

Mapping - What do we do in organisations?

Planning new action

One view of what we do in organisations is to take purposeful action. We work out what we want to do, we do it, and then we make sense of what happened. If we are lucky and alert and the context we help to create allows it, we also learn from what we have done in order to improve on it next time. Of course, lots of events and dynamics mean that the process is not a neat, linear one. In our fast moving world even the purposeful action itself is continually evolving. So, our strategy today might need to change tomorrow. In the process of trying to galvanise people into purposeful action, maps can help gain focus and commitment.

In one view, any old map will do as long as it starts people acting. Weick ¹ relates the story of a group of Hungarian soldiers who got lost in the Alps. They used a map they had to find their way back to base. They subsequently discovered the map was of the Pyrenees, not the Alps. This raises the question, as Weick says, of whether “any old map will do” if you are lost. In this case, the map got people going. They made sense together of the outcomes that their action generated and they then decided what to do next. A twist to the story is whether the leader knew that the map was not the right one. If so, according to Weick (1995:55), this replicates what most leaders face. “Followers are often lost and even the leader is not sure where to go. All the leaders know is that the plan or the map they have in front of them are not sufficient to get them out. What the leader has to do, when faced with this situation, is instil some confidence in people, get them moving in some general direction, and be sure they look closely at cues created by their actions so that they learn where they were and get some better idea of where they are and where they want to be.” This is similar to the mountaineer Joe Simpson’s comment in the film “Touching the Void” that when he was alone on the mountain with his broken leg any old decision on what to do next helped to get him to the next point. What would have been fatal would have been no decision.

¹ Weick, KE. “Sensemaking in Organizations” Sage, 1995

Sensemaking

Much of what we do in organisations is to make sense with others of what is happening. This is usually an ongoing, collective process, done after the event and requires a plausible enough story for people to buy into it, for the time being. So, making meaning out of our experience and what is going on in our organisations, in our clients, in our competitors and the relationships between these is at the heart of organisational life. The purpose of this is to learn from the past in order to change or enact something new and ultimately to improve what we are doing in order to survive for the future. Some see a key skill of leaders is the ability to sensemake for and with others. To quote Athos, “good managers make meanings for people as well as money”².

Why maps?

Pictures often say more than words. They can become a shorthand which people can more easily refer to than lengthy documents. They can also offer the possibility of seeing relationships between the separate parts and the wider context – the wood and the trees. They can offer a prompt for talking about the complex interconnections that exist. They don’t necessarily replace the need for verbal or written explanations and they can help summarise what otherwise might be difficult for people to “get”.

No one map

We start from the premise that there is not one true map of experience or reality out there waiting to be discovered. Rather in the mess of human endeavour, there are many maps. What we are doing is continuously socially constructing good enough maps that enough people can recognise as approximating their experience and can work with until a new one is agreed. In Fay’s words: “There isn’t any One True Map of the earth, of human existence, of the universe, or of Ultimate Reality, a Map supposedly embedded inside these things; there are only maps we construct to make sense of the welter of our experience, and only us to judge whether these maps are worthwhile for us or not”³

² Peters, TJ & Waterman, RH “In Search of Excellence” Harper & Row, 1982:29

³ Fay quoted in Weick, KE “Making Sense of the Organization” Blackwell, 2001:9

What this means is that the very process of mapping is an experimental, social activity. We have to start somewhere and see whether our “straw man” makes sense for others. We also have to acknowledge that different worldviews will mean people see different maps. Part of the process is surfacing these maps and having a dialogue around the ones that make sense for people and incorporating enough of the differences so that more people can live with the outcome. A helpful view mapping is to see it as way of systematically inquiring and learning.

How to map?

Just as there is no one map of reality so there is not one way to do mapping. We have used different approaches, depending on what seems to suit the context.

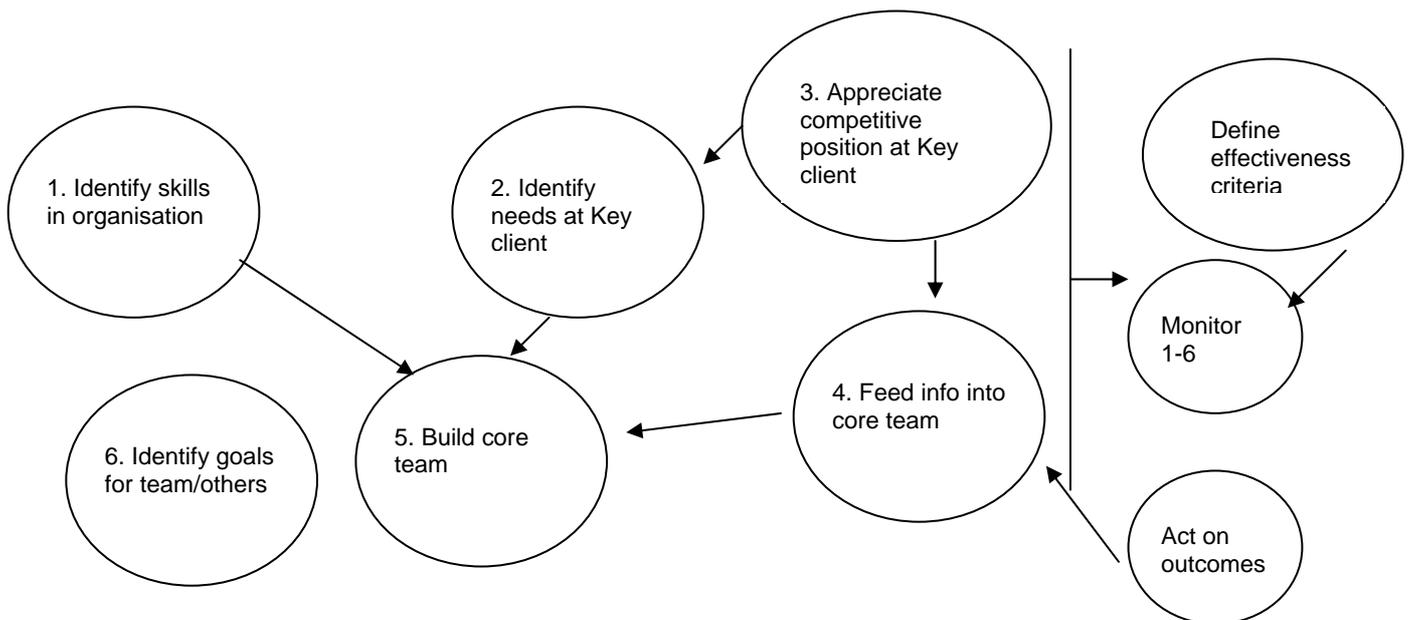
Rich pictures

One tradition we draw on is rich pictures from Soft Systems Methodology⁴. Here what we might do is:

- identify an activity (for example, managing a key account)
- map the actions that would occur if the key account were to be managed in an ideal world from the participants’ and our point of view (possibly two different versions)
- map what happens in reality
- identify the differences and the structural, procedural and attitudinal changes that are needed for the reality to more closely match the ideal
- evaluate what is feasible and how the changes might be tackled
- enact some of the changes and evaluate what is happening and decide what to do next

A simpler version of this might map what needs to be done be at the start of a new initiative. If we were helping a client to set up a new Key Client Relationship the map might look something like the following:

⁴ Checkland, P & Scholes, J “Soft Systems Methodology in Action” Wiley, 1999



So we might start with identifying what the organisation we are working with offers in terms of skills and resources. We would also want to identify what the target Key Client needs based on its strengths and weaknesses, goals and competitive position/context. All of this would be fed into the core team looking after the Key Client and would help to generate goals for the team and others in the organisation. There would also be some monitoring and new actions/decisions depending on the outcomes of initial actions. The numbers don't necessarily signify sequential activities. Many could and would be done in parallel and would be iterative. Behind each of the activities here we would draw a map of the activities that would contribute to their being done. And don't be deceived by the straight arrows. The links are not necessarily straightforward or linear.

Market maps

Another approach we use also comes out of a systems-based view and involves looking at the interconnections between parts to discover their emergent behaviours, rather than looking at the parts in isolation. The questions we ask here are around:

- Who is doing what to whom, how and why. This will include inquiring into different roles and goals, both personal and organisational
- The context they are operating in
- How all this is changing

A recent example of this is a map we constructed of the distribution pipeline in a complex industry. We drew an initial “straw man” map, which we refined with people inside our client organisation. We used this as the basis for conversations with people at different points in the pipeline. The outcome was a refined map which showed the pipeline was changing, the amount of value that was being exchanged at each point and that innovations was taking place at particular points in the pipeline. This enabled our client to identify what they needed to do to take advantage of the shifting market. It also helped simplify the complexity and give a common view of the shape and changing nature of the market.

At a micro level, another example of this is mapping relationships between people. A client we were coaching had an issue with a new peer who was blocking a decision. Drawing a map of the roles individuals held (including our client), their goals in the roles and the context they were operating in helped our client see things from their peer’s perspective and the wider context in which they were both operating. Our client was able as a result to take things less personally and to identify what they could do to un-block the impasse.

Conclusion

Although any map may well be better than nothing as a way of galvanising people into action, a map that people agree reflects reality can help provide real insights into market structures, organisational blockages and client relationships. So whether the issue is market sizing and segmentation, identifying decision-making networks in organisations or fixing problems in organisational processes, mapping may well offer practical benefits.

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