Essay 4: Levels of Knowledge

In the early 1980s I was asked to take over the international MBA program at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Illness and a disagreement with the president had led to this devolution of duties onto the CFO, me. The curriculum was still in development. I had a summer to pull it together. I formed a team of full-time faculty (there weren't many), adjunct faculty, doctoral students from San Jose State who had been working with the previous director, and a couple of second year MBA students. One of the doctoral students, Christine Keener, led us through levels of knowledge. We organized all our work—our meetings, our organizational development course, and our course exercises—around these levels.

In general, higher levels of knowledge are more abstract, and agreement must be reached on the higher levels, like organizational *principles*, before agreement can be reached on lower levels, like the *design* of a project.

We managed to be ready for the fall semester and stay two weeks ahead of first-year students by spending long hours together as a team, using the discipline of the levels of knowledge to improve our efficiency and communications. We put ourselves through all the organizational development exercises we created before imposing them on the students. (I was single and had no time for dating that year. Yikes!)

Too often someone in a group will present what might be called a principle, and another will disagree, citing a favored design. They are talking past each other.

The levels below would seem to be in order, but principles are not easy to develop. Often people must start discussing designs before the team realizes that a necessary principle is missing. Thus, teams often cycle through levels of knowledge or must go off into a "side level" to be able to move ahead.

Beliefs. The highest level of knowledge is belief. A belief is an idea that members of an organization hold without question. In higher education we believe that a college education is of benefit to individuals. This may in fact be a testable hypothesis. Nevertheless, would you hire someone into an academic position who stated that they believed that college coursework was harmful to students? If you are uncertain of the strength of your commitment to an important belief of an organization, keep it to yourself if you want to remain employed by that organization.

A team may not need to spend much time interrogating its beliefs. Like the little car filled with the King's Cabinet in Norton Juster and Jules Feiffer's *The Phantom Tollbooth,* it goes without saying.

Mission. Mission is not often included in a list of levels of knowledge. It is a brief statement of what the organization does. It might also include whom it does this for, but strategy is ordinarily the level where that is spelled out. At its simplest for colleges and universities, all missions are the same: We educate people. Considering the other two legs of the higher education stool, the mission might also say: "We create knowledge, and we serve our communities."

Mission is not normally included in the levels of knowledge because it has become a marketing statement. It is not intended to clarify the efforts of the college, but to sell an institution to

donors and potential students on its history, location, and strengths. If a college's stated mission is to be a great liberal arts institution and it wishes to add a school of business, it changes its mission statement. It does not reject the idea of a business addition because it conflicts with its mission statement. Notice, I said "mission statement." Adding an oil refinery, say, would conflict with its "mission," to educate people.

A team's mission statement may not require much effort. Why does the team exist? What is it supposed to do? The mission of the Retention Team is to improve retention by managing the Retention System, for example. A Retention Team does not normally need to market itself.

Values. I have read many higher education strategic plan summaries online. While the strategies are remarkably similar (excellence in teaching, student centered, internationalize the curriculum, etc.) the statements of values that are added are usually interesting and tend to differentiate the schools.

Values are intentions, especially those intentions focused on how we are going to treat each other and value each other. Values are not designs. Valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion does not get it done, as Lily Zheng says in their book, *DEI Deconstructed.* Nevertheless, one begins by hammering out a wording. The next steps are harder.

The creation of team values is an intentional method of creating a team culture. Values spell out how the team is going to respect and value all members and others within and in contact with the organization. As an indicator of culture, they specify proper behavior.

Examples of team values follow. These are not meant to be "correct." They are only ideas. For example, we value listening to each other and will try to summarize what the last person has said before making our point. For example, we value each other's feelings. We respect the burden of each other's responsibilities. For example, we value consensus and the rights of any of us with a minority opinion and will not move forward until we have resolved all challenges to full agreement. Or, we value deviations from our expectations, humor, teasing, and not taking ourselves seriously. We will follow the majority.

A team's values statement need not be elaborate. All members of the team, however, should agree with the values. Thus, some effort will be necessary to attain a shared culture.

Principles. Principles are the most challenging and most often avoided level of knowledge. They are higher than strategies and designs in abstraction. They combine a rough goal statement (we will…), a specific value statement that refers to the goal (…in a way that…), an outcome statement (…such that…), and a budget (…with X resources).

An organization must have a set of principles to guide its strategic development. A team may develop principles for a project or even a meeting. What do we hope to accomplish? How are we going to behave as we move forward? What measurable change do we hope to achieve? What resources do we have for this effort.

Here's an example: The Retention Team will improve retention in a way that does not increase the burden on faculty such that the college's graduation rate improves by 10% in three years, using current budget resources. Note that the "in a way that" phrase is a constraint. Its inclusion in this example was necessary to assure faculty that the team was not going to

achieve its goals by simply shifting the advising burden to them. This type of constraining phrase is why principles need to be hammered out before design is complete. Faculty, for example, may be unwilling to discuss designs without some assurance that they are not going to be run over.

Nevertheless, not all such concerns may be visible before designs are examined, as mentioned above. In many cases, a team will move into the design phase and realize that "feet are dragging." If that happens, it is time to move back to the principles stage.

Also, at the design stage, the resources designated in the principles may be found to be insufficient. The phrase, "existing budget resource" may need to be re-written as a conditional: "if a grant of at least a half-million dollars can be won."

As another example: In this meeting we will complete a set of principles for our retention project in a way that mitigates the concerns of all team members about the project such that we may move to strategies and designs in the next meeting, if Jim brings soda and chips.

For example: This college will complete a new campus design in a way that significantly involves all members of the campus and town communities in the decision process such that we may have clear and achievable capital funding goals for 2025, using Schmidt Associates Design consultants with $200,000 from the president's contingency fund.

Strategies. Strategies define who is being served and how this audience will be served. This is true whether we are speaking of the entire college or just the Retention Team.

A new strategy for a college defines a new target audience, a new set of programs, a new pricing method, or a new way of delivering programs to an existing (or a new) audience. A strategy signifies a position in market space. Market space is the multidimensional construct that describes the location of the college and its competitors along such dimensions as target audience, programs, distance, and price. The purpose of a new strategy is to move the institution within that space. An effort to attract homebound students in the county with online programs is a strategic shift. An effort to reduce tuition to attract students from a broader range of incomes is a strategic shift. A decision not to recruit from high schools where students have nearly always immediately transferred is an intentional strategic shift.

A strategy for the retention team may define the target audience or the general methodology for improving retention or both. A program to keep in contact with students who have dropped out after earning twenty or more degree credits, making it easy for them to reenroll without penalty, is a strategy.

I have found that it is easy to keep strategies within the bounds of principles, except the resource constraints.

Tactics. This military term indicates a level of thought whereby strategies are given more details. I have not found it to be useful. Once principles and strategies are set, people are eager to begin designing the effort. Intermediate ideas can usually be developed within the design stage.

Nevertheless, some thinkers prefer to place resource requirements and funding as an intermediate step between Strategies and Design, instead of placing resource needs within

principles. Sometimes team members find that the principles stage is too early to discuss resource requirements.

Design and implementation. While the design and implementation stage is conceptually easier than principles, design is operationally hard. What? How? Who? When? How much? I have little advice for this stage, other than giving a vote to using project management. Every project is different. The only rule is to get agreement on principles and strategies before committing to a design and proceeding with implementation.

Implementation is often thought of as separate from design. It may be, but then, that ignores how fluid designs are in real world implementations. The interplay between the realities of implementation and design are why it is a good idea to use a project manager in implementation. Things change.

Assessment. There are two questions central to assessment: 1) How will we know if we have been successful? 2) How can we improve our process for the next project? The general outline of an assessment should have been part of the team's principles for the project or meeting. You may not hit your goal, if you design before you define success. In the assessment phase, you make the measurements that tell whether you achieved your goal.

A characteristic of information technology people is their penchant for defining success as the implementation of new software—it runs! They often look puzzled when I ask if the software was supposed to *do* something. Do we really want to implement registration software that requires students to spend *more* time trying to register? What is the administrative purpose of the software? How may we measure whether it has achieved that purpose?

The second assessment question, the assessment of team process, is often neglected, unfortunately. The team is so relieved to have reached its goal that it is unwilling to admit that everyone is exhausted from a clumsy process and is unlikely to continue and reach for new goals. What information were we missing? Why didn't we realize the impact the holidays would have on our schedule? Why did we set our target audience so broadly? Would we have been more successful with a narrower audience? Should we have added a member after Bill left?

Audit. Before beginning a new project, the team should review the highest stages. Do we still hold to the beliefs we began with? Are our values sufficient to keep us on the same page? How might we improve our statements of principles or the way we used our meetings to develop them?

Side Levels.
There are also several knowledge levels that may be seen as adjacent to the hierarchy of levels of knowledge. These may be entered as necessary at any time during project development.

Concepts. What must we understand before we go further with this work? While "cafeteria course selection" seems to be an easy concept, Teachers College's Community College Research Center adds many other challenges to the problem of retention than unguided pathways. A team exploring retention ought to gain an understanding of the work of the CCRC before going too deeply into a retention improvement project focused only on guided pathways, for example.

Reflection. Why am I uncomfortable? At any point, it is reasonable for the group to step away from the intensity of team meetings and ask individuals to reflect honestly on the entire process. Is the team taking too much time from the normal day-to-day? Have events made the goal seem less important? Have personnel changes made the whole process irrelevant? Sometimes the fun of a good process masks the irrelevance of the work. Setting aside a moment for honest, individual reflection may be helpful for the organization.

Although this outline appears overly intellectual, most teams will agree that they come close to following these steps. Nevertheless, few teams spend time on principles or on a final assessment of their process. The addition of these steps will greatly improve a team's ability to perform.

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