

“CANNED CHANGE”

The Navy’s Command Action Planning System (CAPS)

Abstract

The term “canned change” is often used in a derogatory way and, often enough, rightly so. However, this paper tells the story of a “canned,” organization-wide intervention that proved to be quite effective –with different organizations and different facilitators.

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Foreword

The “canned change” to which the title of this paper refers to is the Navy’s Command Action Planning System (CAPS). This paper draws from a much longer paper the authors wrote that focused not just on CAPS but also on the collaboration between the authors that led to its development, and the conceptual areas underlying that collaboration (e.g., human behavior, organizational theory, organization development (OD), instructional technology, open systems theory, and systems thinking). This much shorter version focuses on CAPS.

The Challenge and the Charge

Back in the early 1970s, the authors were part of a small team of Navy men that was presented with a major challenge by the leadership of the Human Resources Management Center (HRMC) where both were stationed. The stakes were high; some thought the future of our HRMC depended on meeting the challenge, which was described to us as urgent, important, and more than a little risky. Indeed, the senior officers presenting the challenge did so with all the gravity of a high-stakes wartime mission.

The charge was to create and then test the operational feasibility of a short-term, high impact, “canned” change program, one that would be flexible, tactically oriented and focused on organizational improvement. The program was to be “exportable” and usable with any type of Navy unit with equal effect. This “holy grail” of the Navy’s Human Resource Management Program (HRMP) was a desperately wished for capability on the part of the HRMC in San Diego, and on the part of the program headquarters at the Navy Department in Washington, D.C.

The goal was to produce “something” (as in “We need something...”) that could utilize the output of a previously administered, organization-wide survey.¹ This “something” could then somehow translate the numerical results of the survey into practical, organizationally valued, measurable results. The “translation” was to occur via some kind of structured, repeatable (i.e., “canned”) intervention.

What ensued was quite remarkable. All the team members were from very different experiential and academic backgrounds and orientations. Hard pressed by unrelenting circumstance, they engaged in an intense, collaborative design and development effort. This effort drew on all the team members’ experience and synthesized the best of its individual members’ knowledge (mainly instructional technology, OD and the culture and politics of the United States Navy). The rest was created from scratch, “engineered” so to speak. When the dust settled, the team had produced CAPS, a highly synergistic, behavioral change program capable of producing consistent results across a wide variety of Navy units. This, of course, had Navy-wide implications.

¹ Indeed, for quite some time the “something” was referred to simply as “The three-day thing.” There was method to this madness. Giving it a name too soon would have invoked mental models and other forms of mindsets that would have led to pigeonholing the intervention and perhaps forestalled its further development. But, as long as it remained unnamed, the developers remained in control.

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CAPS: Command Action Planning System

The Navy's early organization development process (Forbes, 1977) was built around the technology of survey-guided development. Individual Navy units (e.g., ships, aircraft squadrons and shore stations) were regularly scheduled (roughly every three years) to undergo an organizational improvement experience. The experience was administered by organization development specialists operating in teams from HRMC's located in areas of fleet concentration (i.e., Newport, Rhode Island; Norfolk, Virginia; San Diego, California; and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii). The 88 question Navy Human Resource Management Survey was administered to all unit members. The results were computer scored, analyzed, and fed back by organizational level. The unit was then scheduled for three days at the participating consulting center to work on the survey findings.

It was through the development of the prototype of CAPS) at the HRMC in San Diego, that we first became aware of the potential inherent in collaborative relationships between instructional technologists and OD specialists. That awareness came as the result of seeing that several concepts and techniques from instructional technology were widely applicable to an organizational change intervention such as CAPS.

In this section, we will attempt to answer the following questions: What is CAPS? How was CAPS more effective as a result of collaboration than might otherwise have been the case? Finally, what results have been obtained with CAPS?

What is CAPS?

CAPS is basically a systemic – and systematic – problem-solving and planning process. CAPS is designed to take a group of key leaders from a given organization and have them generate data relevant to current organizational issues; then process that data through a problem-solving and planning procedure. CAPS produces three major outputs: (1) a Command Action Plan; (2) participants with newly acquired skills; and (3) information about how the organization and its members function.

A typical Command Action Plan has the following characteristics:

- Diagnostic. The plan is based on data about current blocks and barriers to more effective organizational functioning.
- Measurable. The plan contains objectives, and standards for assessing the attainment of those objectives, including time-tied milestones.
- Accountability. The plan specifies who is responsible for actually accomplishing any action steps; it also specifies management responsibilities.
- Realistic. The plan is limited to actions that can be implemented within current organizational resource constraints, and to areas over which the organization exercises control.

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- High Ownership & Probability of Success. The plan is conceived and developed by key organizational leaders and other members and modified through “advance troubleshooting.”

Skill acquisition by the participants occurs in primarily four areas. Participants acquire the ability to (1) conduct rudimentary diagnoses of organizational and group functioning, (2) conduct effective meetings, (3) manipulate the CAPS process to identify and resolve organizational issues and (4) utilize evaluation as a means of obtaining feedback for revision purposes (as opposed to the administration of punitive measures).

Information generated during CAPS generally relates to how the organization is functioning (e.g., the content supplied by participants) and how the members function (e.g., the processes by which they develop that content).

As stated earlier, the three primary outputs of CAPS are a Command Action Plan, relevant organizational skills, and data pertinent to organizational and member functioning. The sequence of events or functions whereby these outputs are produced can be broken into three major stages: (1) pre-workshop; (2) workshop; and (3) post-workshop.

Pre-workshop functions consist of the following:

- **Senior Participant's Pre-Brief.** The senior participant is prepared for his role in CAPS (which is crucial to its success).
- **Staff Team Building.** The personnel who will facilitate the workshop clarify expectations, make role assignments, and conduct facilitator training as required.

Actual functions executed during the formal workshop are:

- **Workshop Opening.** Introductions, senior participant's opening remarks, participant questions, administrative details, workshop ground rules, glossary of terms and workshop overview.
- **Problem Identification.** Develop “I Want” lists, present lecturette on effective meetings, develop “We Want” list, develop problem statements, develop objectives, and specify standards for objectives.
- **Problem-Solving & Planning.** Identify possible courses of action, select proposed courses of action, troubleshoot proposed courses of action, write action plan elements, and integrate action plan elements.
- **Workshop Closing.** Human Resource Management Center input, senior participant's closing remarks and final critique by all participants.

Post-workshop functions are:

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- **Summative Evaluation.** Product outcomes are checked against pre-established criteria, senior participant prepares evaluation letter, staff critiques workshop, follow-up contact is scheduled and executed, and evaluation data are compiled.
- **Modification and Revision.** Evaluation data are analyzed, discrepancies identified, and modification proposals are generated. Modifications are tested then incorporated.

The CAPS process is a survey-guided or data-based, facilitated, systematic problem-solving process supported by thoroughly trained OD consultants acting as consultants and enablers. The participants provide relevant content, and the workshop staff facilitates the process. Together, they produce realistic solutions to organizational problems.

Considerable resources are required to conduct a CAPS workshop; however, we will not provide a complete inventory here. Instead, we will comment on only two – the time frame for CAPS and the participant mix.

Navy units operate under numerous and severe time constraints. Operational commitments are heavy and reduced manning does not allow much time for any activity that is not obviously related directly to mission accomplishment. CAPS was designed to fit what appeared to be the maximum time frame most units would allow for an unknown quantity such as CAPS (i.e., three days).

The participant mix (who attends) is one of the more significant aspects of CAPS. The workshop is designed to have four small groups from a given organization. The four groups represent each layer of the organization – top management, middle management, line management, and the work force. Within each group can be found a lateral slice of the organization represented. Each group is also composed of both the formal and the informal leaders of the organization. Thus, participant input reflects vertical and lateral as well as formal and informal aspects of the organization's structure.

How was CAPS more effective as a result of collaboration?

It is our judgment that CAPS was more effective as a result of collaboration than would otherwise have been the case. Our judgment is based in part on the large number of concepts and techniques from instructional technology that were successfully applied during the development of CAPS. The paragraphs that follow indicate what some of those concepts and techniques were and to what end they were applied.

The derivation and specification of workshop outcomes and performance parameters benefited greatly from the concepts and techniques of instructional technology. A modified version of the process proposed by Kaufman (1970, 1972) was used to derive the three-faceted needs assessment that formed the design basis for the workshop. The concept of behavioral objectives served to make the workshop outcomes measurable. Criterion-referenced testing was the key concept used in the design of evaluation measures and devices.

The development of workshop functions was accomplished through a modified task analysis procedure. The concept of "fading," borrowed from programmed instruction, manifests itself in

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the built-in transfer of group leadership from staff to participants. Another programming technique, that of retrogressive chaining, was utilized as a sequencing aid in developing staging directions for staff performance. The concept of active and relevant responding serves as a screening device to ensure that non-essential functions are never inserted into the CAPS process.

The desired participant mix for CAPS was identified using a reversed target population analysis. Target population analysis was also utilized to ensure that CAPS materials are at the level of the participants. The concept of relevant subject matter was used to ensure that only required information is contained in the facilitator's guides and participants' handouts. Behavioral analysis found application in determining what that subject matter should be.

Evaluation and feedback both make use of formative and summative evaluation. The requirements for field-testing and validation were lifted from the developmental process for instructional systems and imposed *in toto* on the CAPS management process.

Many other examples could be listed but those given above will suffice to illustrate the broad applicability of concepts and techniques from instructional technology to organization change efforts. It is important to note that it was system theory and the system model that allowed those applications to take place. System theory provided a language with which specialists from the two disciplines were able to communicate and the system model provided the integrative device for their efforts.

Although we attribute much of the effectiveness of CAPS to the collaborative effort that created it, the collaboration is not the measure of CAPS' effectiveness. The effectiveness of CAPS is found in the results it produced. These results were both predictable and surprising.

What results did CAPS achieve?

The predictable results have to do with the intended workshop outcomes. These outcomes and their actual results are as follows:

- **Action Plan.** At last count during our tenure, more than 100 CAPS workshops had been conducted for Navy units and, in all 100, the plan was produced in accordance with specifications. In all but two or three of these instances, the action plan was also successfully implemented by the command. These action plans dealt with problems ranging from unsatisfactory living conditions aboard ship, through environmental pressures such as upcoming overseas deployment, to disruptive morale and disciplinary problems.
- **Skill Acquisition.** Skill acquisition was assessed in part by the participants' ability to execute the CAPS process unaided. The last half-day of a CAPS workshop usually provided this opportunity and participants inevitably demonstrated that ability. Follow up contact with receiving units indicated that the skills required to execute CAPS are incorporated in the repertoires of participants and they can be observed applying these skills in their daily work situations.

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- **Command Information.** The information generated about organizational and member functioning generally served to identify hitherto unknown talents and resources in current organization staffing and to provide the top managers (and others) with a microcosmic view of the entire organization in operation. The top manager had the opportunity to see his key subordinates in “live action” and most senior participants reported that this experience alone made the three days worthwhile.
- **Attitudes.** The CAPS developers were particularly pleased with the results obtained in the attitudinal area or affective domain. An intended outcome of CAPS in this respect was stated as “an increased sense of potency” on the part of the participants. A considerable body of evidence, both subjective and objective, indicated that the achievement of this outcome was reliably and effectively achieved.

In addition to achievement of the intended outcomes, CAPS yielded some results that were not at all anticipated. A few of the more significant follow:

- The Human Resource Management Center at San Diego, where CAPS was developed, was suddenly inundated with requests from fleet units for CAPS workshops. The CAPS system was “exported” from the San Diego center to the other Navy consulting centers and their consultants were trained in its use.
- The Navy's Race Relations program adopted the CAPS process, shortened it and applied it to the development of affirmative action plans for equal opportunity. As a result, they reported what they consider genuine progress in that area.
- CAPS became one of the cornerstones of the Navy's Human Goals Program. CAPS' success with fleet units resulted in it being made an integral part of the Human Resource Management Cycle which was subsequently required of all fleet units on a periodic basis.
- Spin-offs or by-products of CAPS, as reported by receiving units in follow-up contacts, include improved vertical and lateral communication within the organization (which we attribute to the “shared experience” of CAPS), better interpersonal relationships in and between organizational layers, and improvements in overall morale and organizational performance. (One ship moved from “last” to “front runner” within a large fleet command. The ship's commanding officer attributed a large part of that improvement in performance to the CAPS workshop.)

Accounting for Success

The CAPS phenomenon appears to us to have been very successful for three basic reasons.

- First, the entire approach was systemic in nature (i.e., environmental demands were identified, outputs specified, functions derived, resources identified, and the process then implemented and modified until performance was satisfactory).
- Second, the collaboration that occurred between the instructional technologists and the OD specialists allowed a comprehensiveness of effort and yielded a degree of

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effectiveness that otherwise would have been impossible. In turn, we believe the collaboration was made possible by the cross-disciplinary aspects of system theory and the integrative capabilities of the system model.

- Third, the CAPS process was essentially consistent with the cultural values of the larger organization. The participants — the members and the leaders of the unit in question — were not being asked to do anything foreign or strange or odd. They were instead asked to identify, and “work” issues related to the performance of their unit and, just as important, they were helped by people who shared their beliefs, values and objectives.

The basic similarities between instructional technology and OD provide a powerful rationale for collaboration. The two disciplines are in essentially the same business — systematically changing human behavior and improving human and organizational performance. System theory, the system model and an approach that approximates what is known as “system engineering,” supply the language and the technology through which such efforts can be realized. Our own experience indicates that such attempts are well worth the required expenditure of resources.

Afterword

We believe the organizational world of the early 21st century is characterized by heightened levels of ambiguity and that it is influenced by burgeoning technology, internationalization, ever-accelerating change and intense pressures for quick responses. In this milieu, both Instructional Technology and Organization Development have struggled mightily to adjust and maintain their relevance. Both fields seem to be undergoing an intense, never-ending self-scrutiny and both are seriously examining their purposes and professional identities.

Innovative, change oriented practitioners dealing with practical problems in the marketplace of ideas appear to be creating techniques that outstrip any underlying theory. New sets of stakeholders question prevailing values. OD, in particular, seems bent on incorporating the perspectives and tools derived from many other areas (e.g., complexity theory, chaos theory, creativity, open space technology and the spiritual disciplines). For example, see the work of Anderson (2000), Davis and Meyer (1998), Devane and Holman (1999), Owen (1997) and Turner (1999).

We would like to claim that the past 50 years has blessed us with 20-20 hindsight, but that kind of vision is a myth. The best we can hope for is a clearer sense of our own biases and prejudices, and for the illuminating, thoughtful perspectives of others regarding the few, small trails we might have blazed. We do like to think of ourselves as “reflective practitioners” and there are some reflections we believe are worth sharing. Some of the more enduring lessons learned follow:

- **Pain Drives Change.** Despite all the words written about the purposeful planning of opportunistic change, the reality seems to be that perceived organizational pain is the primary inducement for organizations to change their ways. This might be pain in the “here and now” or the perceived and perhaps imminent threat of pain in the future. In

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either case, organizational leaders typically articulate the need for change in terms of the pain felt by or about to be felt by the organization — and its members.

- **Rationality is Illusory.** Most organizations go to great lengths to preserve the illusion that they are governed by logic and reason. The frequently heard call to demonstrate the ROI of this or that intervention is but one example. In our experience, organizational decisions are made, and problems are solved as often by covert, political means as they are by overt, rational ones. On this count, we think OD practitioners have an edge, because instructional technology was and still is a hyper-rational discipline.
- **Adoption and Integration Obviated Collaboration.** Much of our motivation in writing this paper (the original and this, the condensed and updated version), stemmed from a belief in the inevitability of collaboration. We thought that collaboration would be forced upon both disciplines by a demanding clientele. We were wrong. On the one hand, the OD specialists have moved into and some might say they dominate the training community. On the other hand, the instructional technologists have moved on to performance technology and, in the course of doing so, have incorporated much of what was once considered the domain of OD specialists. For this, one needs look no further than the web site of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), the host to our 1974 presentation (<http://www.ispi.org>). There, one will find a diagram or schematic of human performance technology that subsumes organizational design and development as but one of several options under the heading of “intervention selection and design.”
- **Systems Aren't Necessarily Systematic.** With the emerging insights of chaos theory, it appears that organizations function at their very best on the border between order and chaos (Stacey, 1992; Waldrop, 1992). The consistently repeatable, tightly sequenced, step-by-step processes of “scientific management” are not characteristic of today's dynamic human systems. People and their needs make those systems we call organizations very “messy” places.
- **Systems are More Social than Technical.** One of the “tap roots” of organization development is the socio-technical perspective or the notion that organizations are best understood as combinations of social and technical subsystems. Many diagnostic and intervention strategies have been built on the idea of relative parity between the human side of an organization and its technical component. Our experience tells us that the “human side of enterprise” is more of a determinant of an organization's destiny than the technological side. In really effective organizations, people drive technology and make it subservient to their wishes, not the other way around.
- **Survival Depends on Inputs.** Long term, successful organizations appear to focus more on establishing a secure flow of inputs in the form of financial, technological, material and human resources (including knowledge) than on output products or services. This is no doubt because any system's survival depends on its inputs, not its outputs. Only when an enforceable, contingent relationship between outputs and inputs can be established do outputs matter. Consequently, organizations are extremely sensitive to the transaction

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processes that enable them to obtain the inputs necessary for their survival. In this same vein, we have both observed that people, purpose, core technology, core competencies and established reputation might all be abandoned when survival is at stake.

- **A Focus On Performance.** Both disciplines have come to emphasize performance (see Kaufman, et al, 1997 and McMaster, 1994). The instructional technologists have become specialists in individual performance and the organization development community has focused more on how to better achieve organization-level performance. (There is still room for collaboration.) Additionally, both fields still value learning as a means for attaining their objectives. There is also much evidence of cross-pollination in the form of practitioners who now have a foot firmly planted in both fields and who can act as conduits and bridges between the two. The exemplar in this regard may well be the late Geary Rummler. Rummler was a noted human performance specialist with roots in instructional technology who was also renowned for his work at the organizational level (see his 1990 book, *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart*, co-authored with Alan Brache).
- **A Fourth Change Strategy.** To the three well-known and longstanding general change strategies set forth by Chin and Benne, we would add a fourth: Environmental-Adaptive (Nickols, 2000).

Environmental-Adaptive. People oppose loss and disruption, but they adapt readily to new circumstances. Change is based on building a new organization and gradually transferring people from the old one to the new one.

The fourth strategy is the product of one of the author's own experiences during some 30 years of making and adapting to changes in, to and on behalf of organizations. Instead of trying to persuade, reeducate or coerce people into changing within the confines of an existing system, the strategy is instead one of creating a new system or organization in parallel and gradually transferring people out of the old one into the new one. In this way, people are confronted not by change to their organization but by the requirement for them to adapt to an existing (even if new) organization.

An excellent example of this fourth strategy in action, albeit on an accelerated basis, is provided by the way in which Rupert Murdoch handled the printers of Fleet Street. He quietly set about building an entirely new operation in Wapping, some distance away. When it was ready to be occupied and made operational, he informed the employees in the old operation that he had some bad news and some good news. The bad news was that the existing operation was being shut down. Everyone was being fired. The good news was that the new operation had jobs for all of them — but on very different terms. That there are also elements of the Empirical-Rational and Power-Coercive strategies at play here serves to make the point that many successful change efforts inevitably involve some mix of all four basic change strategies.

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- **It's the Process, Stupid!** Finally, if we have learned anything, we have learned that the surest, quickest route to improved performance lies in a path that must traverse and take into account the organization's processes. This is true whether one chooses the "blunt weapon" reengineering approach of Hammer & Champy (1993), the "kinder, gentler" approach advocated by Davenport (1993) or the more conventional approach set forth by the likes of Juran (1964) and Harrington (1991). This focus on processes includes the "soft" processes that have occupied OD specialists for many decades now as well as the "hard" processes that have been at the center of management's attention for almost as long. Yet, process improvement remains one of the more difficult undertakings faced by those who would help the management of an organization improve its performance. To even correctly identify an organization's processes is a task fraught with difficulty (Nickols, 1998). But, if there is a "commons," where instructional technologists, performance technologists and organization development specialists can meet, share ideas and insights, and collaborate in improving organizational performance and the human condition, that "commons" is to be found in the processes of organizations.

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The authors served together at the Navy's Human Resource Management Center in San Diego in the early 1970s. Ray Forbes was a Lieutenant Commander and Fred Nickols was a Chief Petty Officer. There is where the two of them, along with Chaplain Lieutenant Larry Guido and Commander A. L. "Al" Trygslund, collaborated in creating the Command Action Planning System (CAPS), a structured, systematic way of intervening in organizations so as to improve performance. All have long since left or retired from the United States Navy and gone on to rich and rewarding second careers. Ray Forbes is currently a professor in the graduate school at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio and Fred Nickols spent a dozen years as an executive director with Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. Fred currently devotes his time to writing and consulting. Ranking high among his prized possessions is his copy of the CAPS Facilitator's Manual.

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