Briefing Notes:
"Found Pilots" in Campaigns for Strategic Change

A "found pilot" is a project, practice or event in which the future is already beginning to show up. Found pilots are essential to campaigns for change. At the earliest stages of a campaign they serve as bellwethers. In later stages of a campaign they are the animating force, sweeping in people who are already beginning to move in the direction you want to go. They are a source of the energy and passion that make the difference between a successful campaign and one that fizzles out.

In these briefing notes, we introduce the campaign approach to strategic change. We explore the idea of found pilots at different stages of a campaign. We look at ways to improve on nature, and we look at the infrastructure to pull a raucous and unruly collection of found pilots into an initiative.

The Campaign Approach to Strategic Change

This approach draws on the metaphors of political, advertising, military, public health and fundraising campaigns—with their immediacy and action orientation. 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. The campaign approach cuts through the clutter and mobilizes people around a strategic theme. Campaigns may work particularly well in universities, health settings and other loosely coupled systems where authority is diffuse and windows for change are limited.

An effective campaign has the four elements below. As we will see, "found pilots" are especially important to the first three:

1. "Listen in to the institution"
2. Develop a strategic theme
3. Sweep people in
4. Build an infrastructure

Found Pilots as Windows on the Future

A campaign is organized around a strategic theme—one that is more *discovered* than 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.

At the very earliest stage of a campaign—the stage we call "listening in to the institution"—found pilots are places where the future is already showing up. If people, even just a few, are putting themselves on the line to change the way a profession is practiced or roles are taken up, the pilot may be a sign of something bigger.

How do you know if you have located a "found pilot," a window on the future? Imagine, for example, that you discover that three faculty members from law, engineering and medicine have co-taught a course in biomedical engineering and organized a brown-bag seminar on commercializing biomedical technology. Is this a found pilot—a hint perhaps of future revenue sources and new kinds of partnerships—or a passing whim? You might ask yourself the following questions:

- *Latent Resources*—Is the course able to attract out-of-the-ordinary support? Were industry people, for example, happy to give time? Did students volunteer to help because they saw benefit down the line? If the course was created outside normal channels, did someone run interference to help the faculty members find a way to make it happen?

- *Buzz*—What kind of buzz has the course created? Do students line up to enroll? Have other faculty attended a few classes? Did a fundraiser notice and mention the course in promotional material? Are outsiders asking about the course? Are other people trying to copy what the professors did?

- *How Important is the Problem?*—If someone defined this course as a "solution," what problem would it be trying to solve? Does this implicit problem appear to be something that is important to the institution, somewhat important or trivial? Imagine this course becoming something bigger: What new resources might it generate and from where?

Found Pilots as Building Blocks of the Campaign

Once you are past the stage of "listening in" to the institution and have framed a strategic theme around which to mobilize your campaign, you begin to recruit people into the campaign. At this point, "found pilots" serve a second function: they sweep in people who are already beginning to move in the direction you want to go.

Your campaign is likely to combine found pilots with pilots specifically designed to test a particular concept or change a particular behavior. Found pilots are especially valuable for two reasons. First, they capture passion and energy that are already out there; you do not have to be the only one pumping energy into the system. Second, they "create" time, the scarcest resource in today's overloaded organizations. By sweeping into the campaign a project that someone is already committed to doing, you have a better chance of moving your own initiative forward.

Pilots—whether found or designed—are the animating force of a campaign. Flexible and forgiving, pilots are a way to "act your way into new thinking," in contrast to more traditional planning processes, where you try to "think your way into new acting." Pilots can capture the energy of people who would never be involved in more formal planning. Pilots are resilient; they spring up, they find a way. As a collection, pilots are hard to block; like water they flow around obstacles.

Once a campaign is underway, a big part of your job is to find pilots and connect them to the campaign. In general, you want to recruit a set of found pilots that serve as building blocks for the strategic intent of the campaign. It is better, however, to err on the side of inclusion than exclusion. When people want to join, you want to be able to find places for them.

You become a recruiter, open to people and possibilities. Consider the following example. A group of university faculty and administrators banded together to reorganize the way computing support is delivered across the campus, pushing for on-site support as close as possible to the people who need it. "A computing home for everyone," was the way they put it. Now imagine, for example, that you hear the English Department is quietly turning secretarial positions into computer support positions. The head of that underground effort, delighted to learn from you that others are also trying to move computing support as close to the user as possible, agrees to go public and document her reallocation strategy for wider application across the university.

Improving on Nature

No one ever said you have to sit around and wait for the *perfect* found pilot to show up. There are ways you can improve on nature.

You may be lucky enough, for instance, to be approached by a zealot. In the "computing home" example above, a relentlessly determined professor was looking for ways to integrate living and learning for undergraduates and jumped at the chance to hitch to the new computing model his project to have student "paramedics" do computer support in the dormitories. Zealots are ideal people to sweep into a campaign, since they will move heaven and earth to make things

happen. Zealots, however, may lack organizational connections and may, in fact, be scornful of them. Our zealot professor, for example, would not be the one to make the paramedic program work over the long haul. We paired him, therefore, with a co-leader whose division would eventually have to run the program. Result: The program was so successful that two years later it made the front page of the metropolitan newspaper.

You can also *create* zealots if you run out of natural ones. In the "computing home" example above, another highly effective pilot (this one designed, not found) was co-led by a man from the central computing group whose old job running a campuswide helpdesk was abolished and who would now have to make a personal success of his new "business" of selling on-site support to schools and departments. He too moved heaven and earth to make the pilot a success.

Building an Infrastructure for Pilots

By themselves, a raucous and unruly collection of found pilots will not yield major change. For that you need a strategic theme to focus the pilots and an infrastructure to sustain them. Moreover, these are not pilots in the sense of "peripheral" or "low stakes;" you are applying the pilot ethos—"can-do," experimental—to a campaign that may in fact be seeking to change the future of the institution. With stakes like this, you need an infrastructure to improve the odds.

You may, for example, need a "war room" (as in political campaigns) to orchestrate strategy and coordinate the players. You may need financial incentives such as seed money or matching grants to catch people's attention. You will definitely need flexible, but heavy-duty, project management—not the kind of project manager who needs everything laid out in advance, but the kind who can relish serendipity and deal with ambiguity.

You will need an explicit communication strategy that weaves the pilots together and helps make sense of them; with thoughtful and insistent framing, a collection of projects can become an initiative. Some communication will be formal and designed. As befits a grassroots pilot approach, however, the most effective communication may be stories that people tell and retell.

You might need to set deadlines and force endings; pilots may not want to leave the nest. You will need to build in ways for each pilot to reflect on lessons learned—and ways to analyze learnings across pilots.

Infrastructure such as this helps pilots succeed. Success, in turn, attracts more pilots.

Related Sources

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