longer. The work was intensely and purposefully collaborative, resulting in wholly different relationships, tasks, and processes across functions and departments. After two years, nearly everyone has participated in at least one of these events, if not more. The result is a dramatically new organizational structure—a circular organization they call it—that has seven primary components. Although large-scale events are *not* new to Jackson, since much of its quality-improvement training and teamwork were conducted this way, these events now have become part of the fabric of work life at Jackson. Since Interactive Design is iterative, teams continue to meet in these

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groups as they move closer and closer to the college's ideal design set forth nearly two years ago.

4. *Home-Grown*

Not all large-scale events have a name or a history. In fact, some of the best "events" are those created from scratch—custom-designed for the situation at hand and the institution involved.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Late in the fall of 1995, after three months of planning, 77 faculty and 13 administrators and staff from Hobart and William Smith (HWS) Colleges convened off-site at a hotel in Toronto for four days to discuss passionately and listen carefully, to delve into issues more deeply, and, ultimately, to make progress on the most important challenges facing the college—particularly those around teaching, learning, and curriculum.

The four-day, faculty-led retreat had three objectives: 1) to gain a stronger collective understanding of HWS students; 2) to form an agenda and time line for needed changes; and, 3) to return with a greater sense of mutual respect and collaborative interest. There was hardly an issue unexamined. Admissions and retention, reputation and resources, curriculum coherence and student advising, a learning focus and a collaborative culture were all addressed. All participants soon understood that when they discussed one issue, they necessarily had to talk about six or seven others.

The results were gratifying. As President Richard Hersh recounted to me, "On the substance side, the faculty agreed to radically change from a set of general education distribution requirements to a more integrative, coherent, and significant general education program requiring far more interdisciplinary core course work...a new advising system, a possible theme for the first year...and a return to a senior thesis/project. On the process side," he continued, "the faculty agreed to a total revamping for how faculty meetings are run, how committees communicate with each other, and how everybody relates to students."

5. *Great Teaching Seminars*

"Great Teaching Seminars" (GTS)—created more than a quarter-century ago, not by organization development professionals but by community college faculty—are another type of large-scale event worth exploring.

A Great Teaching Seminar resembles an Open Space Technology retreat with a specific purpose—better teaching—but is exclusively for faculty. Founded by Roger Garrison, these seminars were first held at Garrison's Westbrook College campus (Portland, Maine) in the summer of 1969 and have since become widely practiced. While early seminars were held for faculty across institutions, they frequently now are held for 25 to 30 faculty from one campus.

These seminars, held in retreat settings, celebrate good teaching and create an environment in which teachers from across disciplines can learn from each other about how to advance their teaching. Much like Open Space, they start with no specified agenda and instead follow the interests and passions of the participants. Although there are hundreds of campuses now using these seminars, it is sufficient to tell one campus' story.

Dallas County Community College District. DCCCD has been holding Great Teaching Seminars annually for faculty across its system since 1988. An outside facilitator organizes the retreat and sets the agenda, and each campus sends three to five faculty, who each bring to the retreat a teaching technique or strategy that has worked well for them. Faculty lead most of the small sessions, while the facilitator leads large group dialogues. Faculty members have found the seminars a great way not only to explore new approaches to instruction, but to develop specific solutions to ongoing instructional problems they encounter. Most importantly, faculty continue to report these seminars as the best professional development they have had since starting their teaching careers.

DCCCD has been so impressed by the results for faculty that it now convenes separate, annual, systemwide Great Administrator and Great Support Staff seminars that focus on improving performance and supporting dialogue, horizontally, across the district. Administrators and staff also have found these seminars to be the best professional development they have experienced.

Events Outside Higher Education

Three other large-scale events that have found wide appeal and use in other sectors but have gone unused in higher education are worth mentioning. They are "Real-Time Strategic Change," the "Conference Model," and "Work Out!"

6. *Real-Time Strategic Change*

Imagine an event five, 10, even 20 times larger than a typical Future Search and you get a picture of Real-Time Strategic Change. Developed by Dannemiller Tyson Associates (DTA), an Ann Arbor organizational consulting firm, it has since been used in the

United States and elsewhere by corporations, government, nonprofit organizations, and communities to build coherent action around strategic issues. Most events involve at least a few hundred managers and employees, last for two to three days, are built around enhancing and deepening a draft strategic plan, and encourage intense discussion by a mix of departmental and cross-functional groups. The largest event DTA has presented to date was for 2,000 people in a three-day event at a Ford auto assembly plant in Michigan.

A few years ago, METRO, a department responsible for water pollution control and public transportation in King County, Washington, held 10 Real-Time events for 4,000 people. Even though METRO was undergoing intense public scrutiny and divisive labor negotiations during that time, its goal was to transform itself using these events. "In each of these events," reports Dick Sandas, METRO's executive director, in the book *Real Time Strategic Change*, "people had an opportunity to help design the future culture of the organization, first through developing a strategy and values, and later through explicitly defining behaviors and plans that would support living this new culture." (See Jacobs in box.)

7. *The Conference Model*

The Conference Model, developed by Dick and Emily Axelrod, uses four consecutive large-scale conferences to completely redesign an organization. Each conference lasts two or three days and is separated by a month from the conference that follows. The first conference is for creating a vision and uses the same agenda as a Future Search. The second one is a customer/supplier conference that allows an organization to hear from its most important outside stakeholders about what forces must shape the organization's future direction. The third conference focuses on core organizational processes that must be rethought in delivering key products and services. The final conference is used to fashion a new organization design. Each conference has 60 to 70 participants, but only eight to 10 people, usually key organizational leaders, attend all four. The months in between the conferences are used to broadcast the results and findings from each conference and allow everybody in the organization to make comments, express concerns, and add ideas.

8. *Work Out!*

Work Out! is the brainchild of General Electric CEO Jack Welch. In 1988, while looking for a radical way to transform his bureaucratic culture to an empowered, entrepreneurial one, he developed a way for hundreds of employees to work on challenging problems in which they could speak honestly and without fear of retribution. These kinds of meetings—which he called Work Out!—eventually became a standard way of doing business at GE. Hourly and salaried workers would meet for three or four days, sometimes to solve problems or deal with issues, other times to receive skills training. Managers would introduce the event and then disappear until the last day to hear the recommendations for action. Gradually, GE began to include large events for management as well, and later still, began to invite suppliers and customers to selected events.

Leadership, Learning, and Community

Leadership. Large-scale events are not for the faint-hearted. Presidents, provosts, and deans who consider such events take a palpable risk—the first of which is going against convention. These events contradict the way academics typically go about meeting—methodically and scientifically breaking issues down into component parts; debating and arguing about the finer points, whatever the issue; and reveling more in the dialectic itself than the final result or decision. In contrast, these events foster productive discussion, dialogue, and action while building inductively to a greater and shared understanding about the "whole" (in most cases, the institution).

Academic leaders take a second risk when they invite large groups of people to engage in planning and decision-making—a direct challenge to the norm of an informed "elite" making such decisions in isolation. This is a major behavioral shift, fundamentally different from more traditional, top-down leadership behaviors. Leaders, by holding the event, raise the stakes for the change process itself and for the expectations of everyone who attends. If leaders cannot find ways, in partnership with others, to maintain the momentum afterwards, they risk cynicism from the very members they've hoped to engage.

Leaders most likely to be comfortable with sponsoring large-scale events, then, will have a familiarity with—if not a preference for—innovation and a keen awareness that appropriate change requires actively engaging the institution and the external world in very new ways.

Learning. Large-scale events are designed around "Theory Y" assumptions about people, which state that under the right condi-

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tions, people 1) seek and accept responsibility; 2) have the ingenuity and creativity needed to solve organizational problems; and, 3) take action toward objectives to which they feel committed.

Thus, large-scale events are designed deliberately to create the right conditions for people to learn. These designs allow all participants to experience the process of discovery and, in so doing, the need and possibilities for change. Participants learn new skills and behaviors, including leadership, which emerges—and is shared—as people gather insights together or move forward on key ideas.

Large-scale events are built around collaboration; they are part of a process of shared understanding and creation. Participants learn in small groups, where they spend most of their time and where they are able to participate more frequently and meaningfully in the overall dialogue. Yet the learning continues in large plenary sessions, as event designers create structures conducive to productive discussion.

Deeper learning begins to take place as an event progresses and as people see not only how the organization fits together as a whole, but how they and the work group belong and contribute their part. Participants, because they mix regularly with people from other departments or divisions, or even from off-campus, gain a new appreciation for how their work impacts others and how others' work impacts them. This provides participants with a reality check for their own perceptions of the other parts of the system, "reduces their egocentric view of the world and helps them understand other perspectives," according to Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie T. Alban. (See box.)

Community. In the November/December 1992 issue of *Change*, Jane Tompkins, a professor of English, wrote:

> Right now the culture of the research university militates against a proper attention to the quality of its own institutional life. Caring for the people you work with, taking time to contemplate the nature of your interactions on the job, paying attention to the mechanisms through which people interact—everyone including undergraduates, secretaries, janitorial staff, administrators, professors at all ranks...—devoting time and resources to building supportive, mutually reinforcing human relations, such considerations are regarded as peripheral to the institution's main concern.

What Tompkins talks about for research universities is true for most of higher education. Large-scale events at the most visible level ask participants to think and work hard. Yet, if run well, they also elicit a sense of community and common enterprise that is rarely experienced in the day-to-day exchanges of an academic year. They become rare opportunities in which people can engage their heads *and* their hearts.

Dick Hersh, in discussing his retreat at Hobart, said that "people increased respect for each other and for the collective and they really feel good about the competence of their colleagues." At another institution, a faculty member, when discussing her school's Future Search, said that "faculty yelled at each other; they talked of being offended, overlooked, and being poorly treated. But once people got it off their chest, they could look to the future. After it was over, everyone agreed 'we needed to have this conversation.'...This spirit has carried forward in the months after the conference."

Large-scale events lay the groundwork, develop skills, and expand people's understanding for new ways of working together *after* the event as well. At the University of Missouri-Columbia, a dean remarked that the greatest benefits from her Future Search Conference were "the new connections made. People see it as a catalyst that moved us into the collaborative mode." For a dean at Central Michigan University, her event "helped to alleviate some of the deep suspicion on campus between faculty and administration. New informal relationships formed. A sense of collaboration has been greatly enhanced."

So, large-scale events work at many different levels—from the very explicit one of strategy and action to the very implicit level of building relationships and, as Hersh says, creating "an ecumenism that should be in every place."

Points to Consider

The events discussed here are quite different, having unique histories, approaches, and designs. All can be convened with a strategic issue (or issues) in mind with the intention of bringing about significant change and, if done well, can help make productive change happen more quickly.

Large-scale events provide a robust environment for doing jigsaw-puzzle-solving, in which all participants simultaneously learn, analyze, create, and plan together. Each event puts participants in a position to see the larger system more completely. Before going out to do one, however, there are a few points to consider.

United States and elsewhere by corporations, government, nonprofit organizations, and communities to build coherent action around strategic issues. Most events involve at least a few hundred managers and employees, last for two to three days, are built around enhancing and deepening a draft strategic plan, and encourage intense discussion by a mix of departmental and cross-functional groups. The largest event DTA has presented to date was for 2,000 people in a three-day event at a Ford auto assembly plant in Michigan.

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Leadership, Learning, and Community

Leadership. Large-scale events are not for the faint-hearted. Presidents, provosts, and deans who consider such events take a palpable risk—the first of which is going against convention. These events contradict the way academics typically go about meeting—methodically and scientifically breaking issues down into component parts; debating and arguing about the finer points, whatever the issue; and reveling more in the dialectic itself than the final result or decision. In contrast, these events foster productive discussion, dialogue, and action while building inductively to a greater and shared understanding about the "whole" (in most cases, the institution).

Academic leaders take a second risk when they invite large groups of people to engage in planning and decision-making—a direct challenge to the norm of an informed "elite" making such decisions in isolation. This is a major behavioral shift, fundamentally different from more traditional, top-down leadership behaviors. Leaders, by holding the event, raise the stakes for the change process itself and for the expectations of everyone who attends. If leaders cannot find ways, in partnership with others, to maintain the momentum afterwards, they risk cynicism from the very members they've hoped to engage.

Leaders most likely to be comfortable with sponsoring large-scale events, then, will have a familiarity with—if not a preference for—innovation and a keen awareness that appropriate change requires actively engaging the institution and the external world in very new ways.

Learning. Large-scale events are designed around "Theory Y" assumptions about people, which state that under the right condi-

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tions, people 1) seek and accept responsibility; 2) have the ingenuity and creativity needed to solve organizational problems; and, 3) take action toward objectives to which they feel committed.

Thus, large-scale events are designed deliberately to create the right conditions for people to learn. These designs allow all participants to experience the process of discovery and, in so doing, the need and possibilities for change. Participants learn new skills and behaviors, including leadership, which emerges—and is shared—as people gather insights together or move forward on key ideas.

Large-scale events are built around collaboration; they are part of a process of shared understanding and creation. Participants learn in small groups, where they spend most of their time and where they are able to participate more frequently and meaningfully in the overall dialogue. Yet the learning continues in large plenary sessions, as event designers create structures conducive to productive discussion.

Deeper learning begins to take place as an event progresses and as people see not only how the organization fits together as a whole, but how they and the work group belong and contribute their part. Participants, because they mix regularly with people from other departments or divisions, or even from off-campus, gain a new appreciation for how their work impacts others and how others' work impacts them. This provides participants with a reality check for their own perceptions of the other parts of the system, "reduces their egocentric view of the world and helps them understand other perspectives," according to Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie T. Alban. (See box.)

Community. In the November/December 1992 issue of *Change*, Jane Tompkins, a professor of English, wrote:

> Right now the culture of the research university militates against a proper attention to the quality of its own institutional life. Caring for the people you work with, taking time to contemplate the nature of your interactions on the job, paying attention to the mechanisms through which people interact—everyone including undergraduates, secretaries, janitorial staff, administrators, professors at all ranks...—devoting time and resources to building supportive, mutually reinforcing human relations, such considerations are regarded as peripheral to the institution's main concern.

What Tompkins talks about for research universities is true for most of higher education. Large-scale events at the most visible level ask participants to think and work hard. Yet, if run well, they also elicit a sense of community and common enterprise that is rarely experienced in the day-to-day exchanges of an academic year. They become rare opportunities in which people can engage their heads *and* their hearts.

Dick Hersh, in discussing his retreat at Hobart, said that "people increased respect for each other and for the collective and they really feel good about the competence of their colleagues." At another institution, a faculty member, when discussing her school's Future Search, said that "faculty yelled at each other; they talked of being offended, overlooked, and being poorly treated. But once people got it off their chest, they could look to the future. After it was over, everyone agreed 'we needed to have this conversation.'...This spirit has carried forward in the months after the conference."

Large-scale events lay the groundwork, develop skills, and expand people's understanding for new ways of working together *after* the event as well. At the University of Missouri-Columbia, a dean remarked that the greatest benefits from her Future Search Conference were "the new connections made. People see it as a catalyst that moved us into the collaborative mode." For a dean at Central Michigan University, her event "helped to alleviate some of the deep suspicion on campus between faculty and administration. New informal relationships formed. A sense of collaboration has been greatly enhanced."

So, large-scale events work at many different levels—from the very explicit one of strategy and action to the very implicit level of building relationships and, as Hersh says, creating "an ecumenism that should be in every place."

Points to Consider

The events discussed here are quite different, having unique histories, approaches, and designs. All can be convened with a strategic issue (or issues) in mind with the intention of bringing about significant change and, if done well, can help make productive change happen more quickly.

Large-scale events provide a robust environment for doing jigsaw-puzzle-solving, in which all participants simultaneously learn, analyze, create, and plan together. Each event puts participants in a position to see the larger system more completely. Before going out to do one, however, there are a few points to consider.

Related Readings

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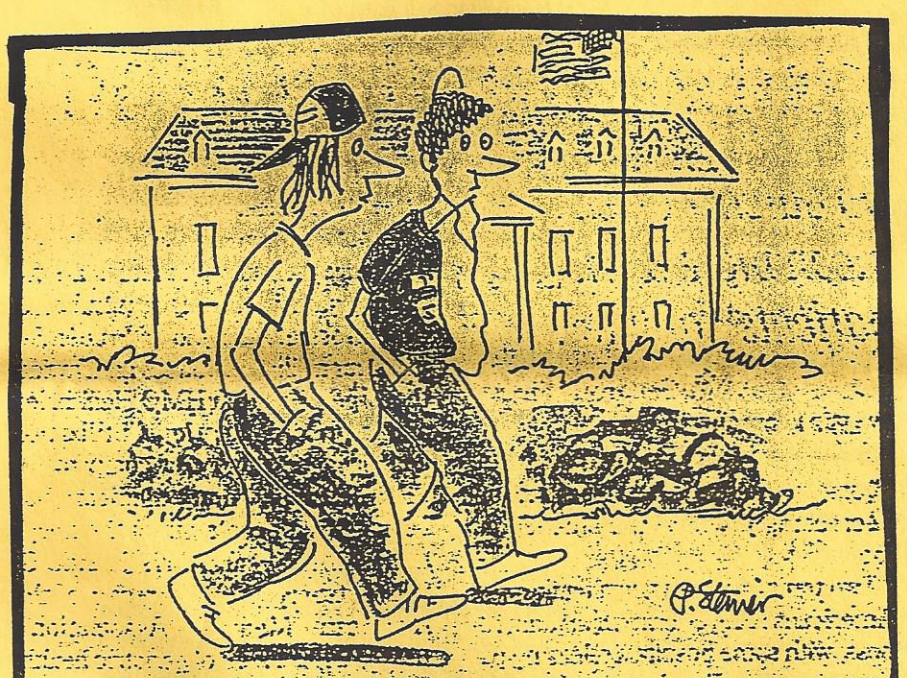
1. *Choosing the Right Time and the Right Issues.* To invest in a large-scale event—time, resources, and risk—you must identify a compelling need to hold one. If you can't, you're not ready to do one. Many organizations (and a few campuses) have held large-scale events that greatly disappointed, often for this reason. Timing is also important. Sometimes the culture of an organization is not ready to accommodate involving large groups of people in developing plans and action around strategic issues. These events are best used, then, when an institution is confronted with change of a magnitude and complexity that can no longer be kept isolated in the top ranks. Large-scale events can then become a powerful catalyst for the desired change.

2. *Link to the Larger Change Process/ Sustain the Momentum.* These events cannot stand alone. They must be used either to launch a new change initiative or to leverage an ongoing one. In addition, while these events generate momentum, they won't sustain it. In the private sector, there would be little worry about follow-up for such milestone events. Higher education institutions, however, will need to be much more intentional since implementation is not a cultural norm in academia. Thus, large-scale events will work best when

- a structure is already in place or is put in place to take advantage of the conference outcomes.
- people unable to attend the event can quickly find out about its outcomes *and* are given ample opportunity to comment, add ideas, and even join the post-event endeavors.

3. *The Expected and the Unexpected.* This is an unlikely partner to the previous point. Without a doubt, campuses must do a lot of hard thinking about how to integrate all of the newly generated ideas and plans into the current work. Otherwise, opportunities of great potential will slip away. Yet, despite vigorous and intentional activity after an event, many of the ultimate outcomes will be *unexpected* and *unplanned* because the work and ideas endorsed at the event not only guide immediate actions and plans but a *whole range of new actions and plans*—none of which could have been predicted when the event comes to a close.

Most campuses have yet to realize that much of the essential knowledge for changing their institutions is within their own people. Major institutional change will require new ways of drawing this knowledge out. So if campuses are looking for ways to conduct productive, collaborative work on a large scale around highly complex and significant campus issues, the time may have come to consider a new way to meet.



"We put our chairs in a circle, started talking and the next thing I knew I learned something."