

***Briefing Notes:***  
**Campaign Approach to Strategic Change**

---

The scarcest resources in today’s overloaded organizations are time and attention. For change to happen, leaders need to get people’s attention and active help. In these briefing notes we explore a “campaign” approach to organizational change. Such an approach cuts through the clutter and mobilizes people around a strategic theme that has resonance and staying power.

When would you want to organize a campaign? Some leaders are looking for a functional alternative to strategic planning. Others have a specific problem or an idea—sometimes just an inkling—of a direction they want to take the institution.

Campaigns work particularly well in universities, health systems, professional service organizations and other “loosely-coupled” systems where authority is diffuse and windows for change are limited. The action and momentum of campaigns are appealing to many corporations.

**Root Metaphors**

The approach draws on campaign metaphors from several walks of life:

- *Political*—Stay on message. Build coalitions. Capture events and venues. Roster a war room to set strategy and direct volunteers. Define the opponent.
- *Advertising*—Dramatize the benefit. Hook the target emotionally. Simplify and focus.
- *Military*—Seek advantageous terrain. Pick beachheads carefully. Tend supply lines. Consolidate gains.
- *Public Health*—Target those *around* the real target. Leverage early adopters.
- *Fundraising*—Build a campaign chest before you go public. Develop a case for support. Manage momentum.

Each metaphor admittedly has a dark side and some will resonate more than others for particular projects or particular people. As with any metaphor, the value lies in using it as a window on fresh thinking.

## Planning vs. The Campaign

A campaign is more flexible and open-ended than traditional planning. A campaign is opportunistic in its details, but strategic in its force. Campaigns require substantial and sustained *planning*; what they avoid is a focus on the *plan* as document. While traditional planning may be right for many efforts, it is particularly susceptible to stalemate. The campaign approach, in contrast, can move forward without the agreement of all.

<b>The Planning Process—Qualities and Traps</b>	<b>The Campaign</b>
Define goals	Develop a strategic theme that mobilizes people
Goals are definite and explicit—often before people can know enough to know what they want	Theme invites interpretation and discovery
Energy tends to go into the document	Energy goes into actions—pilots, probes, projects, events
Often hard to implement	Implementing is the only way to embody the strategy
Formal task forces	Coalitions, grassroots, new blood
Inclusion based on representation	Inclusion based on passion and interest
Reports, memos	Press releases
Easy to block; debate it to death	Can move forward without agreement of all
“Think your way into new acting”	“Act your way into new thinking”

## How to Tell if a Campaign is Successful

A campaign is successful only if practices begin to change. An organization changes when people do things differently on the front line. All other changes—to systems, to incentives, to stated mission—are simply means to an end. Without changes in practice, these other initiatives lack substance.

Successful campaigns are also characterized by the amplifier effect: You find you are not doing everything yourself; others are pouring energy into the system. The “law of networks” kicks in: A practice becomes more advantageous as more people begin to do it.

## Four Elements of a Campaign

An effective campaign has four overlapping elements:

1. *“Listen In” to the Institution*—To discover the emergent future.
2. *Develop a Strategic Theme*—To give direction to the campaign.
3. *Sweep People In*—To mobilize energies.
4. *Build the Infrastructure*—To make change possible.

These briefing notes take up, in turn, each of the four elements of a successful campaign.

### “Listen In” to the Institution

We call the first element of a campaign “listening in” to the institution because we believe that leaders need to step back at this point and actively open themselves to the future. A campaign is organized around a strategic theme—one that is as much *discovered* as invented. One theory of change says that the future is already here in bits and pieces—at the fringe, in the cracks, parasitic on old practices. You can *shape* the future by picking up on certain elements, channeling, directing—but the raw material has to be there for you to shape. The leadership skill is seeing the emergent in the present.

The first element of a campaign is the search for those pieces of the future that are already here. Your aim is to look for vivid, specific ways that external forces and trends are finding purchase in your own institution.

Three ways to listen to your institution, outlined below, are particularly revealing, especially when triangulated as a check on each other.

- *Found Pilots*—Search out “found pilots,” projects and practices where the future is showing up, perhaps among just a few leaders or even marginal people. (For example, DARPA, the cumbersome early network that connected a few of the nation’s research scientists, was a “found pilot” for the Internet.) Look for pockets of innovation. Ask yourself what are the three or four most interesting things that have happened in the last year. Your initial ideas about what you want to accomplish will help you know where to look—but make a determined effort to widen your search and build in some randomness.
- *Comings and Goings and Comings*—Ask yourself who has recently joined the institution, how they are different from people who are already there, and what attracted them to come. Think also about people who have left or been marginalized: What seems incompatible with the institution? Think about new leaders: What is the message of their selection, what new ideas are they trying out?
- *Institutional Tensions*—Often a context for innovation is established because an institution needs an answer to a tension or conflict that is blocking its development. Look for those tensions. Seek out newer, more dynamic tensions,

not the institutionalized ones (such as “research vs. teaching” in universities) that have already developed routines, rituals and decision making processes. Look particularly for those tensions that seem to cut across customary fault lines, creating strange bedfellows and unlikely alliances.

## **Develop a Strategic Theme**

Framing a strategic theme—based on what you have learned and where you want to go—is the second element of a successful campaign. The theme focuses the campaign and gives it direction. A good theme energizes and mobilizes people. Developing the theme involves careful listening to what is already in play. Listening helps you develop a theme that has resonance, one in which people see themselves. The listening element of a campaign and the theme-building element are iterative, in fact, something like a Baptist preacher giving a sermon and being particularly alive to what the congregation reflects back.

The initial framing of the campaign theme is likely to change after working with it for a while. In one university campaign, for example, the president started with the label “Student Retention.” As he began to think from the point of view of the students, he came up with the theme “The Serious Student.” Eventually he honed the theme to the more active and inclusive “Taking Learning Seriously.”

In advertising terms, the campaign theme is a *dramatization of the benefit* to the customer. It is the emotional hook that connects people to the benefit. Ads have perfected the art of the single, simple message. Simple is good because it is hard to miss. It is bigger, more powerful. It is easier to remember. Simplicity and focus require sacrifice—the sacrifice of all the other things you could be saying. The sacrifice is worth it, however, if you get your point across.

In political terms, the campaign theme is simple but big: it generates all kinds of actions. “It’s the economy, stupid” was the unofficial version of the theme of Clinton’s first Presidential campaign. People who were interested in children’s welfare, for example, could find a place for themselves in such a campaign. So could people who were interested in tax incentives for small businesses. A good theme, then, makes action apparent. That is the difference between a theme and a “slogan.”

A theme, moreover, is not a “vision,” since you are still discovering, still exploring. A good theme is open ended and inviting; it does not try to specify the end state.

Some of the best themes explode assumptions and resolve contradictions. You might think of them as “productive oxymorons.” Examples are Rene Dubos’ “Think globally, act locally,” Marshall McLuhan’s “global village,” or a public TV station’s goal to produce shows for the “highest common denominator.” These themes derive their power from a promised breakthrough—from opening avenues you thought were blocked or suggesting resources you did not realize you had. They do this by exploding assumptions.

## Sweep People In

With a strategic theme as guiding framework, you are ready to begin sweeping people into your campaign. In this third element of a successful campaign, your goal is to capture and amplify energy: Discover the natural leaders and give them venues. Build coalitions. Create an environment of inclusion. When people step forward to take up roles in the campaign, find places for them. A campaign can capture the passion and energy of people who would never be involved in more formal planning processes—people on the frontline who are already beginning to change practices.

Keep in mind that the scarcest resources in today's organizations are time and attention. For your campaign to succeed you will need to reorient people's attention rather than always asking for more. To that end, two strategies are especially effective:

- *Piggyback on Existing Venues*—Like the advance person in a political campaign, you can be on the lookout for existing events that can be turned to your purposes. Are there ways to borrow parts of meetings, conferences, training workshops, alumni events, and so on, to make progress on your initiative?
- *Look for Found Pilots*—Look for projects, programs, events or other activities (including embryonic ones) that are already heading in the direction you want to go and figure out how to sweep them into the campaign. The reciprocity principle kicks in: You capture energy and momentum; the leader of the found pilot gains like-minded colleagues and a supporting infrastructure.

Your job, throughout, is to mobilize allies, champions, stakeholders and “skeptical friends.” As public health campaigns have learned, these people should not be forced to make an all-or-nothing commitment (of time, energy, money, political capital). By accommodating a range of possible commitments, you can sweep far more people into the campaign. Once they get a taste, they are likely to want more.

## Build the Infrastructure

For all its grassroots energy, a campaign does not just happen. It takes a lot of planning and a substantial infrastructure to make a campaign work. As with any major initiative, you will need support systems, incentives and an architecture of participation. You will need a communication plan, a life-cycle strategy, and sometimes new revenue models. You will need a skilled and experienced project manager to look ahead and keep things moving and connected.

Political, advertising and other types of campaigns suggest models and strategies for this infrastructure. From political campaigns, for example, come ideas for building an infrastructure of participation. You might, for example:

- *Roster a War Room*—Political campaigns set up a war room, an organized and “on duty” inner circle, to drive strategy and orchestrate volunteers.
- *Gear up for Rapid Response*—Many political campaigns build the capacity to stay on top of breaking events and respond quickly to them. Some subset of the war room core group might usefully be deployed in reconnaissance and rapid response.
- “Vote”—Votes are marker events in political campaigns. In addition to formal votes, many kinds of shadow votes such as opinion polls, straw votes and petitions are used. While votes may polarize opinion, they can also mark a moment of significant progress or create a deadline for accomplishing goals. Are there ways to use shadow votes or actual votes to advance your initiative?

A campaign requires an explicit, yet opportunistic, communication strategy. You will need to capture people’s attention; weave together the pilots, probes and events of the campaign; and communicate their force and intent. With thoughtful and insistent framing, a collection of activities can become an initiative. Advertising and public health campaigns suggest ideas for an infrastructure of communication:

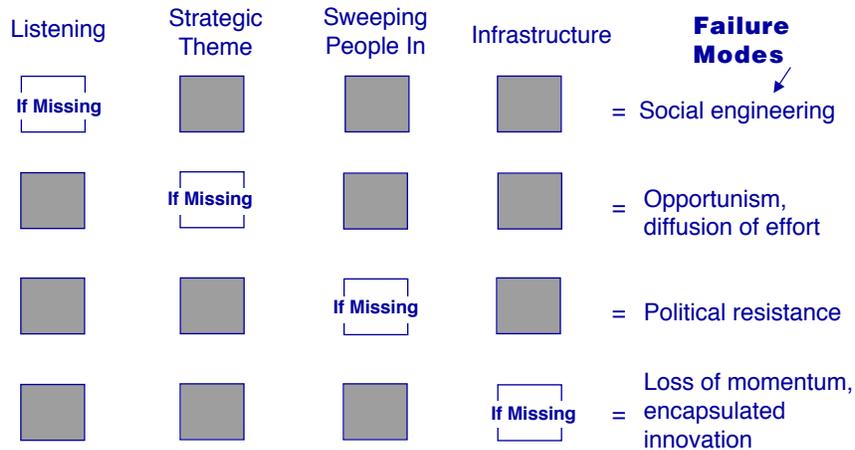
- *Issue Press Releases*—Instead of memos and reports, consider a strategy of quick and continuous “press releases,” with emphasis on news and stories from the field.
- *Segment the Market*—Define the target audiences and design messages that make sense to each.
- *Make the Personal More Obvious*—In public health campaigns, individual benefit and “society’s” benefit sometimes clash. (Family planning campaigns falter in Bangladesh, for example, because parents see children as their support in old age.) In word and deed, therefore, find ways to demonstrate the value to the individual.
- *Create Incentives*—Incentives, because they redirect people’s attention, are one of the most powerful communication strategies at your disposal. Financial incentives might include seed money and matching funds. Think like a venture capitalist to put your money on events and pilots that will give a good return on investment.

Finally, but also from the very beginning, you will need to think about consolidating gains and moving from campaign to mainstream: How can you help pilots and probes think beyond proof of concept to steady state? What is the handoff strategy for moving various parts of the campaign into the authority structure? What new revenue models, staffing, or information sources will be needed?

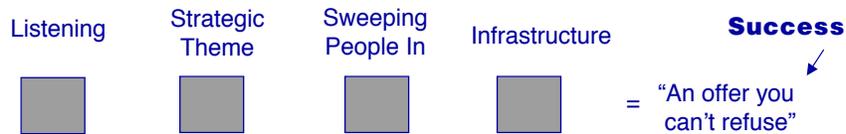
**All Four Elements**

As the diagram suggests, each of the four elements of a campaign is necessary—“Listening in” to the institution, developing a strategic theme, sweeping people in and building the infrastructure. When all four are present, a campaign—at its best—is an “offer you can’t refuse.”

***It Takes All Four Elements ...***



***... to Make an Effective Campaign***



## Related Sources

- Brown, Shona and Kathleen Eisenhardt. *Competing on the Edge: Strategy as Structured Chaos*. Harvard Business School Press, 1998.
- Center for Applied Research. *Briefing Notes: Quick-Hits Projects—Linking Performance Improvement to Organizational Learning*, 1997.
- Cialdini, Robert B. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. New York: Quill, 1993.
- Lester, Richard K., Michael J. Piore, and Kamal M. Malek. “Interpretive Management: What General Managers Can Learn from Design.” *Harvard Business Review*, March – April 1998.
- Mintzberg, Henry and Bruce Ahlstrand. “The Learning School: Strategy Formulation as an Emergent Process.” *Strategy Safari*, 1998.
- O’Dell, Carla and C. Jackson Grayson. “If Only We Knew What We Know: Identification and Transfer of Internal Best Practices.” *California Management Review*, Spring 1998.

For more information on this or related materials, contact CFAR at [info@cfar.com](mailto:info@cfar.com) or 215.320.3200, or visit our website at <http://www.cfar.com>.