

Developing an Empowering Culture in Organizations

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Abstract

People in organizations face uncertainty, complexity and huge pressures. Argues that we need a new culture in organizations to help people and their enterprises thrive in this situation, and that widespread leadership plays a key part in bringing this about. The key challenge for people in management and organization development is to help organizations develop a culture that enables people both to function better individually and to achieve common purposes. Proposes practical strategies for practitioners who want to help their organizations bring about cultural change. Describes a useful model for programs designed to harness the energy of managers in order to bring about change, work on the real issues confronting them and make changes in their attitudes and behaviour. Also describes an open program for leaders of organizational change which follows a similar model and the effects it has had on the participants and their organizations. Finally reflects on some of the author's own difficulties and learning.

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The Need for an Empowering Culture in Organizations

Most organizations and the people in them face uncertainty, change and huge pressures.

Among the factors affecting them are: the demand for greater quality and value (more for less); increasing globalization of the economy and intensifying competition; increasing levels of technology; the decline of many traditional industries including defence; the emergence of Pacific Asia as the centre of economic growth; growing awareness of the urgency of ecological issues; higher expectations of the quality of life; demographic changes; continual pressure on and restructuring of the public sector and, more recently, international recession. When we look back, many recent changes were not predicted (such as the break up of the USSR) and perhaps could not have been. Some of the pressures are largely benign; others can have oppressive effects. However in the long term it seems that the forces of economic necessity conspire with new values and higher aspirations to bring improvement both worldwide and in the workplace^[1]. It is as if we are being forced to progress and learn, albeit with difficulty. It is both exciting and, at times, daunting.

The expectation that "super-leaders" will somehow solve our problems seems increasingly inappropriate. Instead, in this situation, organizations need to learn how to release the creative energies, intelligence and initiative of people at every level. They also

need to learn how to respect difference and unite people so that they are able to work more successfully together to achieve common purposes and solve problems. (The reality is that we find all these things difficult.) The organizations that do so are far more likely to survive and prosper. They will also be attractive to the ablest people and have the best relationships with their customers.

A new culture is needed in organizations. It is as if people are fighting a war on two fronts. On the one hand they are trying to respond appropriately to the challenges described above; on the other they are handicapped by inappropriate and irrational behaviour within the organization - often worse when the challenges are greatest.

Instead we need to make organizations exciting and rewarding places (especially in times of difficulty) where diverse people feel valued and respected and there is opportunity to develop and grow. We have to overcome the stultifying and disempowering effects of bureaucracy and, often, our education. Despite our conditioning, we need to acknowledge how human beings really feel when faced with this degree of uncertainty and challenge. We need to learn to give and get the support needed to deal with feelings appropriately so that they do not get in the way of our energy, creativity and judgement[2,3,4]. In a way it is a question of making life at work more balanced and whole - of creating a culture at work in which it is acceptable to be a whole person with feelings and not merely an instrument. We need to value people for who they really are if we want them to offer their full potential. We need a more balanced alternative to traditional leadership with its "yang" emphasis - a leadership that is more inspiring, nurturing and empowering. We need to find new, practical ways of working together which fully respect people whatever their gender, age, class, racial background or position in the organization.

There is a huge desire among people in organizations for something different -commonly expressed in criticism and complaint. There is a lack of clarity about what it is or how to make it happen but the energy is there waiting to be tapped. This situation offers those of us involved in organizational change and development a central role if we care to take it. To do so we need to see ourselves as leaders of change and central to it rather than professional advisers or specialists. With our widespread contacts we have the information to diagnose accurately what needs to change and the network of friends and allies in the organization to help us bring the changes about. We also have many of the crucial skills that are needed.

Leadership is Crucial in This Situation

People at every level make the culture of an organization. It is the way they behave which determines what the organization is like to work in. Top management can make well-intentioned statements about how they want the organization to be. However, unless leaders change their actual behaviour, nothing will really be different; and there will be cynical reactions to these expressions of good intent.

In organizations today, I have argued, we need people at every level to act powerfully and offer their initiative, energy and intelligence. Yet the traditional leadership which most of us have experienced and perhaps exercised (for want of a better model) discourages people from acting in this way. It encourages powerlessness because it does

not fully respect people nor their true potential to contribute. Inherently it sets up conflict and resistance, to which the leader typically responds with various forms of manipulation. at the end of the article

The traditional messages about leadership which influence most of us to varying degrees are:

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| <p style="text-align: center;">The traditional messages about leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The way I see things is correct.• Keep separate from those you lead.• Avoid being vulnerable; pretend to be confident and to know; do not admit mistakes.• Be consistent to the point of rigidity.• Overwork and sacrifice self - thus become unfit, and often unfit to lead; demonstrate that work matters more than anything else.• People will not do things well or improve unless you reward, threaten, criticize or punish them however subtly.• There is a basic conflict between different groups and hence a competitive, win-lose situation.• Leaders pursue power rather than purpose. |
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This is a disabling and disempowering model for both leader and led. It implies low expectations, low trust and a need to keep control. In today's conditions it is unlikely to work well. It frustrates and wastes people. It makes it hard for leaders to keep on learning which they especially need to do. It is based on keeping up a pretence and implies that it is not okay to be yourself. This is undermining and exhausting. Many of the most talented people simply do not want anything to do with managing if this is what it means.

It will not have escaped the reader's attention that this is essentially a male model of leadership. The increasing influence of women in leadership is likely to be a powerful source of change and learning. Ambitious women should not have to deny their femininity and emulate a male stereotype in order to "get on". This deprives organizations of the more balanced approach the presence of women can offer. It is in everyone's interests that the range of behaviour adopted by leaders of both sexes includes behaviour currently categorized as feminine[5,6].

Leaders need an alternative which empowers and respects people and is more appropriate to the times in which we live. An alternative based on the work of Michael Simmons is shown below[6]. In my experience most managers relate to this strongly. Essentially it is a contradiction of the previous model.

An Alternative Leadership Model for the 1990s
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- **Develop an inspiring vision for the future.** Invite others to contribute their own exciting vision.
- **Learn to love change and uncertainty.**
- **Decide to appreciate the whole situation and see to it that everything goes well.** This implies listening to a wide variety of people and not getting isolated.
- **See yourself as a leader of leaders not followers.**
- **Create an environment of appreciation, high expectations and support.** People perform and learn best in an atmosphere of warmth, challenge and high expectations rather than criticism and blame.
- **See yourself as a life-long apprentice.** This makes it easier for you and everyone else to learn. It is safer for people to be honest in this climate.
- **Develop high self-esteem.** This makes it easier to be flexible, learn from experience and handle difficulties.
- **Build close, mutually supportive relationships based on honesty and trust.** This helps to avoid isolation, appreciate the whole situation and influence others.
- **Learn to listen with complete respect and ask empowering questions.** This releases intelligence and initiative. It is a key way to develop leaders, to influence others and to help people deal with how they feel.
- **Create a culture in which people give up complaining and blaming and instead take initiative.** Complaining and blaming sap energy and initiative and hold powerlessness in place.
- **Develop concrete strategies and plans and review them regularly.**

What can we do to help organizations change their culture and the way people lead? A leader or internal consultant can have a major influence by adopting a strategy that reflects the leadership model outlined above. Some of the key elements of such a strategy are as follows:

A Strategy to Develop a New Culture in Our Organizations

1 Develop your own vision for the organization, your part of it and yourself.

Developing a vision is a powerful contradiction to powerlessness. Base this on your values and your diagnosis of the key issues facing the organization. Trust your thinking. It is hard to do this on your own and you may need the support of a friend or consultant. Share your thinking with your colleagues. Encourage them to talk about their vision with you. You may be surprised by the similarity of their diagnosis and vision to your own.

2 Decide on those few absolutely crucial interventions that will make a decisive difference.

These will tackle the key issues and bring about your vision. They will challenge and inspire you and make the best use of your talents. You will develop others by letting go of things they should do. You will give up trying to do too much or abusing

others by expecting them to do so. Constantly responding to the demands of others prevents your changing things. Therefore it is a key step to decide what you most want to do and give up or minimize the rest.

3 Develop close friendships with managers. Ask them interesting and empowering questions: what are they pleased with; what do they find difficult; how do they see the situation; what is their vision for the future - what do they want to change; what do they need to tackle that will otherwise get in their way; how can you help? In this way you will gain their trust and support, collect data about the key issues and give them support in changing things for the better.

4 Build your network. Develop a growing network of like-minded people and provide them with leadership and support. Release their energy to bring about change. Start where the energy is and others will come round in time. Work at the highest level you can and move upwards as you build your credibility. Remember that many of your friends will move to positions of greater influence. Work strategically and see it as a long-term process.

5 Develop support for yourself. Without this, the task will be unnecessarily lonely and difficult. You will find it harder to trust your thinking and take bold, decisive action. With support, you will learn more easily and deal better with inevitable mistakes, setbacks and disappointments. You will also model for others a more appropriate and unpretentious leadership. It is a myth that real leaders have to do it on their own. Part of your support needs to be outside your organization; otherwise you are likely to be handicapped by the rigid patterns of your organization, which affect you as much as anyone else.

Programs that Address Real Issues and Support the Energy of Managers to Bring about Change

In my experience a reliable way to bring about change and develop a new culture is to offer programs that enable managers to work on the real opportunities and difficulties that face them. Initiatives of this kind have been taken in Sun Alliance, W H Smith[7,8], and more recently in Dacorum Borough Council and Sheffield Hallam University. Almost certainly these difficulties will include the existing culture and current leadership behaviour. Hence managers are likely to welcome a program which offers the opportunity to experience a different culture and models more appropriate behaviour.

At first a program of this kind will seem strange and unfamiliar compared with traditional management training. However, if it is carefully explained and introduced, managers will welcome the opportunity it presents with enthusiasm. Most will rate it as one of the best experiences of their working lives. If a suitable strategy is developed to embed it, this approach is capable of transforming the whole organization. Part of the benefit of such programs is that they provide an opportunity to practice the behaviour and skills that create a different culture and they model and demonstrate the effectiveness of a different form of leadership. Unless behaviour changes, nothing changes. People learn to change by doing things in a different way, finding out how well it works for them and deciding to carry it into their daily work and lives and change the way they conduct their business.

Key Elements of a Programme Some of the key elements of such programs are outlined below. It will be evident that a simple counselling model underlies the design of the two workshops.

1 An initial workshop that enables managers to work on:

- The current situation - a rigorous appraisal.
- A vision or picture of the desired future.
- Key strategic actions to bring this about.
- Whatever will otherwise get in the way.
- Commitments to action and plans (including support).

2 A second workshop (possibly more) to:

- Celebrate successes.
- Review difficulties.
- Share thinking about how the situation has changed and share learning.
- Develop new strategies and plans (including support).
- Work again on whatever issues will otherwise hinder complete success.

3 Support groups

These will be the main work groups during the workshops and they will continue independently between and after the workshops. Long-term support is needed to make changes and to change behaviour. Support groups benefit from guidance on how to work most effectively without an external facilitator. In essence they need to follow the process of the second workshop and appoint one of themselves to facilitate.

4 Working in small groups and pairs

Safety will be higher in small groups. In small groups and pairs (or on their own) people are more likely to be able to get real work done. The object is to encourage individual responsibility. The large group can be used to give key inputs or briefings, share successes, build energy and excitement and review progress. The large group is also the place to work on key organizational issues presenting themselves in the workshop.

5 A flexible program to work on individual needs

Needs emerge from "whatever will otherwise get in the way" and a "flexible program" can enable managers to work on them in whatever way they choose: on their own; individual consultations; one-to-one; or in small groups with common interests or needs. Managers find it exciting and rewarding to take responsibility for identifying their unique needs and meeting them in whatever way they choose with or without the help of a tutor or with other members of the program. Again, the object is to encourage individual responsibility.

6 A supportive and challenging atmosphere

This is the atmosphere in which managers say they learn best. It is the atmosphere in which they are prepared to be open and work on what really matters to them. It usually transpires that it is also the kind of organization culture they most want. It is encouraged by showing appreciation, having high expectations of people, encouraging them to trust their thinking, and giving criticism very thoughtfully. All this can be quite difficult because it is so different from our prevailing culture of control, criticism, competition and self-deprecation.

7 Teaching, modelling and practicing key skills

Listening with respect is probably the most important skill for leaders who wish to empower people to develop. In the workshops we help people discover the amazing power of thinking aloud with respectful attention and the power of asking interesting questions. We encourage people to practice listening on a reciprocal basis sharing time equally. Giving feedback in a helpful way is another key skill. Because we have been schooled in a "put-down" culture most of us find it hard to give feedback helpfully or to receive it.

A program of this kind sets up empowering structures, creates an empowering atmosphere and develops empowering skills and attitudes. It does not escape the attention of participants that it is a model for an empowering organization. Often it leads to requests to help them create that culture back in the organization.

Of course, given the disempowering conditioning and experiences all of us are subject to (to varying degrees), some participants may have initial difficulty adapting to such a program. It is wise to anticipate this and be ready to help different people in different ways through such difficulties. Rarely, the difficulties can take the form of an attack on the program leaders! This makes it essential that the leadership team give each other good support so as to react appropriately.

Readers who want more information about the design of such a program, how it works and the benefits to the organization may refer to the articles about the initiatives in W.H. Smith and Sun Alliance[7,8]. Among the key points I have learned are: the support and, ultimately, involvement of the Chief Executive is vital; it is wise to start with a "pilot program" with carefully chosen participants who have high credibility; if possible start at the top - otherwise work upwards; start with a tutor team consisting of an external consultant experienced in this approach, an internal consultant who will lead the ongoing work and a respected and skilled senior manager; if possible train top managers to be tutors on subsequent programs; because gender is such an important issue, involve both men and women in every tutor team if possible; handle the ownership issue carefully; and involve the management in developing the strategy to embed and cascade the changes in the organization; consult participants about their needs and the key issues before designing each program. The first and second workshops require three and two days respectively. Once a successful pilot program has been held, programs should be extended to the whole population of managers at that level as soon as possible and management involved in developing a strategy to embed and cascade the approach throughout the organization. It will be important to provide long-term support for managers to make enduring changes in their behaviour and practices if these programs are not to be seen as just another fad. One way of doing this is to hold "Network Events" for managers who have attended different programs so that they can develop supportive relationships with each other, share experience and work on issues that are getting in the way of the organization. The job of the external consultant is to act as guide to the internal consultant and managers in developing an appropriate strategy and where necessary help them implement it.

An Open Program for Leaders of Organizational Change and Development

This section of the article describes an open program. Our experience and what we learned may be helpful to readers who wish to develop similar programs. Those requiring more detail may wish to refer to an earlier account[9].

In 1986, with the support of two colleagues, I conceived the idea of a program based on these principles but designed for trainers, developers and consultants who see themselves as leaders of organizational change and development[9].

As conceived, this was not to be another course in organization development, consulting skills or personal development. There are excellent programs of this kind. Our intention was to offer a program that would provide long-term support for people wanting to facilitate fundamental cultural change in their organization. The formal program would last some nine months but the support groups and the availability of tutors as consultants offered indefinite support. The first three-part program started in September 1987 and at the time of writing a seventh annual program is in progress, albeit now in only two parts. The overall structure and outline design is shown in [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#). at the end of the article

The program works at a number of levels. The main focus is to help participants take successful initiatives in their organizations. However the program also offers a model which can be adapted for use in the clients' organizations. It also provides a laboratory in which to try out new ways of leading and working with people. Therefore, inevitably, mistakes will be made, difficulties experienced, and there will be the opportunity to learn from them.

We developed the idea of a "**core program**" and a "**flexible program**". The core program meets common needs and the flexible program can meet the unique needs of each participant.

The "**core program**" gives participants the opportunity to: diagnose the fundamental needs or key issues of their organizations; build a vision for the organization and their part of it; decide the key interventions required to bring this about and tackle the key issues; develop an influencing strategy; identify and work on the obstacles to change, both in the organization and in themselves; and develop a support network inside and outside the organization. The "core program" also offers explanations and ways of working with, first, the blocks within individuals which get in the way of their achieving all they are capable of[2,4] and, second, the difficulties in organizations which make it hard for people to act powerfully and work together toward common purposes[10,11].

We believe that lack of respect for difference and the oppression that results is at the root of many of the difficulties in organizations. If facilitators wish to improve the situation, we think they need an in-depth understanding and awareness of how oppression in all its forms (particularly that based on gender, age, race, class) and gender conditioning affect their own behaviour, the behaviour of their clients and underpin organizational culture[11]. Our aim is to provide this understanding and awareness and help the participants develop the strategies and skills to tackle discrimination within their organizations and in their relationships. As trust and safety develop during the program, these more fundamental issues can be addressed.

The "flexible program" is designed to meet the unique needs of each participant. In the first workshop these emerge from identifying the obstacles which would otherwise get in the way of their strategies. In the second and third, the needs are re-defined after participants have reviewed their successes and difficulties. Progressively the participants take increasing responsibility for the "flexible program".

We have tried to achieve a good balance between organizational, professional and personal issues; strategy and tactics; conceptual and practical; group and individual; the task, process and feelings; the need for relaxation and fun; taking action and learning from it.

How a Program of This Kind Can Help

Those of us who want to help organizations adapt and change need to work on our own development and be a model for others in this respect. Our own difficulties define our limits in assisting others. The program sets out to provide a balance between organizational and individual development and the comments below reflect this. It will be appreciated that cultural change takes a long time and these are the comments of people who started initiatives at various times over the past seven years. They represent participants who in our view were able to make the best use of the program. Their comments are given to illustrate the potential benefits and effects of a program of this kind rather than to make unjustified claims as to its effectiveness.

I developed a network of line managers as trainers who became instrumental in helping me change the culture of the organization through influencing the people around them.

The ongoing support and inspiration of the program empowered me to make major changes in the culture and management style...such that the new values became embedded

Despite the large amounts of money my organization spent...we constantly failed to unlock the initiative and creativity of those who worked with us...The program has enabled me to recognize that the key to unlocking the potential in us all is the creation of a working environment in which people are challenged to be more effective in the full knowledge that their colleagues in general and their boss in particular want them to succeed. Specifically the program has enabled me to set out to create that environment in the organization... Respect, openness and trust are now among the terms used... We have a long way to go.

I have talked to and made allies of people who believe that behaving as human beings to each other, by creating a common language about visioning, celebrating success, etc. can change an organization into a powerful and exciting place to work. There are a large number of people who now believe this.

We have trained approximately 60 senior managers on our own shortened version. Feedback... indicates...these managers: see more clearly the need to think strategically and to link their actions to a vision for the future; know that there is an alternative, more effective way to lead their organizations; regard themselves as...truly influential and capable of bringing about change.

The difference in my self-esteem and sense of direction has been noted by both friends and colleagues. I feel "bigger" if that makes sense...I am self-directed and I am helping others be the same. My team has been strengthened by our support of one another.

(It) gave me a model on which to base an in-house program, which is having an enormous influence on the development of the organization.

By giving me the confidence to understand what can be achieved by one individual if they have the courage and determination to go for it!

"Achieving Excellence" gave me space at a crucial time in my life to review where I was and where I was going. The framework enabled me to think strategically and to set an inspiring vision to make a difference in the world. My purpose as a beacon is to open my heart in order to enable transformation of pain and injustice in organizations, in my life and in other peoples' lives. I have done this by living my values, setting my standards high and being guided by my integrity to sail the shore that I want to sail. I have gathered strength from encouraging others to treat themselves and other people well, in the knowledge that success is maintained when I allow other people to be successful by taking leadership backed by passion, determination and understanding of the politics that might get in the way.

What We Have Learned and How the Program Has Evolved

We have learned both from what has worked well, and from our difficulties. Hence it is important to include both here.

The basic structure and design of the program has endured although now shortened to two workshops. However we have steadily modified it in response to successive groups of participants, and as we have learned and developed ourselves. Changes in the leadership of the program have brought innovations to the content and the ways in which we have worked with participants.

Among the features which participants have valued most highly are: the simple, practical models; the "flexible program" for which they take more and more responsibility; the support groups and the support provided by individuals; the tutors sharing and living their dreams; the two or three parts with time in between for implementation; one-to-one work with tutors and others; exposure to a wide range of trainers and the mix of people - gender, race, age, religious background, etc.; the increasing safety and self-discovery allowed by its length.

We have wrestled with a number of difficulties. Occasionally people have joined the program (despite an introductory day and individual consultations) who have been unable to benefit and have made it difficult for others eager to move on. A key piece of learning has been that if this type of program does not suit a participant it is best to act decisively and generously to enable the person to leave. Others do not seem to have succeeded in bringing about much change. (Was it just too difficult or did they need the active involvement of a consultant back in the organization?) We have learned that the personal autonomy of participants matters far more than their formal organizational level. We have struggled with judging when the group was ready to work on deeper issues.

Sometimes we were unable to respond well enough to the difficulties presented by the group because of divisions (yes, despite all we know) in the tutor team or limitations in our own skills at that time. Usually this led to profound learning for leaders over succeeding months, sometimes accompanied by much anguish. In recent programs, we have risked introducing elements of spirituality and meditation and learned that any fears about this were unjustified. I personally have struggled with how to sustain my energy for a program over a period of seven years and perhaps more.

Also, as an older man, usually working with people 20 years or so younger, I have not yet mastered the art of coping with that peculiar form of dependency usually followed by counter-dependency that seems to be stimulated by someone who looks like a father figure (no matter how he feels inside). This dynamic can affect relationships with colleagues as much as clients and get in the way of true partnership which is, I believe, what it is all about.

It is interesting and encouraging that many of the support groups continue to meet; there is a good deal of networking among participants; the first program continues to meet as a self-managed learning group. Two "network events" for ex-participants from all programs have been held, the second led by two former participants. A third is planned and will be led by former participants.

Our vision at the start was that, in time, suitable ex-participants would become program leaders and that leaders and participants would be increasingly representative of men and women of different ages, different racial, religious and geographic backgrounds. In this way we would be demonstrating and putting into practice our commitment to dismantling oppression in all its forms. This has all become a reality. The previous two programs have included leaders who are ex-participants and the current program is led by two women ex-participants, one black and one white and I have become their consultant. We hope to create a growing network of people supporting each other in bringing about fundamental change in their organizations and in society.

Figure 1 . Overall Learning Structure

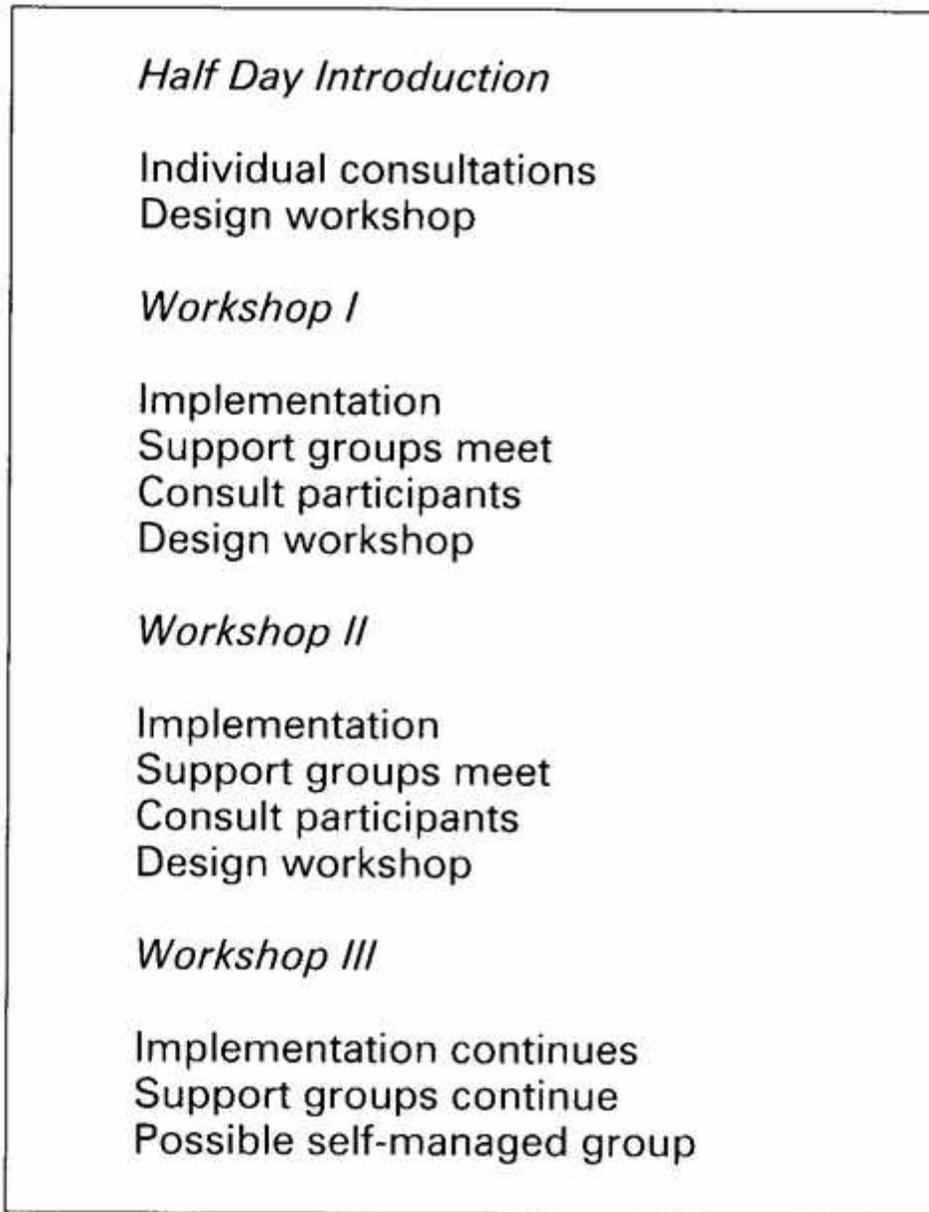


Figure 2 . Outline Design

Workshop I

Building trust and forming support groups.
The key issues of your organization.
Your vision.
Deciding your key strategic interventions.
Building your network.
Identifying your own needs.
Flexible program.
Planning and commitments (including support).

Workshops II & III

Re-building the climate.
Reviewing successes and difficulties;
how the situation has changed.
Your needs now.
Common themes.
Flexible program.
Planning and commitments (including support).

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