

Elements of the WorkOut Process

Adapted by C.A. Schifman and Co. from William S. Schaninger, Jr., Stanley G. Harris, and Robert E. Niebuhr's
"Adapting the GE Work-Out Process for use in Other Organizations: A Template"

Introduction

General Electric has been held up as an example of a well-run, highly successful company (e.g., Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). Three methodologies are generally mentioned as being the keys to GE's success – process mapping, best practices benchmarking, and WorkOut (Stewart, 1991). The Change Acceleration Process (CAP) and Six Sigma soon followed. Understandably, other organizations have adapted these methodologies for their own uses (Quinn, 1994; Stewart, 1991).

Although the WorkOut process must ultimately be tailored to each organization's circumstances, the elements below offer a starting place and insight into the WorkOut Process.

Elements of a WorkOut Session

- A. Planning the WorkOut Session
 - Sponsor identifies the challenge domain and planning team
 - Process manager prepares the leadership sponsor(s)
 - Planning team identifies potential participants, sub-challenges, timing, background information, select and prepare the site
 - Facilitator(s) are identified and engaged
 - Participants and the groups represented by participants are prepared

- B. Conducting the WorkOut Session
 - WorkOut introduction and team charge
 - Team problem-solving and recommendation development
 - Presentation to responsible leader(s) – Town Meeting

- C. Implementation of Team Recommendations
 - Sponsoring leader's role
 - Executive team's role
 - Participant's role
 - Process managers role

- D. Implications for Success

Following are highlights of each of these 4 elements.

A. Highlights: Planning the WorkOut Session

Sponsor identifies the challenge domain and the planning team

The issues addressed by WorkOut can be broad, such as improving productivity, increasing customer satisfaction, and reducing costs in a particular area, or narrower, such as improving the wait time for customers (Ashkenas & Jick, 1992). The ultimate key to the success of any WorkOut session is the leader(s) who “own” the problem being addressed.

Process manager prepares the leadership sponsor

WorkOut sponsors put themselves on the line by turning over a challenge to the WorkOut teams and having to regard (but not necessarily approve) their recommendations. The process manager provides the leader with information about the overall process and their role in it. Preparing the sponsoring leader begins with casting WorkOut as a tool that the leader uses to get insight into solving problems for which he or she is ultimately responsible

Lowe (1998) captures some of the potential tension sponsors face in the remarks of one GE sponsor: Sometimes, as a leader at WorkOut, you feel foolish, like, “why didn’t I listen to this before?” Some people have the perception, “gee, if I sit on the hot seat and if I’m insecure about taking someone else’s idea, instead of it coming from me, it’s going to look like I don’t know what I am doing.” You have to get over this mindset. I never felt intimidated; I always felt invigorated. (p. 133)

Planning team identifies potential participants, sub-challenges, timing, background information, select and prepare the site

Guided by the Process Manager, the Planning Team is key in determining the clarity of the WorkOut challenge and how to ‘dice’ it so that addressing the Challenge is in manageable pieces. The planning team develops sub-challenges for separates teams to address.

WorkOut team participants (typically 8 to 10 people per team, with the number of teams for each WorkOut dependent on the scope of the problem being addressed, with one facilitator assigned to each team) are then selected and come from across levels, functions, and work areas. All groups are represented that somehow touch the challenge.

The planning team determines the amount of time they think is necessary for the WorkOut, researches the key background information the team participants might need at their immediate access at the WorkOut, ensures the participants get the information they need prior to the WorkOut, and manage all the logistical set up for the WorkOut session.

Facilitator(s) are identified and engaged

One of the features that distinguish WorkOuts from many other problem-solving approaches is the use of expert external and in due course, internally trained WorkOut facilitators.

The facilitators ensure the WorkOut teams’ efforts are focused and efficient. The group must feel free to disagree, discuss, explore, and problem solve in a short, intense period of time. Facilitators manage the process while participants focus on content. The facilitator guides participants through the problem-solving and recommendation development process, introducing a variety of tools as needed to move the group towards their end product.

Participants and the groups represented by participants are prepared

The participants' managers are contacted and a request for a particular person(s) to attend the WorkOut session. If it is important for the managers' to inform their teams about the WorkOut, the planning team encourages this in their correspondence with these leaders.

Participants typically receive two forms of preparatory information: information about the WorkOut process itself and information regarding the challenge to be addressed.

A participant manual is prepared for the participants containing information about the WorkOut process and data specific to the challenge they will be asked to address, which they will receive before or at the WorkOut session.

B. Highlights: Conducting the WorkOut Session

At its core, WorkOut is a process whereby teams spend two to four days together defining, analyzing, and solving clearly-defined, specific business problems.

WorkOut introduction and team charge

This step, which occurs the morning of the first day of the session, sets the stage for the remainder of the meeting:

1. Participants, including the facilitator(s), introduce themselves.
2. The Process Manager explains the WorkOut process and the facilitator's role.
3. The Sponsoring leader a) presents the challenge, b) outlines the team(s) responsibilities, and c) recommits to looking forward to the teams' recommendations in addressing the challenge. The Sponsor then leaves the session until the Town Meeting, or may return during lunches to provide support.

Team problem-solving and recommendation development

This consumes the bulk of the time devoted to the WorkOut session. The facilitator helps the team get organized, facilitates the team as they clarify their sub-challenge outlined by the Sponsor, and helps the team understand the process they will use during the WorkOut session. In particular, the facilitator(s) provide tools for the team to distinguish between problems that are fairly easy and those that are more difficult. As necessary, the team is coached on brainstorming, process mapping, flow charting, fishbone diagramming, etc. The facilitator helps their team stay focused on the challenge and on the aggressive agenda they have to get their work accomplished.

Ultimately the team gets to a set of recommendations complete with detailed implementation action plans. The team attempts to assign costs, project timetables for the accomplishment of its recommendations, (most WorkOuts require a 90 day implementation period as the maximum amount of time to complete the recommendation) and project the expected benefits of these recommendations. Key to the development of the recommendation action plans is assignment of who *on the team* will take the lead on each recommendation action.

Presentation to responsible leader – Town Meeting

Several hours are reserved at the end of the WorkOut session for the responsible leader(s) to come back to meet with the group and hear its recommendations and to decide 'yes or no' to each recommendation. After hearing each recommendation and getting any desired clarification, the leaders either approve the recommendation or not approve the recommendation.

Highlights: Implementation of Team Recommendations

The post-WorkOut period is a critical point in WorkOut. In order to support action-oriented behaviors after the WorkOut, several roles must be filled by sponsoring leaders, participants, and the process manager.

Sponsoring leader's role

The sponsoring leader helps the WorkOut teams overcome organizational barriers while they work on implementing their recommendations. They are key to removing obstacles and providing support as needed. The Sponsor meets with the team leaders and the process manager every 30 days during implementation to ensure that the recommendations that were accepted are progressing as planned.

Participants' role

Accepted recommendations also include detailed action plans stating who on the WorkOut team will be responsible for carrying out each step of the recommendation, so each team participant is typically involved through implementation. Ensuring this happens is a key role of the Facilitator during the team's development of action plans at the WorkOut session.

In addition to helping implement solutions, team members serve as conduits back to their respective organizations regarding the WorkOut experience.

Process Manager's role

The process manager is heavily involved in the overall implementation of the WorkOut effort, helping with follow-up activity as required.

The process manager helps the sponsor with planning and conducting meetings after 30, 60, and at the final 90 day meeting to monitor progress on the recommendations. For WorkOut to be successfully implemented, the sponsoring leaders must be willing to acknowledge and show appreciation for progress as well as address lack of follow-up on the WorkOut recommendations.

C. Implications for Success

WorkOut is a process, not an event. A decision to implement WorkOut is an organization's cultural decision not to be taken lightly. It represents a cultural intervention designed to enhance the empowerment of people in the organization and the openness of leadership to their ideas. It is designed to create a culture where "paralysis by analysis" (Quinn, 1994) is taboo.

It becomes clear fairly quickly that, in its purest form, the WorkOut process as used by General Electric reinforces an underlying culture emphasizing speedy problem solving, broad-based involvement and empowerment, open and direct dialogue between leaders and their people, accountability, and continuous improvement.

With WorkOut, participation is crucial to success so getting an initially positive message throughout the organization is vital to the acceptance of the WorkOut (Larkin & Larkin, 1996). This message may be delivered via a variety of conduits, of course, but one of the best ways to communicate the nature of WorkOut is to share the outcomes of the first few WorkOut sessions, particularly if heard from the sponsoring leaders of that WorkOut, the Process Manager, and the WorkOut participants.