

# Organizational Support: Ready, Willing, and Able

BY CLARE GOLDWATER

*Some organizations, regardless of their size or their readiness for and buy-in to change, stand in the way of innovations achieving momentum needed for success. Therefore, innovators must focus on what is controllable.*

**IT IS PROBABLY** an obvious statement that in order for change to take place in an organization, the organization has to be ready, willing, and able to support that change. It is no surprise that even equipped with a fantastic new idea if there is no institutional will, there will certainly not be a way to make it happen. Nothing new there. So what can we add to the accumulated wisdom of innovation strategy that will be valuable to others in the same situation? The lessons of three Project InCITE Fellows (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>) who fought tenaciously to bring change to their various organizations can serve as cases (not exhaustive or comprehensive, certainly, but instructive and true of many others) for some lessons to bear in mind.

## **Lesson #1: Size Doesn't Matter—All Organizations (Regardless of Size and Scope) Can Be Supportive or Not**

The three Project InCITE Fellows that I worked with closely came from very different organizations. One of them (let's call him A) worked for a national organization. B worked for a cross-communal organization in a particular city, and C worked for a local institution with local members and stakeholders. Despite the very different types of activities and scope

of these three organizations, we found that size was irrelevant to their ability to embrace and support change. It was no easier for a small organization to embrace change than a larger one and no easier to gain buy-in from a limited number of stakeholders as opposed to very large numbers of members.

## **Lesson #2: Are You Ready? And Able?**

Organizational readiness should not be underestimated. Despite the fact that all the Fellows completed a mapping of their organizations before they embarked on their projects and were encouraged to explicitly consider the level of readiness of their organization, this was a step that was either skipped over or minimized as relatively unimportant. The assumption was that a good idea would create its own traction and push the project forward, even over the obvious objections of particular stakeholders or despite other levels of dysfunction in the organization. This just wasn't true. On reflection, at least one organization was not ready or even really interested in innovation. And a second was ready in some areas but inconsistent overall. The final success of the projects was directly correlated to the level of readiness of the organizations.

## **Lesson #3: Buy-in, Buy-in, Buy-in**

A significant part of readiness relates to the notion of "buy-in," which is absolutely crucial in order for a new idea to find any support and momentum. Buy-in from varied stakeholders can be extremely difficult and time consuming to procure, and it was an element that all the Fellows struggled with. Even for C, whose project was ostensibly most successful and whose environment was most supportive, the level of buy-in was mixed among stakeholders, and C basically just ignored those who might have had different approaches or questions about the project. All the Fellows failed to invest significant time in creating relationships with their allies and stake-

holders and shied away from the intensive work that was needed for this.

It is interesting to consider why this is the case. I would estimate that, for young and relatively inexperienced professionals, the skills needed (strategy, communications, and relationship building) to develop buy-in from stakeholders (often lay leaders, older superiors, and donors) are undeveloped. They focus on the program implementation itself, the curriculum, programming, *hadracha* (leadership training), and group facilitation, but don't have the other set of skills needed here. For B, for example, who was in a very complex and fluid situation with almost no control over her budget, community agenda, or even implementation of her project, I have hypothesized that significant investment in communicating on an ongoing basis with her allies and stakeholders would have preempted at least some of the difficulties she encountered. But her natural reticence with this kind of work and the pressures of actual programming conspired to keep her away from this investment, and in the end she paid for that. It would be wise to consider how young professionals can be trained, or mentored, by those in their organizations who have demonstrated skills in this area, and helped to understand the importance of this work as an integral part of any kind of program implementation.

#### **Lesson #4: Focus On (and Celebrate) What You CAN Control**

Given the relatively junior level of the Project InCITE Fellows, it is unsurprising that they did not control very much of their own environment. There was a constant struggle to define and retain control of budget, program, and implementation of the innovative idea. It was quite

frustrating to start with an innovative big idea, only to find it whittled down into something different through the course of a budgeting and planning process. As a result, the Fellows who successfully managed to implement a satisfying project were those who focused on the small victories that they were able to achieve and to stay focused on the goals that they had set for themselves, while holding only loosely to the process itself. And in the case of B and C, whose projects were at the mercy of other forces that were out of their control, I encouraged them to focus on the elements that they could control and their own personal goals for the teens they were working with.

Frankly, given the complexities and dysfunctions of the organizations in question, I am

The assumption was that a good idea would create its own traction and push the project forward, even over the obvious objections of particular stakeholders or despite other levels of dysfunction in the organization.

impressed that the Fellows did manage to achieve something and that two out of three of them implemented projects that were new to their organizations with some level of success. Organizations, even with the right stated intentions, are complex beasts, and the best idea has little chance for success in an unsupportive or problematic system. Change is hard, and that is a truism that deserves respect. ■

**CLARE GOLDWATER** is a British-born educational consultant with a particular interest in experiential education, educational travel, and group facilitation. She has worked with children and adults of all backgrounds and with professional development for Jewish educators. She has an MA in education and was a Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem. She is also a certified coach, working with leaders to help them reach their potential. Clare lives in Washington, DC with her family.

**Clare is a member of the Project InCITE Coaching Team**

