Chairing a Presidential Committee
Process Observations and Strategies for Success

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The Challenge

- Requested by University President to co-chair a major committee mandated by new strategic plan
- Large (N=25) committee of distinguished faculty
- High expectations, but some vague aspects of committee charge
- Two-year time frame for completion
- Areas of concern:
  - Shifting University landscape, realities of political limits on work
  - Defensive/territorial committee members, initial distrust, private agendas
  - Lack of sufficient domain knowledge
  - Busy committee members
Obstacles to Progress

- Committee size – Too large to function efficiently, but too much initial distrust to effectively work in smaller groups
- Length of charge – Knowing charge was two year allowed slow progression to Performing
- Significant time needed for member education
- Changing University landscape
- Loss/near-loss of members/staff

**Tuckman Model**
Tuckman, Bruce (1965)
“Developmental sequence in small groups” Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399
Rutgers Leadership Academy

- Committee Charged
- Facilitated Meeting
- Interim Report Delivered
- Present Ideas to President
- "Final" Report Delivered
- Small Group Mtgs
- Final Final Report

- First Ideas Articulated
- President Feedback
- Staff Crisis
- Planned End Date
- Multiple Ideas!!!

- Working on 1-2 Ideas
- Working on 8-12 Ideas

- In Person Attendance
- Working on Ideas
- Discussing Process
- Data Gathering

Small Group and Individual Extra Work
Committee was tasked with producing “big ideas” – too vague a charge to be helpful

Many members felt unprepared for task at hand
  – Lack of knowledge about all components of University, exacerbated by recent merger
  – Lack of technical expertise in many important areas (finance, HR) that could limit options

As academics, natural response was to seek more data
  – Some education was necessary, but reluctance to do “homework” outside of meetings resulted in lengthy fact-finding process
  – Data gathering became a mechanism for avoiding hard discussions
    • Background data gathering ultimately stretched out for 18 months
Strategies for Getting Unstuck

- **Outside Intervention** – Outside facilitator helped break log jam
  - Expert status allowed committee to hear criticisms of process
  - “In Class” exercise helped changed focus to producing deliverables

- **Work Group Reconfiguration**
  - Committee too large to be effective as a whole
  - Focused on doing real work in smaller groups
    - Initially assigned subcommittees, later self-assembling workgroups

- **Education as a Productivity Tool**
  - Committee very information and data driven
  - Data presentations related to specific ideas helped move them along
Process Observations - Conflicts

- Some committee members came with specific agendas
  - Initial positions generally representing interests of home units
  - Some saw committee as opportunity to push a longstanding pet idea
  - Some members were there to block a specific feared outcome

- High levels of initial distrust and some significant conflicts, but generally masked by extremely collegial interactions
Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

◆ Find Common Ground
  – Identified on a focus (improving the student experience) that all either genuinely supported or were not willing to oppose in public
  – While this was not the primary focus of all proposals, it provided an initial framework for working together on some ideas and building trust

◆ Overcoming Difficult Conversations
  – Collegiality was an impediment when it prevented consensus by giving all minority views equal weight, indefinitely, in discussions
  – Alternatives included special session on a topic (poor attendance signaled lack of interest); online votes (inclusive and private); outside agents restricting options
Other Observations

◆ Committee functioned better when fewer members were present
  – First observed during a rescheduled meeting with only 12 members
  – Did not correlate with presence/absence of specific member(s)

◆ Over time, the number of regular attendees dwindled
  – Better working size
  – Most committed members kept with it

◆ In the end, a core of 8-10 people did most of the report writing
  – Group process was necessary for the rest of the committee to trust this core with this work
Can You Just Do One More Thing?

- Successful presentation of “final” report to President in early November

- President very supportive of ideas, but wanted “just a few more” items for some of the proposals, including some background budget feasibility work
  - Continued to extend work of the committee, at least for some members
  - New direction as previous guidance was for big ideas only, no need to worry about details such as budget numbers
  - While out of scope of original charge, interesting work that should enhance probability of success

- Plan to have real final report submitted by end of March