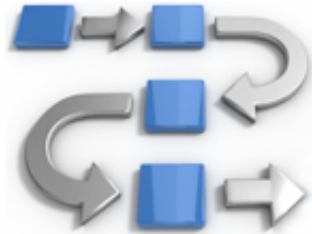


A Collaborative Approach to Restructuring

By Jay W. Vogt



Organizations that must make substantial budget cuts face a stark choice: have senior leadership make those decisions behind closed doors, or throw them wide open, and engage the entire organization in facing the challenge together. Few choose the second path, imagining it to be full of risk and rancor.

The University of Southern Maine (USM), having already implemented substantial budget cuts, and facing a second, deeper round, recently confronted this dilemma, and made a surprising choice. Incremental cuts would no longer do the job. Restructuring was now necessary.

Jim Shaffer, USM's new chief operating officer, was named chair of the Restructure Design Team, and was given a tight timeline by President Selma Botman to propose changes, dramatic if necessary, to restructure the university.

Looking to Engage All Interested Parties

Rather than lock his team in a closed room to tackle the challenge, Shaffer proposed convening a two-day convocation, *Innovating for our Future*, with the express purpose of engaging all interested faculty, staff, students, and community members in generating specific ideas for change and concrete recommendations for restructuring. Still reeling from prior budget cuts, likely participants could understandably be anxious and wary, if not hostile.

Shaffer, also dean of the School of Business at USM, proposed convening the convocation using open space technology (OST), a self-organizing meeting method in which no prior agenda is set, and participants not only create their own agenda, but choose how to spend all of their time. (To learn more about OST at USM, visit [click here](#).)

Over the course of two days, about three hundred faculty, staff, students, and community members participated in the Convocation. No one dictated anything to anyone. In fact, administrators not only asked for help, but created the conditions—through the meeting method—for people with similar ideas to find each other and organize their thinking. The community responded enthusiastically. Individuals proposed and convened about 60 working groups that yielded an equal number of specific recommendations for change.

Each working group prepared two products. Conveners completed a simple poster stating their recommendation, along with strategies for implementation, benefits of implementation, and the name of their convener(s). Volunteer recorders posted their longer set of discussion notes in real time to a community web site on the blackboard platform.

By mid-day on the second day, the posters were clustered, reducing the total number of discrete proposals to about 40. Then participants used a technique called multi-voting to identify their top six. A clear top tier emerged. The Restructure Design Team was now free to lock itself into that room, confident that it had tapped an enormous reservoir of community creativity.

"A Self-Organizing Outpouring of Passion and Creativity"

Jim Shaffer, COO, commented, "Our task was to restructure a regional comprehensive university, and we faced a plethora of multiple constituencies and values. OST turned out to be ideally suited to the task. The result was a self-organizing outpouring of passion and creativity. This was a special convocation, and we were very pleased."

The approach demonstrated that organizations facing a tough challenge and preparing to make hard decisions behind closed doors can benefit by taking another path. They can engage their constituents to produce surprisingly pleasant results.

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