

J. Kevin Barge, Professor, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University

Moderator: Caby Verzosa, The World Bank

Caby Verzosa: How would you develop a communication strategy that will build support among middle management?

J. Kevin Barge: Well, I think what I would suggest is that I think we need in our communication processes to work appreciatively, that is, to use appreciative ways of communicating, appreciative dialogue. Now, what I mean by that is I think we need to start with change processes, not from a problem-centered approach, that is, what's the problem we are trying to solve. What we need to focus in on is what is it the agency or the organization does well and start to look at what people do well with an organization. If you are a middle-level manager, that reduces your resistance because think of what the story is sometimes when change effort fail an organization. It's never the fault of the senior-level managers in the sense of a wrong vision or a flawed vision. It's because of the execution. So if we change the story from being a problem to focus on what works well, managers will know what works well and be able to leverage that for a positive change.

Caby: This is a very interesting approach because often times in development work we look at what's the problem, where the gaps are. And you are saying we need to start with where the capacities to do things well are.

J. Kevin: Exactly, because I think one of the things is that when we talk about problems it's not that far removed from talking about blame, and getting into the blame game, because if there is a problem, someone must be held accountable. And typically it's the middle manager, the technocrat in many instances that is held accountable. So managers know that, so it makes sense for them to resist change because they may be getting positioned to be the scape goat or the fall person in this instance.

Caby: So this is framing the issue from the point of view of the middle management and finding ways by which they would not resist change because it starts from where they are, what they do well.

J. Kevin: One of the issues I think is paying attention to how you frame an issue and how you frame a change initiative. For example, I think there is a very large difference between simply framing an issue as we want to deliver high-quality service to all our clients, as opposed to we have a problem with getting people their bills on time. A very simple kind of example. But when you frame something out affirmatively, how do we develop the best possible client service or how do we develop excellence in this reform initiative, those are exciting questions. They get people to think beyond where they normally are and to really expand their horizons and dream about a future where this can actually be possible and lived out.

Caby: Very interesting. Is there an example you can cite where people have tried to use this in practical work on the ground?

J. Kevin: Absolutely. Now it's an example that is not from a reform effort but for example there is a movement in organizational development called "appreciative inquiry" and they have something they call an appreciative inquiry summit. And a very good example of this is in the United States Navy, when they had just developed a new division and they were trying to sort out how to begin to create an identity for it. And what they did is that they had a three day summit as a very concrete tool. The first day, they engaged in what they called appreciative interviews, where they interviewed each other about what this new unit could be, what they thought their strengths were, and what their capacities were. And this generated a huge amount of excitement within the room. In the second day, they asked people to dream about the future, that if you think 10 or 15 years out and this unit is a high-performing unit, what does that look like? How do people execute within this organization? And based upon those dreams and what they do well, they then began to articulate the vision. What they called "aspiration propositions". What do we aspire to be? Then the question became, how do we make that a reality?