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THINKERS

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PHILIPPA HARDMAN & CHRIS NICHOLS

Creating the future, together

Participative strategy is a way to involve teams in strategic thinking, based on the power of invitation and creative ways of accessing strategic data and collaborative insight. Our experience shows how to use this approach to create compelling strategies and clear ownership of the actions required to translate them into reality.

Over the last ten years, we have worked on creating and executing participative strategies in 15 organizations across ten sectors, involving over 5,000 leaders. Most recently, we have worked in developing and implementing a participative strategy process at the High-Performance Materials (HPM) operation of the industrial group Saint-Gobain. This involved over 200 of the organization's most senior leaders.

HPM is the materials science division of Saint-Gobain, its parent company, based in Paris, France, with nearly 180,000 employees and a 353-year history. With an eye for innovation, Saint-Gobain has invested in branded technologies that support products in sectors from construction to aerospace, automotive to industrial applications and life sciences.

The HPM division had grown strongly over many years with one in three of its current products not existing five years ago. But, its executive team realized that being constantly at the technical frontier places limits on organic growth. They wanted to engage the company's leaders in addressing the question of finding new growth. They asked: How can HPM harness the insight of these leaders most effectively?

Participative strategy is ignited by such questions.

What matters is both the nature of the strategic question and the attitude of the senior team. So, the starting point of participative strategy is to ask yourself honestly: Is this a question that will benefit from the application of collaborative insight?

Participation isn't a panacea for all situations. There are instances where it just won't work, where it's unsuited to the team or the task. It is no use asking 200 people a question that requires a forensic, expert answer. The participative process is suited to the exploration of genuine unknowns, where no single source of expertise will hold the complete solution.

The HPM situation was perfect for a participative approach. The company had expertise in depth, separated by branded divisions. There was a track record of selective inter-team collaboration. Creating the circumstances for greater participation appeared likely to lead to new ideas and action to further accelerate growth.

Of course, participation doesn't in itself guarantee new outcomes. It's all too easy to create processes and events that reinforce existing ideas and ways of seeing. Our experience suggests that for participative strategy to work it requires the following elements:

Top team readiness

Using a participative approach is an act of leadership. It signals that the top team knows that it doesn't hold all the strategic answers. That requires them to be honest and be willing to accept their vulnerability.

In the case of HPM, the top team had not done this before, so they were cautious. The crucial strength they brought was a willingness to explore what might be possible beyond their common practices. It took several weeks, and many conversations, to reach agreement that a participative approach was the right way forward. This was new ground and the top team could not afford to fail.

In bringing this process to a conclusion, it is vital to have an internal champion within the top team. At HPM, HR Senior Vice President Valerie Gervais played this crucial role: "I know what we can achieve by working more closely together, and I recognize that doing it might feel unfamiliar for colleagues. It's not that people aren't willing to work together across brands, it's that we haven't asked them to work like this before."

The rules of invitation must apply

People have to sense that the participation is genuine from the outset. How you invite people is an important step. Psychological safety is vital to all participative strategy processes. People must genuinely feel that they can join in fully, to know that alternative voices, with sometimes difficult and unwelcome messages, will be heard.

Getting the invitation right depends on context and chemistry. The HPM team is made up of scientists and engineers who test things out. They would step into participative strategy only if convinced there was a genuine intention to make a difference. This started with the CEO seeking out respected individuals from across the business to join an interview – or inquiry – group to gather input from colleagues. This form of invitation to become involved itself signalled a change.

Don't design in the dark

HPM leaders responded enthusiastically and a team of nine emerged, keen to step into this different role. Indeed, more than 60 people were eventually involved in some way in the inquiry and design process – talking to colleagues, seeking customer input, and brainstorming process design options.

“The process and style needed to match the purpose we set – to unleash growth. People really seized on this invitation – which allowed our teams to unleash their energy. The process needed to be a live demonstration of the change we were creating,” says Valerie Gervais.

The involvement of so many people in the inquiry stage was important. The dozens of people covering the ground understood the complexity of the business and the stakeholders who needed to be brought fully into the process. The initial invitation created an immediate sense of community. Valerie Gervais talks about the importance of “misfits that fit”. Securing the involvement of these internal free radicals helped bring the process fully to life.

Actively seek different viewpoints

Strong companies have powerful stories, and these narratives can strangle new insights. A participative process needs to seek out, promote and protect different ways of seeing the world. At HPM this started with the active inquiry process and the involvement of “misfits that fit”, but it didn't end there.

Customer views became very powerful in the process. The inquiry and design group asked colleagues to gather their customers' views on the “strengths that HPM bring to us” and “the advice we'd offer to HPM”. These became the catalyst for powerful conversations within, and across, brand and market teams during the process. Says Valerie Gervais: “We always say we never have a wasted conversation with a customer, and so it proved. Their comments were illuminating.”

Pay attention to process

Shifting the dynamics of participative processes is key to making participative strategy reality. There is a balance between changing the process to signal a changed intention and those involved having sufficient familiarity to create a safe place to allow the work to happen effectively.

HPM balanced a radically different process with executive team members playing new roles, while constantly reminding leaders – many of who were materials science specialists – of the importance of reaching practical, tangible, and actionable outcomes. For HPM's leaders this was largely unfamiliar language.

An important part of HPM's process was a three-day meeting of its top 200 leaders labelled the "Unleash Growth Forum". The CEO didn't open the event. The executive team joined in as participants. All conversations were hosted by volunteers from the inquiry process, who were passionate about making sure issues were well explored. The willingness to experiment with a new power dynamic in conversation was important in stirring up the sharing of possibility.

Find different ways to record and share outcomes

To share the Unleash Growth Forum beyond the people in the room, HPM worked with a team of artists, using a 50-foot graffiti wall built along the back of the arena. After the Forum, the artwork and edited films became part of the ongoing communications process as the work of the Forum moved back into – and across – business units.

In another example, an engineering company used photographs of its strategy workshops, involving around 100 people out of 1,000 in its division, to accompany the briefing note from the managing director about the resulting decisions. He also encouraged everyone involved in the process to go out and speak to colleagues about the work they'd been doing to supplement the more formal road shows he and the management team were due to make. As he acknowledged: "If everyone here speaks to around ten people, then just about everyone will be better informed about what we're trying to do with our business, and they'll hear it directly from colleagues who've been directly involved."

Don't assume elephants can dance

A successful participative process involves temporarily suspending some everyday leadership rules and norms. This requires top leaders to be briefed so that they are prepared for specific situations and dynamics. At HPM, each member of the executive team received extensive briefing notes about how the process would work as well as individual coaching.

The more emergent and explorative the process (especially where it's large and complex), the more important it is that the boundaries and the structure are very clear and maintained throughout. The choreography of an event isn't to control what happens but to control the space within which positive things can happen.

Maintain disciplined action over time

It's easy to get hooked on creating workshops or some kind of Big Event during a participative strategy process. Because of the scale of preparation and

risk involved, these can easily become ends in themselves. Used well, they have a unique and valuable role to play, but they are never the whole story. Much of the success lies in the preparation for, and the follow up to, large showcase interventions.

At HPM, the CEO Laurent Guillot asked the Inquiry Group to form an advisory board, to work alongside the Executive Team to keep up the global momentum created at the Forum. Over the following months four global initiatives were developed, tested in specific business units, and the learning shared and implemented. This ensured that the participative approach continued to live beyond the initial work, with tangible outcomes shared across the group.

Think of designing and investing in the post-event process as being akin to physiotherapy appointments after surgery: it's not an optional extra. If you don't do the follow up, the surgery won't be successful. Much of your investment may be lost.

We have never, in ten years, seen an under-invested project deliver well. Harnessing collective energy and insight requires choreography, skill and process. It is in itself usually a statement of transformation, and it must be respected as such an investment.

Done well, participative processes realize energy and insight that no traditional strategy consulting work or engagement process can deliver – and can be a powerful and elegant way of inviting people into making a new, shared strategic story. But it is essential to respect the process as what it is – an investment in strategy making and in the creation of a future.

About the authors

Philippa Hardman is Cofounder of the consulting firm GameShift. She was a chartered accountant at PwC and was previously Co-leader of the Strategy Engagement Group and a Director of Ashridge Consulting.

Chris Nichols is Cofounder of GameShift. He was previously Professor of Practice in Systems Leadership and Innovation at Ashridge-Hult Business School.