



## **Learning From a Whole-System, Strength-Based Approach: A Case of Collaborative Curriculum Development**

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Innovative employees with versatile skills are the driving force behind successful businesses. Given the ever-evolving face of today's globalized business world, it is no small feat to prepare individuals who can apply their imaginations and analytic abilities effectively to issues that inevitably arise during the course of an ordinary business day. This task falls, at least in part, on undergraduate educators whose aim is to cultivate the dynamic, critical thinkers to fill tomorrow's organizations. Unfortunately, a chasm exists between the faculty who train and educate these future business leaders and the business practitioners who hire them. Faculty view practitioners as too focused on narrow skill sets, and practitioners perceive faculty as residing in "ivory towers" and out of touch with the daily realities of business.

To bridge the communication gulf between these two groups, Southwestern University conducted a national dialogue that brought together voices from 55 educational institutions and business organizations. Although the summit context focused specifically on business education, it provided a framework to extrapolate lessons on how bringing together disparate stakeholders' perspectives within a system can improve any organizational design process.

### **Overview of the Collaborative Process**

The summit was designed with the view that business education is a holistic system. Participants who represented all facets of this systems' "value chain," including students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and recruiters, were invited to conceptualize the ideal undergraduate, liberal arts-based business curriculum.

Over the course of nine months, 72 participants completed three collaborative phases. First, responses to open-ended questionnaires were solicited to get a litmus test of the ideas percolating across the different stakeholder groups. Next, a synthesis of these responses was shared with the whole group, inviting feedback, clarification, and virtual conversation about the ideas raised. Finally, a three-day in-person summit was hosted for a subgroup of the participants to engage in an in-depth conversation.

What became clear during this process was how differently each stakeholder group learned, listened, prioritized, and made meaning out of what needed to be accomplished. This is representative of the challenges any organization faces when attempting to bring together the various parts of its system into shared, collaborative thinking about the whole. For example, in corporations, the research and development people possess a different perspective than quality assurance people and the marketing team has a different set of challenges compared to customer service representatives.

Despite these challenges, there are methods, such as those used in Southwestern's process, that help to effectively and productively bring together the different facets of the system. We will elaborate specifically on the two core design principles the Southwestern dialogue used to leverage strengths of the full stakeholder system.

### **Design Principle 1: Leverage Strengths**

First, Southwestern's dialogue employed a strength-based philosophy of organizational change. Researchers and practitioners alike are increasingly documenting the powerful impact that strength-based methodologies are having on organizational change processes. Although traditional change processes focus on diagnosing and solving problems, strength-based approaches center instead on valuing the best of what already is working and foster inquiry into what "might be" in the future. Such approaches are often successful in moving people toward innovation rather than simply repairing problems. Strength-based work is particularly effective with groups prone to misunderstanding each other.

Rather than spending time exploring what is not working in business education, participants were asked instead to imagine what was possible for the development of future business school curriculum, and focus on leveraging and building on what already was working in their own systems.

To facilitate inquiry into the possible, strength-focused prompts were specifically designed. For example, the summit's opening exercise asked participants to

explore their “highest hopes” for the future. In particular, participants were instructed to leave constraints at the door, allowing themselves to imagine possibilities rather than the obstacles that often limit one’s imagination when thinking about change. Guided by the questions, “What is your hope for the future (at a global level)?” and “What are the essential ingredients needed to make these hopes a reality?,” participants worked in pairs, reflected on these provocative questions, and then shared their responses with the plenary group.

The strength-based approach demonstrated tangible impacts, including the following:

- Generating a tremendous amount of collaborative energy among the group.
- Helping a diverse group build common ground.
- Setting the stage for further exploration of affirmative questions.
- Uncovering the best elements already existing in the various universities’ programs.
- Encouraging participants to go beyond the boundaries of current programs and innovate around new ideas for future curriculum.

### **Design Principle 2:**

#### **Bring the Whole System Together**

The second principle influencing the summit design was a “whole-systems” approach. Although many change processes include representatives of various subgroups from the organization, few involve representatives of all major stakeholder groups of the entire organizational system, including internal and external stakeholders. New methodologies in organizational development that target a whole-systems level are showing great impact in igniting positive organizational change. The rationale behind gathering all voices in the system together is that bringing together multiple stakeholders in the room offers a more comprehensive spectrum of perspectives, insights, and questions than if any one of these groups met alone. This type of approach is growing in popularity among managers because of its ability to increase stakeholder ownership of the change process, foster greater commitment to the change process, and improve innovation and collaborative links across stakeholder groups.

While other university dialogues assembled individual stakeholder groups (e.g., primarily faculty or primarily employers) to discuss the topic of curriculum

design, the Southwestern dialogue sought to include a wider array of the stakeholders who are affected by and are invested in the shared future of both business and liberal arts programs.

To leverage the diversity in the room during the face-to-face meeting, participants were arranged in “maximum-mix” discussion tables so that each smaller group was representative of the whole. By doing so, all stakeholder perspectives were present for every discussion. These maximum-mix configurations also were designed to change at half-day intervals to further blend ideas among participants.

Bringing a whole-systems approach to the process sparked rich collaborative thinking across stakeholder groups, as delineated below:

- Defining curriculum objectives that include both theoretical learning objectives and practical skills training.
- Balancing the students’ desire for a marketable degree with the need to provide a rich educational experience.
- Leveraging best practices in corporate assessment and evaluation into educational institutions that tend to evaluate programs rather than student development.
- Sharing innovations and building relationships that usually emerge within rather than across institutions.

### **Lessons Learned**

Although the dialogue was a success, challenges arose along the way. Each challenge, however, provided an opportunity for reflection on how to improve future collaborative processes with multiple stakeholders.

#### **Challenge: Learning to Speak a Different Language**

One of the challenges of bringing multiple stakeholders together is that each group speaks its own language. While an outside observer may think that everyone was conversing in English, a closer evaluation of the conversations would reveal that each subgroup actually came to the table with a unique vocabulary. The academics had a certain context, complete with its set of assumptions, reference points, and specific jargon. Even their rhythm for exploring ideas used a unique, slower pace compared to that of the practitioners. Likewise, the administrators, business practitioners, and students each worked from unique reference contexts.

The challenge meant that conversations could erode easily into groups talking “past” each other instead of “to” each other. For example, academics could become frustrated with practitioners for wanting to move so quickly to outcomes, and practitioners might feel frustrated with how much precision academics could explore without defining objectives. If left unchecked, participants may have spent huge amounts of time trying to agree on and clarify specific words rather than addressing the underlying meaning and intent of the conversations at hand.

### ***Process Lesson: Honoring Differences Through Role Modeling and Ground Rules***

To help bridge the gaps in language, we explicitly addressed differences and similarities up front. For example, at the outset of the summit, the facilitator set the context for honoring differences and for generously listening for colleagues’ intent rather than dissecting specific words. The facilitator modeled this point as she frequently asked participants for clarifications or translations of what they were saying when they slipped into jargon.

Also, ground rules were established collaboratively at the outset of the meeting. For example, recognizing that people were coming from different perspectives, one participant suggested a rule that all participants should feel free to speak freely without censoring themselves—both when sharing ideas and when reacting to others’ comments. By collectively exploring the question, “How do we want to work together?” the group began building a strong foundation of cooperation and mutual respect from the very beginning.

### ***Challenge: Building a Common Understanding of Success***

Just as the stakeholder groups used different languages, each group also came with a different perspective on the purpose of undergraduate education; therefore, building a shared understanding of the “ideal” business program was challenging. The academics had theoretical objectives that they felt were important to put forward, and the business practitioners wanted to make sure that those ideas had practical application in the real world. The students were concerned with succeeding in both their current academic environment as well as the future business world they would enter. School administrators wanted to make sure it was feasible to translate the ideas generated into reality in the university systems in which they worked.

### ***Process Lesson: Begin at a High Level That Can Include Everyone***

A real benefit to using a strength-based approach was that it immediately helped bring people together in a common vision for the future—a level of success that everyone could share. For example, the highest hopes discussion is a simple but powerful exercise to launch a collaborative process. This activity moved people out of their individual mindsets and into a space of shared imagination. At the highest level they found that they really did want the same thing even if they held different ideas on how to achieve that vision. In this case, the group realized that despite their different visions for improving business programs (some wanted more accounting courses, others wanted service learning experiences, etc.), they all desired education that ultimately contributes to a better society.

To help keep this high-level shared vision as a reference for the group throughout the ongoing discussions, the facilitator captured the ideas raised from this exercise on a large wall chart. This chart served as a visual reminder of the collective, overarching goals the group shared, regardless of any specific disagreements that emerged.

### ***Challenge: Allowing Adequate Time for Building Consensus***

Bringing people together in a dialogic process requires a significant time commitment from participants. Creating meaningful conversations takes talking and listening, more time than simply talking across each other. This kind of work is inherently more time consuming than simply having an individual or small group make a decision on its own, which is in part why multi-stakeholder dialogues are not yet commonplace for organizational decision making. Indeed, three days initially felt like a significant time commitment in summit participants’ busy, daily schedules; however, they soon realized that their time together passed quickly with many more conversations and questions left for future exploration.

### ***Process Lesson: Recognize the Importance of Having Enough Time***

Given the nature of collaborative work, it is important to plan enough time for meaningful conversations to evolve. Often, multiday sessions are necessary. The Southwestern summit was only a part of a larger nine-month process that also included asynchronous feedback and interaction among the participants. The

design signaled that the face-to-face time was not the beginning or the conclusion of the dialogue, but rather a part of the overall process.

With such a time-consuming process, it is also important to recognize that not every individual will participate as fully in each stage; therefore, every stage still requires sufficient time for establishing and continuously re-establishing what the group has accomplished and where it is going. In Southwestern's nine-month initiative this was done both through summarizing the major ideas generated (e.g., a report on the pre-summit questions to which people responded) and reiterating the major ideas raised during earlier parts of the process to keep everyone updated on current conversations. These iterations strengthen everyone's buy-in to the ongoing discussion so the outcomes are of greater interest to all participants.

### Overall Reflections

On the surface, whole-system collaboration may appear deceptively easy—one need only to invite representatives of various stakeholder groups, arrange maximum-mix groups, offer some questions for discussion, and allow adequate time. There are, however, also many challenges that require attention to ensure the process is effective. Taking a strength-based, whole-system approach provides positive returns that are well worth the investment of extra time and attention. Our final suggestions for others who are considering similar approaches in their organizations include the following:

- *Remember why whole system is important.* Continuously remind participants—and yourself—that collaborative, whole-systems work is important because it unlocks the innovation possibilities found in multiple perspectives. It requires special planning and skillful execution, but it makes any given solution vastly more robust than a solution created by few.
- *Remember to listen.* Engaging in meaningful dialogue with others who do not share your point of view often is difficult. Creating an open space where people can share their ideas is critical for this kind of process, but people also may need help to hear

ideas that are different from their own. Invite participants to embody Steven Covey's mantra of seeking first to understand, and then to be understood. Only if participants work to hear others' ideas can we fully realize the true value of having multiple perspectives from the whole system.

- *Remember to articulate the process:* If many participants are inexperienced with strength-based or whole-systems projects, it is helpful to take the mystery out of the process by elaborating what the process will (and will not) include so that common expectations are established. If, as in our case, the face-to-face meeting is embedded in a longer ongoing dialogue, participants need to understand what they are committing to and how each step feeds into the next. Helping everyone understand the process, the purpose of the process, his or her role in the process, and the rationale for choosing this particular design model can successfully engage the curious and minimize complaints from the skeptics.



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