



The Perfect Client: Using the SOQ and KAI for Organizational Transformation

By Barbara Babij with Ken Lauer

It is seldom that we encounter a situation where the client is ready, willing and able to fundamentally change their entire organization. In the last year I found such a client. Here is the story of what has been a very rewarding experience. Although space will not permit me to provide all the details, I will share some of the highlights with you.

In order to preserve confidentiality, let's call this organization Wecan Corp. Wecan is a distribution company. The Buffalo office incorporated approximately twelve years ago, and employs eleven people. The general manager (GM) is intelligent and extremely progressive. He desires to move from a top-down pyramidal form of operation to distributed decision-making, allowing employees to become more autonomous. The organization is considering expansion in the near future and would like to leverage the current staff in that process.

I became involved in Wecan through a close association with one of the employees and had performed financial and operations work for Wecan in the past. In December of 1999, the GM asked if I could help him transform Wecan by enhancing employee commitment and involvement. I agreed and began to appraise the task. It soon became apparent that this was a perfect opportunity to both assess the climate and incorporate the notion of cognitive style as the foundation for this change.

I drafted a proposal, including specific actions and timelines. (Over time and in consultation with CPS-B, the original proposal was modified to better meet the needs of the client.) The general manager and I agreed to proceed with caution because retention was a key issue. The loss of even one employee would have a detrimental impact on the company. Heavy travel schedules and 100% employee participation resulted in a series of one- to four-hour meetings, mapped over a period of one year, and included developing a vision as well as some introductory CPS training.

First, we decided to use the SOQ (Situational Outlook Questionnaire) to gauge the readiness of Wecan for change (with the assistance of Ken Lauer at CPS-B). I was also able to obtain Wecan's commitment to administer the SOQ at a later time to help monitor changes in the environment due to subsequent interventions. I administered the questionnaire to the employees as part of a three-hour session conducted in April. I designed, and with Ken's help, refined a new warm-up activity called Edgar's Story for this session. (It is now called Lee's Story to provide gender neutrality.) It was designed to invite employees to begin

thinking about their work environment and how they contribute to it or detract from it by their behavior. During this session, they also began to work together in small groups for the first time.

In May, the results of the SOQ in individual and group format were shared with the GM, first in a private session and then with the rest of the employees). Upon reviewing the results and how they compared with innovative and stagnated company norms (see Chart 1), the general manager was quick to target the dimensions of freedom and risk-taking for improvement. We also discussed the implication of a high debate score coupled with relatively low freedom and risk-taking – too much of a focus on consensus could lead to indecision and implementation paralysis, and lack of employee decision-making. We decided to use the LPI (Leadership Practices Inventory) at a later date to target areas for understanding and change in leadership style.

Chart 1: Wecan SOQ Results – Fall 2000

DIMENSION	INNOVATI VE	WECAN AVG.	STAGNAT ING
Challenge & Involvement	238	214	163
Freedom	210	158	153
Trust/Openness	178	150	128
Idea Time	148	138	97
Playfulness/Humor	230	193	140
Conflict	78	98	140
Idea Support	183	142	108
Debate	158	160	105
Risk-taking	195	90	53
	10 Companies	11 Employees	5 Companies

The debrief of the qualitative portion of the SOQ took place in early June during the first hour of a two-hour session. These results revealed interpersonal relations as an area for improvement, thus confirming the original diagnosis during task appraisal. The second hour was spent facilitating next steps. One of these steps was to develop an employee appreciation system that was formalized through the participation of the entire staff in late June.

We chose to use the KAI (Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory) to address the area of interpersonal relations in a simple yet powerful way. The KAI was administered in July. The debrief session was held in September due to vacations

and heavy travel schedules. (One of the cornerstones of this entire process was to include all employees.) During the three- hour session, I specifically focused on the group development process as a means to further solidify the concept of empowerment and shared leadership.

The KAI scores ranged from 74-111, and the mean was 93.8. The means for the subscales were: SO, 43; E, 18.5; R, 32.3. As quite a lot of information was provided during the debrief, we decided to give everyone time to reflect on their scores. A follow-up session was held about a month later to answer questions and administer the SOQ for the second time. A one-hour session was planned.

During this follow-up session we discussed how climate and style interact and used a real problem to demonstrate the interaction. The problem we chose to explore was the inventory process. We can had recently counted their inventory and it was still not complete at the time we conducted this session. In prior years, the inventory process was completed smoothly in one day. So, what went awry? Very simply, the warehouse had been reorganized for greater efficiency, yet the process for inventory remained the same. The decision about how to conduct the inventory was made by the operations supervisor together with the accounting manager; the warehouse manager had not been involved. Through a facilitated dialogue and modified ALUo, taking into consideration the climate and KAI scores, we explored who should have been involved in the process, the decisions that were made, and how they might have been made differently by those who knew the system best. The one-hour session was extended to two-hours.

The results of the second SOQ administration are provided in Chart 2. This chart represents the results for nine of the eleven employees, those who completed the SOQ in both the spring and the fall. Two of the current eleven employees were not with the company when the SOQ was administered the first time.

CHART 2: Wecan SOQ Results – Spring/Fall Comparison (N=9)

DIMENSION	WECAN SPRING 2000 Avg.	WECAN FALL 2000 Avg.
Challenge & Involvement	214	230
Freedom	167	154
Trust/Openness	153	167
Idea Time	144	152
Playfulness/Humor	185	235
Conflict	104	67
Idea Support	153	167
Debate	167	185
Risk-taking	93	129

As you can see from chart 2 there were some definite changes in the environment. Eight of the nine dimensions moved in the expected direction. There is one apparent anomaly: the average for the freedom dimension went down. During the debrief we discussed possible reasons, such as: the GM has the final word; there's too much consensus-taking; we can't make decisions. These reasons are supported by the increase in the Debate dimension which seems to be a common occurrence in an organization that is in the early stages of empowering its employees. The increases in other dimensions were attributed to "a lot of people are involved"; "we pitch in when shipping volumes are high"; "we work more as a team"; "we feel more comfortable with each other"; "the (employee appreciation) meetings help"; and "sometimes the risk is not as big as we think".

Two other events conspired to assist in improving the work environment at Wecan. The company participated in the Corporate Challenge. As a result of their experience, those who entered secured the commitment for 100% participation next year. The enthusiasm and bonding that occurred was unbelievable. This feeling of camaraderie was reinforced during Buffalo's pre-winter snow storm when five employees were stranded at the office overnight and they were able to learn more about each other.

It is evident that we have made progress toward our original goal of enhancing employee commitment and involvement. We began the visioning process on December 4, 2000 as the second half of the SOQ debrief meeting. We began by identifying the milestones and changes in operations at Wecan during the past twelve years. This shared understanding of history will provide the foundation for the next step – developing personal values and vision and translating them into organizational values and vision.

Thus ends my saga of progress to date,
As we continue to journey, more I'll relate.

Much has occurred since I first intervened,
And I'd like to share some thoughts that I've gleaned.

This plan was ambitious, but that's quite ok,
I set expectations at the start of the fray.

As you know by now, Wecan is quite small,
With 11 employees we included them all.

If even one sole departed, it would cause quite a stir,
All of this project, we then could inter.

We considered each person from each different angle,
In the hopes that this muddle we could untangle.

Through all of this process, patience was key,
We elicited feedback at every tee.

The GM is quite pleased with the progress he sees,
Though he'd like to go faster, with the pace he agrees.

Our next steps include charting a course,
A plan for the future, employees can endorse.

With the commitment of the GM and the motivation of the organization's employees aligned, this is indeed the perfect client!