
Moving to the Next Level at the Canadian Institute for Health Information

Larry E. Peterson and Rebecca Peterson

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The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) is highly regarded as a productive organization and a concerned employer. It gathers, analyzes and reports health data from across the country to inform policy and practice. CIHI is an independent organization servicing governments and other constituencies. In 2004, Mediacorp Canada Inc. listed it in MacLean's magazine as one of the top one hundred companies to work for in Canada.

In 2001, CIHI hired the HayGroup to carry out an employee survey and compare their results to the *HayNorm* for similar North American organizations (HayGroup, 2003). The overall CIHI results were very good. The 200 CIHI employees, on average, rated themselves 20% above the Hay Public Sector Norm. The CIHI *managers*, however, rated themselves slightly below that norm – especially on factors such as communication, performance management, training & development, management style and employee involvement. The managers did not see CIHI fully living up to their expectations and desires. The CEO responded to the results of the survey by developing working groups to address some of the most contentious issues.

Communication, Management Style and Training and Development issues were seen as a priority for executive attention; task forces were established in each of the above areas. In addition, the Pension Plan was reviewed and there was some substantial restructuring of the organization. Some Branches were given particular attention. As part of these initiatives, the managers received permission and the resources to hold occasional Managers' Forums.

Even with that good record, the CEO knew that performance had to move to a higher level if CIHI were to address the challenges and opportunities it faced. Other think tanks and forums were developing good health data and analysis – there were more and better competitors from both the public and private sectors. Although the quality of their work was very good, there was significant room for improvement. Advances in technology and the development of new standards and systems for collecting health care data required new strategies. They needed to improve their data quality, get their analysis out to their clients and stakeholders faster and in a form that better met the stakeholders' needs. They needed to develop more effective partnerships with newer related initiatives that were now getting sizable government funding. They decided to move to additional locations for their offices and knew that move would increase communication and integration issues. Although their profile in Canada was good, it could be greatly strengthened in order to develop more stable funding to support CIHI's growth.

The organization already had a robust business planning process, an award winning board and the key elements of a business plan were already established with board approval. In order to lead the organization to the next level of performance, the CEO decided to hold an executive retreat in the spring of 2003. He wanted to develop clear strategic initiatives to realize what he believed was a shared vision of stable funding and growth by 2005. He had set the date and the participants before inviting the first author (the consultant on the project) to work with him to design and facilitate the event.

Why Open Space?

The primary Large Group Method used in this case was Open Space Technology (OST). The decision to use the Open Space approach was made with the CEO, after discussing other options and after some interviews with members of the executive team because it can shift the

culture towards taking individual responsibility as well as real teamwork. It does require the commitment of the sponsor to an open dialogue on the topic at hand.

A critical component to the effective use of Open Space Technology is good planning that determines the client's intention or goals, the theme or question to be addressed, and any boundaries or givens that set the parameters for action and follow-up. In this case, the initial planning was with the CEO. The rest of the 13 person Executive Team was included through brief telephone interviews. Initially, the CEO established the following goals for the retreat:

- Agreement on the top 5-7 strategies the Executive must carry out to achieve stable funding and growth by summer 2005
- Executive Team Building – A closer connection between team members
- Clarify the implementation planning process in order to inform the board

The contextual drivers for their business improvements had been well established in CIHI's internal planning processes. The CEO developed his statement of a positive vision, or in his words a "willed future", for CIHI in the face of its current challenges. He developed the theme for the executive retreat "What do we have to do between now and summer 2005 to get stable funding and growth?" Without the stable funding base and the ability to grow, CIHI was going to lose its strong position to the growing competition. A number of substantial changes were seen to be required to create a strong position with the growing competition.

The CEO also articulated the "givens" or the boundaries within which the executive members could develop proposed initiatives. For example, the Board had developed a scorecard to measure overall performance and the current approved Business Plan set the context for implementation planning. Revisions of the Business Plan required certain steps. The decision to develop offices in Western Canada was also to be taken as a given. These previous decisions set the context for both the discussions and the development of implementation strategies. He, with the consultant, also determined that priority setting and

action planning with regard to the ideas developed at the retreat would take place at the end of the retreat, with all involved, on the last day.

Based on this planning, the CEO invited executive team members to attend the retreat and informed them of the purpose, the theme question, and the outcomes sought. He also described the nature of an Open Space meeting, the givens for this retreat and the fact that implementation planning would be part of the session.

One Event Becomes Two

On the first day, the CEO welcomed the thirteen executives and began the retreat by reminding the group of the key reasons for moving to the next level of performance. The CEO then stated his vision for the next two years. He saw CIHI as an essential part of the information processes of key clients and partners and as the vendor of choice for the services it offers. Its information quality would be at the highest level. He saw both a national and an international reputation for its health perspectives. The Executive Team reached immediate real agreement on that vision within the hour allotted for this discussion. The CEO had named the shared vision well.

Open Space Technology was then used to engage the executives in determining the challenges and opportunities for implementing that vision and the strategies for moving forward. The same approach was used as that used for larger groups. Participants sat in one circle. There was no proposed content agenda but instead a blank wall. The agenda topics emerged from the participants who each stated the aspects of the vision for which he or she had passion and would take some responsibility. The responsibility included entering a report on the laptop computers provided. Groups self-selected and self-organized their conversations. Group initiators chose a start time and location for their discussion from sticky notes. There were four suggested start times for conversations throughout the day with four possible locations in the

retreat center for each start time. The norms for the behavior during the day were set by the facilitator with the Four Principles and One Law of Open Space. (Owen, 1997b, pp. 95-100)

At the end of the day, the participants expressed genuine pleasure and excitement about their learning, the quality of their time together and the reports they produced. People listened and built on each others ideas. Disagreements fostered better solutions and a strong sense of teamwork emerged.

On the second day, they reviewed the book of group reports that detailed the proposed strategies. Copies had been printed overnight for each participant and made available at breakfast. With the smaller group and the extent of the action planning already in the Open Space reports, the consultant guided the priority and planning process. Participants were asked to choose the top five reports for attention by the executive team for the next six months. A simple voting procedure was used. Those reports were then addressed in order of priority to clarify how far the Open Space topic group got in its implementation strategy development, what next steps were required to move it forward and the leadership energy required to move forward in the next six months. Relationships to existing initiatives or executive responsibilities were identified and support for the Open Space initiative confirmed. Participants demonstrated genuine energy for and a strong commitment to the newly developed plans.

The participants realized that the work and the outcomes of the two-day retreat had created their “executive” implementation strategy. They also realized that they had to engage the whole organization’s energy to carry out most of their strategies. As they explored how they would lead the organization, the manager’s results in the employee survey became a salient part of the executives’ conversation.

The CEO reminded the group that he intended to meet with the managers in two weeks. He had planned a fairly traditional agenda – a conversation with the CEO including presentations and interaction with the managers. However, the executive team’s positive experience with Open Space Technology led to the decision to propose a change to the

planned agenda -- to engage the managers in planning as they had been engaged. They also committed to take seriously what the managers would produce and to integrate those ideas with their own plans, sharing emergent leadership roles when appropriate.

At the closing of an Open Space event, each participant in the circle is given the opportunity to comment on their experience. In this case, the circle took place after the action planning. The participants at the executive event thanked each other for sharing information, being honest and valuing all of the contributions. They expressed their surprise at how far they were able to get in their two day retreat.

Managers' Retreat

The CEO approached the leadership group for the managers' retreat and proposed that the theme, boundaries and process developed for the Executive event be used in the one-day Managers' Forum. The formal leaders of the management group agreed. In the planning for this event, it also became clear that the focus for the managers' event was to be on what the 23 managers perceived as their challenges or opportunities for implementing the vision.

After the leadership of the managers' group called the one-day forum to order, the CEO stated the shared vision of the executive team and asked for questions of clarification. Again, the vision struck a real chord with the managers. It was big enough to include their interests and clear enough to provide a sense of direction. The CEO also stated that the Managers' strategic initiatives would be linked to those of the Executive, but were not limited by those the Executive developed. The CEO asked them to explore their roles and strategies as managers in leading the organization toward the vision.

When the "space was opened" individual managers identified strategic topics for which they had a passion. The approach used with executives was repeated with the managers -- the circle of chairs, blank wall and emergent agenda, self-organizing discussions, computer reports and the "Four Principles and "One Law".

At the closing circle of the one day event, with substantive reports in the computers and posted on the wall, many managers stated that they felt more connected to each other and to the strategy of the organization. They had also developed some key strategies and implementation plans to move CIHI forward. They thanked the CEO for engaging them in planning in this way.

That “felt connection” could have been stifled by the executive team if they had chosen not to integrate their results collaboratively with the managers. In adjourning the event, the CEO did a quick linking of the topics with those that had been developed by the Executive and stated what he saw as new insights.

There was not a “Day 2” for the managers’ session. In the following days, however, the executive team took the managers initiatives seriously. First, the VP in charge of strategic planning did some integration of obvious connections between the two sets of reports, strategies and next steps. Then he held a joint meeting to clarify the integration of the plans and reach agreement on how to proceed. The specific follow-up action items were listed from both events and related to the Open Space reports. Then the action responsibilities were clarified along with target dates.

Surprising Results

The consultant met with the CEO two months later, in mid August 2003, to reflect on the sessions and the strategic work that had followed. There had been substantial agreement on key issues between the executive and the managers but at different levels of specificity. Executives had a broader view for the most part. The integration of the strategies had led to action. There had already been progress on the key issues identified at both events. The CEO also stated that there had been a “huge impact” on the feeling of involvement of the managers and believed that the planning process we followed, including the Open Space events, was a factor.

The CEO's reflections were based in part on his review of the results of the HayGroup 2003 employee survey, which had been conducted in late June 2003. For CIHI as a whole, there were real across the board improvements relative to the 2001 results and relative to the HayNorm, and these were a genuine surprise.

In the survey, participants were asked to rate CIHI in relation to 75 questions as very good, good, average, poor or very poor. The response to each question is compared to the HayNorm for that employment sector in North America. The analysis indicates both the "percent deviation" from the norm and from the last survey. The "deviation" is the difference from the norm of the percentage of CIHI employees who answered a question as "good" or "very good".

The 236 respondents in 2003 represented 95% of the employees. There were 184 respondents in 2001 or 94% of the employees at that time. All of the 23 managers responded to the 2003 survey, with one of the 23 not responding in 2001. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Figures 1 & 2)

The scores for CIHI as a whole did improve, with the largest improvements seen to be in the Training and Development factor, the degree to which training is provided and employees believe they will reach their career objectives at CIHI. The overall data also showed a 9% improvement in Recognition, in the appreciation of employee efforts. There was also an 8% improvement in Organizational Commitment, perceptions of how well the organization will act on their issues and concerns. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section I)

The CEO was most excited, however, by the size of the changes in the managers' results. According to the HayGroup lead consultant, the amount of change was unusual. Big gains are not expected when starting with already good results. Yet, there were numerous jumps of 20 percent. Some of the highest areas of improvement for managers were in Employee Involvement, Employee Satisfaction (Morale), Communication and Organizational

Commitment. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section I). These issues are the most likely to be influenced by Open Space Technology events.

The Employee Involvement category is a collection of six questions focused on the degree to which employees feel that they have had input, that their interests/concerns are being taken into account, that their ideas have been adopted, their skills are put to good use and that they have authority to pursue their work. In 2001 the managers were below the norm for public organizations in North America in this category. In 2003 the managers' results were 19 points above the Hay Norm and 22 points above 2001 while the CIHI total was only 5.5 points above the 2001 result. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section II, p. 88-93)

The results in Employee Involvement for managers are even more dramatic given that one of the six questions had only a 5% increase. It identified the feeling of contribution to the success of CIHI. 95% of managers already believed that CIHI was good (or very good) in that category in 2001 so shifting to 100% was not a large change. All of the other questions in this category, however, shifted by 19% or more. The largest shift was in the question about how well CIHI took into account employee interests or concerns when making important decisions. Although there was not a focus on managers per se in the question, there was an astounding 38% improvement putting CIHI managers 25 points above the norm for such organizations in North America. The survey showed a 32% improvement in the managers' sense that "I have input into the changes happening at CIHI" putting them 33% above the Hay Norm for North American public sector organizations. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section II, p. 88-93)

One of the questions in the category dealing with Employee Satisfaction or Commitment asks about the overall morale at CIHI. There was a 23% improvement in the managers' perception of morale while there was only a 9% improvement for the organization as a whole. The question focused on overall CIHI morale, but the morale of the managers would certainly influence their perceptions on such a question. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section II, p. 103,)

Another question in the Employee Survey focused on the opportunities to communicate with the Executive Team. Twenty nine percent more managers saw those opportunities as good or very good in July 2003 in relation to a 19% increase for the organization as a whole, an important improvement. (HayGroup, 2003, July, Section II, p. 32)

Interpreting the Results

Given the positive survey results and the indications of strong steps towards implementation, the first author conducted some brief interviews with four CIHI Executives and four managers. Their perceptions reinforced the view that the Open Space Technology events made a real contribution.

As one research Vice President stated, “No direct cause-effect relationship can be claimed” for the planning process. Implementation planning and cultural change are complex processes. The planning process and Open Space events, however, may have been a “nice way to wrap up the efforts at change,” according to another Vice President. “Managers came back from the meeting with a very positive message.” A third Vice President acknowledged that the Open Space events created a different “atmosphere” in the organization and that the integrated follow-up led to real action. “Unlike other strategic thinking processes there was more impact on outcomes”. Two managers that were interviewed also saw the Open Space event as having a “huge impact”. It “lifted the spirits” of the managers. One saw the process working because it led to priorities that “we all now own”. Another manager who helped organize the Forum stated that “people really liked the event and there was lots of good feedback”. One Vice President believed that the fact that managers had the CEO’s attention for a full day was both unusual and appreciated. The CEO also believed that the planning process was a factor and it had a “huge impact on the feeling of involvement”.

Confirming OST Experiences

The Open Space Technology sessions clarified practical strategy and aided its implementation in the whole organization. They also accelerated or enhanced the managers' positive view of the organization and its culture as indicated in the employee survey. The desire and willingness of the CIHI executive leadership to listen and engage made this possible.

Taking that risk was enhanced by the Open Space Technology planning process used by the consultant, which clarifies the focus and the boundaries. Clarifying what is to be taken as "given" and what will be done with the results enables the event sponsors to "let go" of specific outcomes and enhance the spirited self-organization of the participants. In this situation, both emergent self-organization and hierarchical planning and accountability effectively took place. The planning in this case was one key component of preparing CIHI to take full advantage of both formal accountability and emergent strategy.

The two Open Space events accelerated the organization's initiatives. In one of the few theses focused on Open Space Technology, Richard Norris did a content analysis of Open Space Technology stories that were published on the internet or in various periodicals over a specified time frame. He concluded that "The prime value noted is Open Space Technology's ability to help people move below the surface of their personal or organizational façade by uncovering what is already in existence but unseen....allowing value to emerge in its most authentic state" (Norris, 2000, p. 1). Harrison Owen (1997a) describes the same phenomena in *Expanding Our Now*. Open Space Technology seems to enable participants to become more aware of what is possible at a given time in an organization.

Other researchers have found similar effects. Linda Olson's follow-up interviews after an Open Space Technology event at Hewlett Packard discovered five key themes. Participants identified the "ability to collaborate, freedom to make choices, creativity, shared leadership and the ability to make connections" as key elements of their positive experience of Open Space

Technology. (Olson,1996, p. 59). Richard Norris found the same kinds of responses in his survey of the literature. The top occurrences of the value of the Open Space Technology experience were learning, shared leadership, creativity, self-organization, the assumption of responsibility and increased awareness. (Norris, 2000, p.41)

Open Space has been used at Hewlett Packard for a variety of types of meetings. The experience there fits with the two sessions at CIHI. “Boundaries that previously separated employees disappeared in the Open Space meeting, as new relationships emerged based on common concerns and interests” (Olson, 1998, p. 14). OST created the conditions for emergent collaboration, at least for the time of the event. The CEO and two senior managers were at the managers’ Open Space forum. The managers experienced collaboration with each other and the CEO. This was furthered by the integration of the executive and managers strategies in the ongoing planning process.

Reflections and Learning

OST accelerated the development and implementation of a shared strategy. It also accelerated a shift from normal manager survey results to those that were substantially above the norm. Even with a smaller group, this case demonstrates that Open Space can liberate energy and engage effective strategic thinking and relationship building. The HayGroup studies were a fortunate coincidence that provided some supporting evidence for the changes that the authors have experienced for a number of years.

As with any “event”, what happens in preparation and in the follow-up activity can substantially influence the experience and the results. In this case, that learning was reinforced. In the short time frames involved, a strong CEO who prepared well for the event was critical in creating the conditions for emergent planning and energy.

Many CEO’s or managers, particularly in mid-size organizations, believe they can micro-manage the organization and its conversations. Letting the agenda and conversation emerge

from the participants is experienced as a risky proposition. They would prefer a process that appears to be more in control – if not of the sponsor then in “control” of the facilitator who would guide the discussions at table groups. Many would prefer to deduce the implementation strategy from their vision, rather than let it emerge in relation to the vision. This CEO also had some of these concerns until the executive team was interviewed by telephone and some boundaries were acknowledged. He chose to take the risk and therefore got substantial results. Our continued learning is that if the sponsor or CEO is not willing to take that risk, then OST is not the appropriate approach.

As in this case, it is sometimes easier for a CEO to take that risk with a senior team or smaller group of managers than with the whole organization. After that positive experience, he and the executive team were ready to risk the use of the Open Space approach with the managers.

As a result, more managers believed they had input into the changes happening at CIHI and could take responsibility for some of those changes. Managers chose the workgroups where they wanted to make a contribution and had the freedom to leave whenever they wanted. The topics or strategies developed by the executive did not prescribe what the managers saw as important. The synergy between the two groups emerged. Thus managers felt and exercised real freedom to make substantive input into the planning process.

As in this case, participants in an Open Space event often experience a “felt sense of connection” to each other, a sense of emergent or deepened community. There are often statements by some participants that they now have a much better understanding of the organization as a whole. They feel more integrated, connected and positive about their colleagues and the organization. This occurred at CIHI even though there were two events rather than one, as we usually prefer. This is likely because they were held close together in time and a few executives attended the managers’ event along with the CEO.

There were ongoing signs of collaborative implementation after the two events. The first author also facilitated two shorter working group sessions with the CEO's involvement that partly emerged from the directions established in the Open Space workshops. In those sessions, participants identified strategic criteria for successful population health research initiatives and deepened relationships with a partner organization. In addition, Open Space Technology was used for a successful Canada-wide consultation on obesity policy development where CIHI was one of the sponsors.

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