Unleashing and Combining the Wisdom: Rapid, Whole-Systems Change in Public Organizations

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Abstract

This article describes an approach called Whole-Scale® Change, a large group process that appears to have helped others achieve dramatic, sustainable results in their organization or communities. It describes the possibilities for applying the predictable processes and the critical elements of Whole-Scale Change to achieve rapid, whole-system solutions in today’s complex environment of public organizations.

Public organizations face increasingly complex demands in our world’s ever-changing environment—complex social issues, deregulation, privatization, drastic budget cuts, customer needs for responsiveness and flexibility, pressure to survive and to recreate themselves more as a “business.” These demands require leaders to uncover new approaches that harness the speed and complexity of the new environment and use them to the advantage of all their stakeholders.

This article describes an approach called Whole-Scale® Change that has, from the perspective of group participants and some public officials, helped achieve dramatic, sustainable results in their organizations and communities. It describes the possibilities for applying the processes and the critical elements of Whole-Scale Change that may, from the perspective of the authors, achieve rapid, whole-system solutions in today’s complex environment in public organizations and in communities.
What is Whole-Scale?

Whole-Scale has been used extensively in a variety of public organizations—city and national government, education systems, community organizations, and non-profits.

Whole-Scale was developed by Dannemiller Tyson Associates in 1981 when Ford Motor Company, seeking to move its management culture from “command and control” to a more participative style, brought in Kathleen Dannemiller, Al Davenport, Bruce Gibb, and Chuck Tyson to design and facilitate the change. The method that emerged has been used for two decades to assist hundreds of organizations and communities.

This highly participative approach provides a robust, highly effective and predictable set of processes to help organizations and communities identify and utilize their own internal abilities to grow, to better lead, and to create the organizations and communities of their own choosing. Typically, organizations and communities already know what kind of difference is needed: implementation of a new vision or strategic direction, new or redesigned work processes, restructured roles/jobs/teams, cooperation between labor and management. What they do not know—which Whole-Scale helps to provide—is (1) how to put the difference in place rapidly and effectively through whole-system solutions, and (2) how to continue the process.

The goals of Whole-Scale are simple. Through a series of small and/or large group interactive sessions that are purpose-driven:

- Organizations and communities work to build a shared understanding of their current reality, a vision of the future, and the action steps to get there.
- Individuals and groups seek to gain a broader “big picture” of and critical need for cooperation among all elements of a system.
- Whole system solutions are create real time and people work to implement them within days or months instead of years.
- Diverse people strive to become “one brain and one heart” which shapes how they go about their work—acting individually with the wisdom of the “whole.”
- Personal connections are forged between stakeholders at the individual “max-mix” tables over the two to three days of an event, where each table is a cross-section of all the diversity in the room. Actually knowing people makes calling on them for assistance or information easier and is key to implementation.
- The organization develops skills for using Whole-Scale processes as a way of staying connected and working together, engaging microcosms to continue to refine roles, tasks, and actions. They design and facilitate their own reunions to continue learning and changing.

Two essentials which underlie Whole-Scale as a way of leading change are the belief that: