



THE ABSENCE OF FOCUSED CHANGE IN EMPLOYEE AMBITION

Dr. Jan van de Poll

*Managing Director at Transparency Lab BV (www.praioritize.com),
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
jvdp@transparencylab.com*

Kevin Yang

*Chief Technology Officer at Transparency Lab BV
Shanghai, China*

Marissa Miller

*Senior researcher at Transparency Lab BV
Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

Abstract

One of the best ways to reduce employee resistance to change is to involve these employees (or obtain input from them) from the early stages of the strategic decision-making process. However, there seems little or no literature on what that input meant for the content and composition of the organizational change itself. Therefore, this study is a pioneering study to quantify how employees' ambition influences the choice for a strategic target. To start with such research, we performed extensive polls about a wide variety of strategic issues, all of which required (some sort of) organizational transformation. These polls objectively measured the ambition of almost 120,000 employees in more than 2,500 teams providing over 12 million answers. All of these teams unconsciously eschewed the ideal change focus: "Change a few things and change them well. Then, repeat." We calculated a rule-of-thumb of 20% teams with no ambition, 55% with no focus, and 25% with no realism. The perceived generic application of this rule has profound ramifications for the planning and implementation of organizational transformations.

Keywords: Employee polling, organizational transformation, ambition patterns, Guttman-Poll

I. INTRODUCTION

To achieve success in organizational transformations, employees must be involved as much as possible in every aspect of the change. They are the essential part of any change management process, and their involvement and engagement should be maximized (Sims & Sims, 2002). A study by Riordan et al. (2005) demonstrated that a high employee involvement climate leads to a higher rate of organizational effectiveness. Implementing employee involvement efforts can also significantly contribute to a healthy workplace (Grawitch et al., 2009). Not involving employees in administrative change can leave them defensive and often resistant to the changes occurring around them. According to Galbraith (2018), leaders should involve their employees to understand the change processes by inspiring and informing employees and empowering the leadership. Jacquemont et al. (2015) assert that the sustainability of an



organizational transformation comprises the new initiatives being implemented and the organization's employees. Investing in employee engagement at all levels creates more support for implementing changes. In a study done in the United Arab Emirates, Alasadi and Askary (2014) found that resistance to organizational change can be reduced through employee involvement methods, such as employee empowerment and bearing in mind employees' needs. Vales (2007), in an analysis of employees at Allstate Insurance, also determined that one of the best ways to reduce employee resistance to change is to involve them in the process from the early stages. Lawler (1999) explains that this is the case with teams. He states that "Moving decision-making power downward in organizations is at the core of what employee involvement is all about" and asserts that the employee involvement initiatives can be even more successful in team-based environments.

A study done by Weber and Weber (2001) indicates that leadership support for organizational change increased over time and was moderated in part by employee participation. The strategy of employee participation was employed during administrative hospitals' organizational change processes (in this case, downsizing). Variables concerning employee involvement positively affected employee attitudes and well-being in both locations (Sverke et al., 2008). Psychology of the workplace study maintained that participation in decision-making leads to a decrease in uncertainty among employees and gives them a sense of control in organizational change situations. In turn, these feelings of power resulted in less psychological strain upon employees (Bordia et al., 2004). Brown and Cregan (2008) also support the assertion that involving employees in decision-making can mitigate employee cynicism toward organizational change. Even organizational change in customer relationship management shows that implementation and effectiveness are positively influenced by employee participation, even at low levels (Bouma, 2009).

There are various ways an organization can encourage employee involvement, such as increased "quality of work, ...self-directed work teams, and employee ownership" (Cotton, 1993). Marchington (1992) recognized a boost in employment involvement among various employers in the 1980s, specifically in communication style, problem-solving techniques, and the representative participation of employees. Bangasser (2014) laid out a few key ways to give employees control over organizational change and reduce resistance: begin with a collective vision for change and communicate with employees early on and often throughout the change process. In their article for McKinsey & Company, Basford and Schaninger (2016) advocate for leaders to introduce a "change story" to help employees "understand where the company is headed, why it is changing, and why this change is important." Nink and Welte (2011) also write that organizations should engage employees in the change process in every aspect possible, citing how Stryker Corporation used employee feedback surveys to pinpoint areas where involvement needed to be increased. To combat ineffective communication in employee involvement strategies, Messenbock et al. (2019) encourage open-source engagement for working through organizational change and as a long-term sustainable practice that will encourage involvement at later stages as well.

Regarding employee support for organizational change, Heyden et al. (2016) found that change initiated by middle managers generates above-average levels of support instead of showing no difference when started by top managers. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) applied their model of workplace commitment to organizational change practices, with scales for



affective, continuance, and normative commitment to change. In another study by Meyer et al. (2010), a three-component commitment model was tested and concluded a positive relationship between employee commitment and their support for organizational change. Choi (2011) discusses variables that impact employees' support for organizational change processes, including readiness, openness, and cynicism towards change, and suggests that these variables apply to individual employees are not personality traits though and therefore can be molded or shifted over time.

This paper aims to research cases where employees have been actively requested to participate in the organizational change design. And the objective is to quantify how their contribution works out in terms of 'implementability': can the organization execute what the work floor suggests?

II. METHOD

When asking employees for a substantive contribution, it's necessary to objectively measure the delta between the actual situation and the employees' ambition. You cannot find data on this ambition in the corporate data warehouse; you have to ask people. We considered a survey with Likert scales not the right way to measure verifiable facts, let alone verifiable ambition. Therefore, we started to create a different survey scale using a Guttman scale (Gutman, 1950) as a basis and with a focus on employee polling ("Guttman-Poll").

Next, we conducted 417 different questionnaires about a wide variety of strategic issues, all of them requiring (some sort of) organizational transformation. These questionnaires were answered by 117,337 employees from 2,659 teams giving over 12 million answers. Finally, we calculated the delta between the actual situation and the ambition per respondent per question and aggregated that per team. We used the world's first online SaaS platform for automated consultancy, to gather the respondent input and calculate their ambition. (<https://www.praioritize.com>).

Our questionnaire scale required capturing two different answers simultaneously: an employee's actual situation (Now) and ambition on that question (In 6 months). This relatively short window of 6 months was chosen to 'force' the respondents to make a deliberate choice about their priorities. We feared that asking for the ideal situation would result in an employee ambition that opted to improve every question, and to the maximum extent. We upgraded a widely employed Guttman scale (Diamond, McDonald, and Shah, 1986) - a multiple-choice scale - with a time dimension (van de Poll, 2018 and 2021). The scale has so-called 'breaking points' (Uhlener, 2002): how far is an employee planning to improve on a certain topic? Therefore, in our scale, every following answer represents an improved situation than before.

Here is an example of the Guttman-Poll format:

Q. How do you celebrate successes?	Now	In 6 months
1. We don't	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. When there is a reason to do so	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Regularly, we celebrate successes with the entire team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Comparing the actual situation and the employee's ambition, it could be that the employee would like to see an improvement from Answer 1 (actual situation) to, e.g., Answer 2 or Answer 3 (the ambition in 6 months). We considered this question format sufficiently verifiable (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006; Plewis & Mason, 2007) for objectively capturing employee ambition. We did not use any adjectives or adjectives that represented an opinion and could not be verified (e.g., "good") to reduce interpretation bias. Next, we used "proof-words" like, e.g., 'periodically,' 'documented,' 'measurable,' 'formally,' and 'archived.' This reduces the self-reporting bias by employees (Donaldson and Grans-Vallone, 2002). Also, using these "proof-words" encourages employees to refrain from adding a cognitive or emotional meaning to the answers (Frese & Zapf, 1988).

III. RESULT

Each question in our questionnaire had three answers. We postulated that the 'worst' answer of three was rated with 0 points, the 'middle' answer with 5 points, and the 'best' answer with 10 points. A team's ambition was calculated along two dimensions: 'width' and 'depth.' The 'width' of the team's ambition represented the percentage of questions that employees in a team earmarked for improvement. The width had a scale ranging from 0% (the team members did not identify a single question for improvement) to 100% (every question in the questionnaire needed improvement). The scores per question per employee were averaged in a team score from 0 to 10: one team score for the actual situation, and one team score for the ambition. The percentage increase from the actual score to the ambition score was expressed as the 'depth.' In our analysis, the depth ranged from 0% to 200%. Then, we plotted all the teams in a scatterplot (see Figure 1) where axis X represents the 'width' (the % questions to improve) while axis Y is the 'depth' (the % improvement).

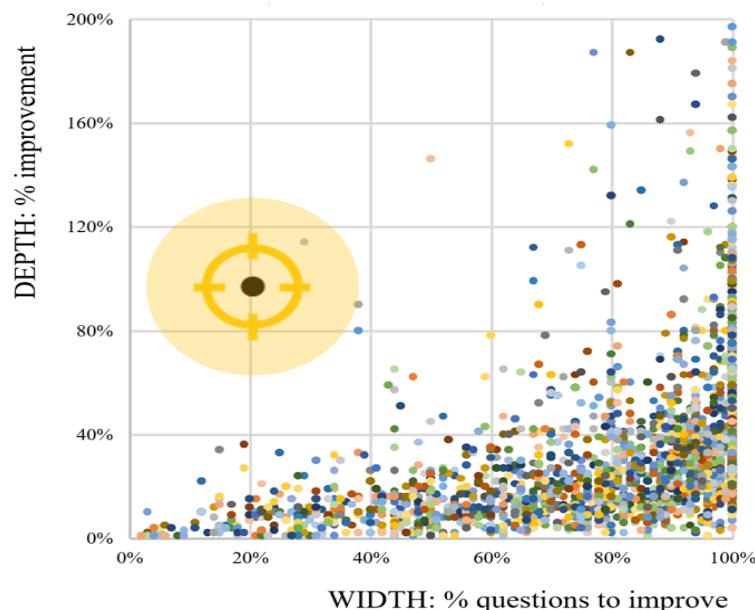


Figure 1. Plotting team ambition



The circle with the dartboard rose indicates a sort of preferred team ambition: changing a few topics and changing them well (and repeating that cycle with other issues in a next period of 6 months, and so on) is most effective (cf. in leadership, Foote, Elsenstat, & Fredberg, 2011; in technology innovation, Ghosh, Martin, Pennings, & Wezel, 2014). Remarkably, the teams (the dots in the scatterplot) seem to circumvent this preferred ambition type.

Next, clustering is a helpful tool for finding structure in a data set characterized by the most significant similarity within the same cluster and the most remarkable dissimilarity between different clusters. Herein, we clustered the 2,659 teams via a K-means algorithm (randomly initialized, 20,000 iterations) into three clusters and calculated their share of total teams as well as the centroids for width and depth (Fig. 2), where the bigger dots represent the clusters' centroids. We name these three clusters 'No ambition,' 'No focus,' and 'No realism.'

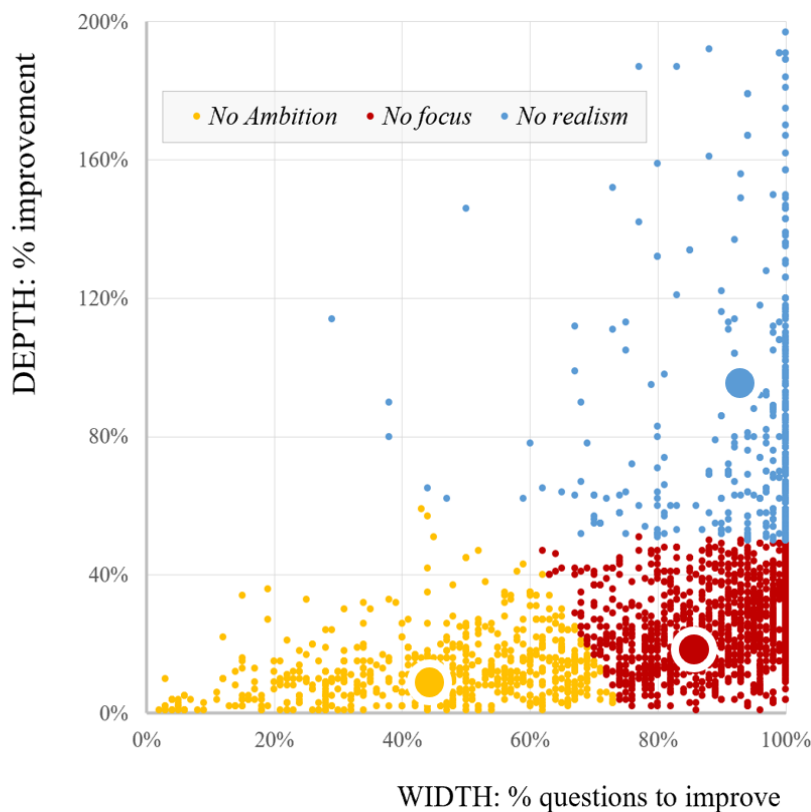


Figure 2. Clustering team ambition



Table 1 shows the sample size, width, depth, and clustering results.

Table 1
Sample size, Width and Depth, cluster scores

	N	As % of total	Min	Max	Avg.	StDev.	Centroids	
							Width	Depth
<i>Sample size</i>								
Number of questionnaires	417							
Number of teams	2,659							
Number of employees	117,337							
Answers given	12,109,320							
Teams per questionnaire			1	90	6.4	10.3		
Number of employees per team			5	992	44.1	90.1		
Number of questions per questionnaire			4	234	52.4	33.3		
<i>Ambition: teams</i>								
Width			2%	100%	80%	23%		
Depth			1%	543%	35%	37%		
Teams planning to change all questions	645	24%					100%	58%
<i>Cluster scores</i>								
Cluster 1: No Ambition	682	26%					46%	13%
Cluster 2: No Focus	1477	56%					90%	26%
Cluster 3: No Realism	500	19%					94%	92%

Min.: lowest value. Max: highest value. Avg: average value. StDev: standard deviation.

Centroids: the average cluster value for Width (% questions to improve) and Depth (% improvement).

The bandwidth of the width (25 to 100%) and the depth (1% to 543%) shows that the teams' ambition went everywhere. Table 1 shows that 24% of the teams earmarked all questions for improvement (a width of 100%). There are exceptions/outliers (a methodological consequence of clustering), but we see a clear conclusion when focusing on the clusters' centroids. For example, some of the 'No ambition'-teams did indeed select many questions (up to 60%) but failed in focused change due to the low depth. A similar thing happened with the 'No focus': marginally more depth but even more width than 'No ambition.' Perhaps the most problematic are the 'No realism'-teams that, on average, present a width of 94% and a depth of 92%. Management should applaud their energy and ambition, but a reality check could be considered mandatory.

IV. DISCUSSION

It seems that asking employees for their ambition gives them a positive sign of involvement but has no real value to the actual change process. In fact, why bother with teams that either have no ambition, no focus, or no realism? We deem such a view too shortsighted. After all, we can sort which questions have been earmarked most for improvement and which ones the least. In turn, that is input for calculations about organizational alignment. For example, are team employees aligned as a team, and to what extent are they aligned with the management



target? Such analyses help with an improved target setting and process and, consequently, leading to better achievable targets

We haven't measured to what extent teams and employees went on their way to actually implement their ambition. Or whether something stopped them on their way (e.g., 'No focus'-teams stranding due to 'paralysis by analysis'). No organization with which we conducted such an assessment gleefully let 'No realism'-teams continue to do their thing in the name of science.

We were also not able to do a second round of questions with the teams. There was no way to confront teams with their results and then ask them anew to answer the questionnaire to make a more deliberate choice. On top of the fact that the 'In 6 months' answer already forced employees to make such a conscious choice in the first place. We also did not verify whether employees could make such a choice at all.

Several cautionary remarks are to be made about our approach. We already touched upon the procedural situation that we monitored employees' initial thoughts without any feedback loop. Analyzing such feedback loops will help us understand how we can obtain better employee input. Furthermore, we can dive into the employees' minds to understand their rationale for choosing a specific ambition pattern.

Understanding more about underlying factors that influence how a team ends up in a particular ambition pattern would also be beneficial. Once these relationships have been established, an ambition pattern could become a bellwether for other organizational aspects. Such aspects could include, e.g., management style (or a lack thereof), team composition (certain age groups), or the presence of a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (or a lack thereof in a 'No realism'- team).

Employees are an essential part of any organizational change. To achieve success in organizational change, their involvement and engagement should be maximized. This study aimed to understand what the employees' input materially meant for organizational change. Towards this aim, we collected a large amount of data (117,337 employees from 2,659 teams giving over 12 million answers) through surveys. Nearly all teams avoided the ideal change focus as indicated in literature. We could divide ambition in into three clusters. We calculated as a rule-of-thumb: 20% teams with no ambition, 55% of teams with no focus, and 25% with no realism. This study presents profound ramifications for planning and implementing an organizational transformation.



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