

# **BRIDGES: Internal Consultants**

## **for Change and High Performing Work Cultures**

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A Learning Organization requires a mindset of employees who choose to build BRIDGES, not walls, where collaboration is the rule and internal competition is the exception. Many of us were raised to have the right or the best answers, be the best in the class or in some way compete. Those interpersonal traits of an I.K.E. (I Know Everything) were rewarded. Many IKEs became young leaders, then the future leaders of organizations and institutions. Reward came through being first and, first alone, with rarely a word about sharing or creating through the collective talents and wisdom of those around us.

In today's organization environment, with greater competition and higher service expectations, the IKE style does not always serve us well. As leaders, IKEs often create "Knowing Organizations" where people can't possibly be told by another of a different way. Or even worse, where people are afraid to ask for help, even when they realize it. On the other hand, the "Learning Organization" evolves in a work culture where employees are able to build BRIDGES, to collaborate even when that means being vulnerable, taking risks, and not "knowing everything".

Failures abound when organizations seek to bring about work culture change for high performance. Reasons include the lack of a strategy to teach the necessary collaborative interpersonal skills as well as a way to integrate those skills as the new norms in the work environment.

For people to be able to learn and then change something about how they work together there needs to be constant and real use of new interpersonal skills. Growth is about using new skills and getting open, honest feedback. Feedback focuses on how well I am doing in terms of what I would want to keep doing, stop doing or do more of to be as effective with people while getting work accomplished.

In Hennepin County, Minnesota's Economic Assistance Department, we implemented an effort that improved the work culture, sustained positive change and has increased the potential for moving from that knowing organization to one of learning and higher performance.

To share the Hennepin County Economic Assistance story, we answer four questions from our experience:

- Why do people fail to sustain positive change in their work cultures?
- What strategies can be used to drive and integrate change and learning?
- Which interventions can be taught readily and used by internal consulting facilitators?
- What should organizations avoid and how to support change?

Through our answers, we will hope to show:

- A specific approach and strategies that can be modified for an organization of any size.
- A menu of interventions that directly support work culture change and learning that can be taught and used by internal facilitators.
- The knowledge of previous success and failures from actual implementation.
- The methods to sustain positive change to support the shift from a Knowing to a Learning Organization.

**Question #1: Why do people fail to sustain positive change in their work cultures?**

Flavor-of-the-month  
Series of false starts  
Leadership changes

Magic bullet expectations  
Resistance surfaces  
Leaders want a cheap and quick fix

**Question #2: What strategies can be used to drive and integrate change and learning?**

While an external consultant helps you create a roadmap for change and provides the tools to make that happen, internal consulting facilitators are those who live in the organization and, are there for the long-term. Internal consulting facilitators are the holders of sustainability. They hold the organization to the new behavioral practices and standards.

So how do you create a sustainable effort to improve your work culture from a Human Resource perspective? Improvement begins with clear leadership direction and expectations, followed by a solid infrastructure of interpersonal and communication skills for all employees. Improvement requires organization champions willing to model those skills and behaviors and hold others to those standards of new behaviors. Trainers are selected who exemplify or are willing to learn to the values and skills taught.

After training, real-time application of skills is led by a group of internal consulting facilitators, actual organization leaders. They serve as role models by facilitating individual and group learning. Facilitated sessions we have used include:

- Leader Feedback
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Conflict Resolution
- Team Building and Group Conflict Resolution
- Interpersonal Styles exploration
- Transition Management for leadership or organization structure changes
- Intergroup Image Exchange for stronger work relationships between work groups with common overarching objectives

The internal consultants demonstrate how to build BRIDGES and provide the forum and tools to make that happen for employees. Some employees with long-standing interpersonal issues clear the air, make firm, specific, actionable agreements to re-build credibility and trust resulting in improved organization performance.

**Question #3: Which interventions can be taught readily and used by internal consulting facilitators?**

Leader Feedback: This is a structured experience for a leader and direct reports. This allows direct reports to give feedback to the leader in a safe and helpful environment using a small group approach. This ensures the leader will get the most useful, reliable information to grow as a leader.

3<sup>rd</sup> Party Conflict Resolution: This is a structured approach for two people who have “hard-to-resolve issues.” The process uses issue identification and requests for agreements to improve the work relationship. This can be peer-to-peer, supervisor-to-direct report, direct report-to-supervisor or for any other co-workers.

Team Building/Group Conflict Resolution: The Session helps the work group explore issues preventing higher performance and makes agreements for improvement. This session can be effective whether there are specific issues to address or if the desired result is to improve and already high performing team.

Interpersonal Style and Strengths Identification: Survey instrument reveals work groups similarities and differences using a personal strengths orientation. Awareness of styles and strengths leads to a more effective work environment. This session can be used to raise awareness about conflict resolution responses based on interpersonal styles.

Transition Management: A process to assist in leadership or organization structure changes by engaging the group in the move. This is especially helpful when a new leader comes to the work group, or the role or mission of the work group changes significantly.

Group Imaging: Two different groups of workers can improve how they work together and make agreements to do so. This enables a work group to learn how they are viewed by others and to give feedback to the other work group.

Visual Explorer <sup>TM</sup>- Picturing Approaches to Complex Challenges – Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, NC – This photo images tool serves as a resource for groups seeking to explore complex topics through a variety of perspectives.

**Question #4: What organizations want to avoid and how to support change?**

The time commitment and learning curve for the internal consulting facilitators is substantial. Also, facilitators may be uncomfortable with some of the intensity of some sessions or may become discouraged with the lack of change or progress. A support system needs to be in place to continue technical development as well as emotional buttressing.

**In summary we ask, why this investment of time, talent and money?**

This sounds like a lot of work! And a lot of money!! What is the payoff for the organization to do this? What kinds of organizations need this to do better business? Hennepin County Economic Assistance Department found this effort worthwhile because they were moving from internally competitive silos to collaborative lines of business, from individual case workers to teams. There also was the recognition that one-time training wouldn't do the trick as evidenced by earlier false starts in their Quality Partnership program. To introduce and sustain change in people, behaviors and cultural norms takes time, there is no magic bullet.

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