

Huddling For Success

By Debra Merinchuk

The scary thing about The Business Huddle is that it works.

But it's supposed to, you may scoff. What's the big deal? The deal is that people often fear and try to avoid success when actually faced with it. Business Huddle vice president Ron Tabachnick notes a certain percentage of people who set up huddles to meet private challenges often cancel just before the session. Perhaps they're afraid of sharing their most personal dreams with an outsider, no matter how sympathetic that person is. But often it's because they're afraid to actually say out loud what they want to achieve and then accept the responsibility to take the first steps towards it.

Where Business Huddle demonstrates most of its successes are with organizations which call them in, often in crisis periods, to help sort out what's going wrong and how to fix it. Business Huddles are short sessions, usually no more than 4 hours, in which success is defined, the obstacles outlined and then remedies listed, and committed to by the various participants. It's a kind of SWAT team approach, quickly getting to the guts of a situation, exposing the solutions and then moving off to the next challenge.

The flair of a Business Huddle comes from their system of producing final documentation throughout the session. The facilitator works with a skilled typist who uses a laptop computer connected to an overhead projector and large screen. The technographer simultaneously types and projects what is said, so that everyone can see and agree upon any changes or corrections. As each part of the huddle is completed, the notes are printed and distributed.

President David Talbot facilitated the huddle I observed, and his sense of humour was a pleasant surprise. He's an intensely focussed man, so dedicated to making this process work that you could miss the subtle twinkle. Before the huddle began, Talbot gave a clanky cowbell and old-fashioned hourglass to someone who was supposed to ring the very loud bell each time the hourglass ran out, roughly every half-hour. There were giggles and surreptitious glances as people clearly wondered if they were supposed to take this seriously. But I could also sense a certain alertness, a feeling that this wasn't going to be just another in a long line of dreary meetings. After all, if every half-hour was going to be punctuated by such a ridiculous noise, it would be impossible for anyone to ignore how fast time is passing. I found myself wishing there had been a cowbell in most of the meetings I've attended over the years.

Talbot then distributed a couple of very clever wooden devices he called 'bullshit detectors'. Rotating a crank on the wooden block moves another piece back and forth. It's actually an engineering model for turning rotary energy to reciprocal energy. But in this case, everyone delightedly realized that they had permission to visually express their feelings when someone got too long-winded. The grins and sly looks again, indicated a fresh alertness that I have very rarely seen.

As he introduced the session, Talbot laid down some very unusual ground rules. He explained that the rules are designed to guide the discussions into producing a specialized final document. The document would be a record of the factors indicating success, the obstacles preventing that success, the actual tasks that can be undertaken to overcome those obstacles, and the people who will do those tasks, along with a target date. The closer participants stick to the rules, the more useful the document will be. As well as using sentences of no more than ten words, or always using an active verb such as "decide" or "meet", there were other special conventions he would be making sure they observed. Talbot would also repeat everything that is said. Presumably that's to aid the technographer, as

people speak three times as quickly as someone can type. But I noticed the repetition also ensured that the whole group had a chance to hear each comment, and express an opinion.

The huddle I was observing had about ten people in it, managers who weren't particularly comfortable as a group. From the meaningful looks and inside wry jokes being exchanged, it was clear that many of them were feeling overwhelmed, isolated, hopeless and angry about their work situation. The toys Talbot passed around broke the ice but there was a distinct feeling that the problems were too great to be surmounted by one consultation session.

Talbot began by asking them to visualize themselves 18 months in the future and congratulating themselves on their success. As you would expect, there was a little snickering and downright disbelief that this would be useful. But Talbot persisted, and asked each person around the table to volunteer a comment. As they realized they each were going to have to speak, people grudgingly began saying the things that were on their minds, often a little defensively. They described having lots of customers, being ahead of their competition or even just being able to get home on time each evening. Others immediately pounced on the statements, only too ready to explain why these were pipe dreams. The despair was palpable, but Talbot reassured them this exercise would lead to success. He diverted the negative comments by explaining there was a special place for those later on, and he kept doggedly following his game plan.

Eventually a list of 25 or 30 ideas was up on the screen, describing what success meant, and it was impressive. It was not a 'blue sky', idealistic wish list because everything had to be realistic in terms of the target date. Instead of 'lots of clients', for example, Talbot guided the group into agreeing exactly how many clients, how many new ones and how many repeats, could be reasonably expected within the time frame. People discussed percentages of current business, rates of acquiring new clients and numbers of clients necessary to meet budget requirements and reached a consensus. Talbot is a skilled listener, and constantly

rooted out the generalisms to get the group focussed on specifics.

By now, the group had settled into the routine of the session. The initial wariness and then pleased surprise of seeing their spoken words projected in a formal presentation faded, as had the awareness of the daunting array of equipment and power cords. Attention was fully on the business at hand. Now, during the quick break for coffee, and as the technographer prepared and printed the first document, the room vibrated with a simmering energy. The cowbell had been clanked a couple of times and everyone enjoyed the paradoxical noise. But the startled laughing did not mask the building of a subtle tension. Talbot had allowed the first part of the session to go a little over time and everyone knew it. You could see some frustration warring with the good humour. If the next part of the session went a little over too, then the last part, where the solutions were actually going to be discussed, would be too short. These managers would be no better off than they were before the huddle.

The second part of the session was where everyone got to be as negative as they wanted, and people relished the opportunity to describe lack of money, lack of resources, lack of proper accountability, lack of a responsive management and all kinds of other things. Once again, Talbot shaped the comments into the phrases that would best suit the printed document, but now people were more prone to fight him, thinking he hadn't quite understood the complexity of the situation. Here Talbot really shone. Through his deft questioning, principal problems were laid bare, typed, projected, and agreed upon. Methodically, each person around the table was made to express their most pressing problems. Those in despair were reluctant to volunteer their negatives but Talbot gently forced them to speak. Those who were angry started snapping at each other and little private arguments broke out, like flash fires. The bullshit detectors and clanking cowbell lightened the mood a little but people had really got going. Talbot kept his calm, though, and people responded. When things got a little too heated between individuals mired in specifics, he intervened carefully. He made sure the final wording had captured the actual

problem and then moved on to the next person's contribution. He went around the table more than once and again, let this part of the session go over time.

Now the heat was on. We were more than two-thirds through the session and the solutions had not yet been mentioned. I was feeling panicky and I was just an observer! This time at this break, people came up to Talbot privately, compelled by their fear the session would end before they'd said what really needed attention. Talbot listened carefully, and calmly reassured people their concerns would be raised. I was confused and apprehensive. Would I be observing the one huddle that didn't work?

As people resumed their chairs, there was a kind of stiff fear in the room. Talbot opened by acknowledging what everyone felt, that time was running out. He offered a follow-up session, at the Business Huddle's expense, should the group not be satisfied by what was accomplished by the end, and people breathed a little easier. But that generated a discussion about voluntarily lengthening the session past the agreed-upon time. Naturally, there was dissension. Talbot allowed this debate to go on for a little while, diffusing some of the tension, before repeating his offer and then getting to work.

And now the wizardry of a huddle! As the worried group quickly read through their list of very real problems, and as they introduced the privately mentioned problems, we all became overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. Except for Talbot and the Huddle team. With the confident finesse of a magician revealing the empty box which had once held a lady, Talbot unveils the solutions. The very words of the problem are the clue. No trustworthy database of potential new clients? Create a database of potential new clients. Not enough training for key personnel before they take on more responsibilities? Arrange for the training. No money in the budget for advertising? Budget for advertising.

Of course, it's not simply that just by reversing word order you come up with a solution, nor that the problems are so simplistic. What has happened is that through Talbot's ground rules and his guidance, the problems expressed all have a nugget of

the solution within them, an idea of who or what is responsible. The more carefully the shape of the problem is phrased, the easier it is to see the shape of the answer.

A crucial part of each solution, however, is that the people in the room must actually assign someone to do each task, or a part of each task, by a specified date. People volunteer themselves, or each other, or even co-workers not present at the huddle but who are clearly the most qualified to handle the task. Names are added beside each task, as well as the date, so the commitment is public.

Talbot moves swiftly now. With the sands running through the hourglass and people openly looking at their watches, the whole group pushes to get through as much of the list as they can. Talbot keeps a firm handle on any quibbling that sparks up, but since everyone can see the whole list, such quibbling is minimal. Everyone feels anxious if there's a holdup on discussing Point 3 when there are 22 more points to go.

At the same time, there's surprised relief in the air. The session is almost over. Everyone has unburdened themselves and has seen printed proof they were heard accurately. And now, people are actually committing themselves to doing tasks that will result in real changes. Amazing! Of course it's not magic. It's been a carefully managed procedure which uses a short timeframe to pressure the people who *already know* both the problems and the solutions to present them in a practical format. But five minutes after the scheduled finish, when the last point has been addressed, it feels like magic. As people put on their coats and chat individually, the final pages are printed and distributed. Each person now takes away with them a document formal enough to show a supervisor, and detailed and clear enough to use as a 'to do' list. And as the bullshit detectors, cowbell and hourglass are reluctantly returned, the people who had earlier entered the room in glum despair, leave it now considerably heartened and optimistic.

Of course, as Talbot said later as he and the rest of the Huddle team unplugged cables and carefully packed away their equipment, the key to success is action and that's up to the participants. It's one thing to point out the obstacles to

success and the ways to achieve it. It's quite another to actually do anything about it. There's no guarantee those managers will actually use the tools they've been given and do anything. Those carefully crafted pages may just sit in a drawer.

The answer?

Hold another Huddle! Talbot explains excitedly how useful regular huddles would be, for example, every 90 days. Progress would be impossible to avoid if people periodically clarified their problems, adjusted the solutions and celebrated their successes, all in an afternoon. Huddles can even be done in as little as an hour and a half. But, he sighs, most of his clients hold huddles only rarely.

Which just goes to show how scary real success can be.
