Overcome Resistance to Planning

When you bring up strategic planning, do your board leaders and staff members cheer “Hooray!” in unison? We didn’t think so. Even when strategic issues are top of mind, the thought of strategic planning may elicit groans or downright heel-dragging.

In the book, Why Don’t You Want What I Want? (Bard Press, 2002), Rick Maurer outlines three basic types of resistance:

- “I don’t get it” (it’s rational)
- “I don’t like it” (it’s emotional)
- “I don’t like you” (it’s personal)

If you can figure out which type of resistance you’re facing, you can respond more effectively, according to Maurer.

For strategic planning, ICL applied Maurer’s framework to offer you specific tips to address all three types of resistance in your organization.

1. “I don’t get it.”

   **What it’s about:** People may not see the need, how it’s relevant, or why it matters now. Others may be stuck on the mechanics—how to start, what’s involved, or how to do it effectively.

   **What to try:**
   - **Make the connection.** Ask board or staff members to share a few trends (political, economic, environmental, etc.) and big questions that may affect the organization’s work.
   - **Share a model.** Share examples of how partner groups have done strategic planning effectively, or show a model of a strategic planning cycle (e.g., La Piana’s real-time strategy wheel) that you might follow or adapt.

2. “I don’t like it.”

   **What it’s about:** Most resistance stems from people’s experiences of planning being poorly done. Maybe it was painfully drawn out or never used, and they concluded it’s a bad idea. For others, it may be threatening. Although rarely said aloud, they fear a planning effort may usurp their control, add to their workload, expose their work to criticism, or won’t work out in their favor.

   **What to try:**
   - **Surface past experiences, acknowledge them as valid, and learn from them.** Ask what previous planning was like, including what was useful/not useful; then make a list of dos and don’ts for this time.
   - **Try on alternatives.** Has anyone seen or heard about a different approach? What would strategic planning have to look like (or be like) to work for us?
Call it something else—developing a strategy screen for new opportunities, a session to answer strategic questions, etc.

Probe for underlying objections. Sometimes “I don’t like it,” is expressed as “I don’t get it” because it’s safer to say they need more details on the purpose than to say they don’t want to do it. I’m sensing there may be some additional concerns behind these questions, such as ____. I’d like to understand more about how you’re feeling about this and what you’d like to see happen.

3. “I don’t like you.”

What it’s about: No matter how much people get or like the idea of strategic planning, if it’s proposed by that certain someone, they want no part of it. They might like them personally, but see them as disorganized or likely to steer the results to their agenda.

What to try:
- Choose your champions wisely, tapping vocal supporters who will be viewed favorably by potential resisters.
- Assemble a planning team that will build confidence in the process. Involve trusted leaders, skilled doers, and influential skeptics in key roles, early on.
- Use an outside facilitator who can guide the process and be viewed as an “honest broker.”

How about you?
What has worked for you in overcoming resistance to strategic planning? Email ICL your ideas or questions you’d like us to include in a future issue. To explore how ICL can help you plan or facilitate your strategic planning in 2010, contact Peter Lane at (301) 270-2903 or peter@icl.org.

References: