

A different way to tackle problems

Naomi Stanford. August 2015

Often HR practitioners see organisational issues and challenges and think that they have to come up with answer or a solution themselves. For example, one learning and development manager recently asked me how he could define employee's career path expectations at various levels in the organisation and develop assessment frameworks that could be used by line managers to take promotion decisions.

Another, in a similar question, asked me how she could design and implement a career management programme for employees so that they have a more fulfilling career within the organisation. She noted that cross-functional moves are desired by many employees, but very rarely are allowed by managers.

A third person asked how he could improve the effectiveness and credibility of the HR Function. He said that although the HR function itself is pleased with the work that they are doing; the employees don't seem to understand and value the role being played by HR in the organisation.

What would you do if you had these questions? Would you:

- Try and answer them yourself
- Informally involve other HR colleagues in helping you develop an answer
- Establish a formal HR project team to design and implement an answer

These are three typical approaches to the type of question outlined above. But there are other approaches you could take. You could involve a wider group of people from other disciplines to help you come up with possibilities that you would not have thought of yourself. A useful Harvard Business Review article <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6760.html> outlines how 'Innovative breakthroughs often happen at the intersection of diverse disciplines and fields. Author Frans Johanssen described this phenomenon as "the Medici effect," referring to the creative explosion in Florence when the Medici family brought together creators from a wide range of disciplines—sculptors, scientist, poets, philosophers, painters, and architects.'

If you only want to include a diverse range of people from your organisation think about colleagues from finance, risk management, procurement, business operations and so on. Collectively they could help you think in different ways about answers to your questions. For example they may suggest that you delete a policy or adapt a process. Here's one HR person's example, again about developing career paths.

'We decided to invite 10 middle managers and 10 new junior joiners from across the business to a one day event to help us think afresh about career paths. We had difficulty getting agreement to do this because the senior HR people thought only they could develop career paths. However, we finally got permission to run the day. It opened with a debate on the question 'What do you think a career is?' It was surprising to middle managers to hear that the younger new joiners had very different ideas on careers from theirs. Then we asked each middle manager to pair with a new young joiner and we gave them a topic about career paths to consider. For example, should pay and promotion be on skills or length of service? Is it better to stay in the same role for several years or move after two years? Is a career path always upwards or can it be lateral or even downwards for a period (in which to learn new skills)? What followed was a short presentation on the views of each

pair about their question and a whole group discussion of the question. Because we had so many views in the room we got a many ideas that we in HR had never considered before. Now, with the help of that group we have designed and implemented a new career management approach and along the way have deleted some of our career management policies and streamlined the process.’

There are several ways of getting the views of a diverse group of people to address a specific issue. Future Search and Open Space are two – these are usually face to face events and last one or two days. The table below explains them.

<p>Future Search</p>	<p>“Future search helps people transform their capability for action very quickly. People tell stories about their past, present and desired future. Through dialogue they discover their common ground. Only then do they make concrete action plans.” www.futuresearch.net/method/whatis/index.cfm</p>	<p>This is conference-style approach involving large numbers of internal and external stakeholders jointly working on the design with facilitator support. Briefly, some initial questions are posed and the conference delegates use a combination of structured activities to agree answers/solutions. This approach has the benefit of generating feelings of ownership among the stakeholders with speed in getting to the implementation stage.</p>
<p>Open Space Technology</p>	<p>“Open Space gatherings are typically held to create a new vision, figure out how to implement a strategy, plan a significant change, solve a complex or intractable problem, invent a new product or prepare for community action.” www.openspaceworld.org</p>	<p>“The rules are simple, although setting up the parameters for a meeting or conference in Open Space is based on the theories of complexity, self-organization and open systems. Do you know how sometimes when you go to a conference or a meeting, the best ideas, networking, brainstorming and deal making happen during the coffee breaks? Open Space Technology is designed to simulate that natural way people find each other and share ideas in all different cultures and countries. It is also based on the understanding that there is a great amount of wisdom and experience in any gathered group of people “It all starts with a circle of chairs, without a pre-designed agenda. The group sets their own agenda by identifying issues and topics that have heart and meaning for them; topics for which they have passion and interest and for which they are willing to host a discussion group. Small group discussions happen throughout the day, with participants moving from group to group whenever they feel that they can no longer learn or contribute to a discussion, or when they feel drawn to</p>

	another topic.”
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Source: Stanford, N. (2014) Guide to Organisation Design, 2nd Ed. The Economist.

Another similar approach is running an ‘unconference’. A useful two minute video on unconference design explains the principles <http://transparencycamp.org/about/tips/>. Or you can download an explanation of unconferencing here. <http://www.unconference.net/unconferencing-how-to-prepare-to-attend-an-unconference/>

Also common are hacks or hackathons which were first used by software developers to address technology challenges. See a guide to them here. <https://hackathon.guide/> Companies including Cognizant, Facebook, Google, SendGrid, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Pegasystems and Kareo hold internal hackathons to promote new product innovation. Facebook's like button was conceived as part of a hackathon.

Generally these types of participative problem solving events do one or a combination of:

- Building a ‘working prototype’ for a product, or service.
- Creatively solving a problem or meeting a challenge
- Creating a community around an issue

Depending on the intent or objective of the event a mix of topic experts, users or customers, and representatives of different disciplines works well as a participant group. What you’re aiming for is a wide diversity of perspective from people interested in working on the topic.

The approach to participative problem solving is straightforward:

1. Have a clear issue/problem or challenge you need help on. (See the MIX Manifesto <http://www.managementexchange.com/about-the-mix/manifesto>)
2. Frame this so everyone participating understands it or can get to understand it through discussion.
3. Have ‘rounds’ to encourage themes and possible approaches to emerge as people get to grips with the topic.
4. Encourage people to gravitate to a slant on the topic that they are interested in and can develop further.
5. Be clear that everyone in the room is an equal participant; vertical hierarchies don’t work in these participative events. You may need to help people with this one (depending on how hierarchical your organisation is).
6. Increase engagement by having a range of resources available; crayons, musical instruments, paper, modelling clay, paints, anything that will help people step out of their organisational persona and be a bit more adventurous. (But don’t force this on people).
7. Organize to distribute leadership – the organiser(s) are the firefighters to get things started. They fan flames, encourage others to take initiative, and then step back but organisers are ready to step in again if needed.
8. Be aware if you’re organising an in-house event there’ll be in-groups/out-groups and perhaps scepticism. Think about how you can help people find the common ground and not work from vested interests or power plays.

Some of these face to face participative methods of generating innovative solutions to organisational issues and challenges may not work in your organisation – but they do work in many organisations IBM and Ikea are examples.

Other approaches for innovative problem solving include on-line collaboration. Take a look at the work of Gary Hamel, a management expert. He has a website called Management Innovation Exchange. He recently ran a 'hackathon' opening with the challenge question 'How do we create adaptable HR functions?' Hamel's hackathons are run over several weeks in 'sprints' of two weeks. Each two weeks builds on or refines the topic discussion of the previous two weeks. You can learn more about the approach and download the report of the HR hackathon here.

<http://www.mixhackathon.org/hackathon/hacking-hr-build-adaptability-advantage/sprint-41>

So consider these participative methods of problem solving. You might be pleasantly surprised if you suggested using them and then tried them out.