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# SWARM TO ACCELERATE CHANGE

*by:*

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*with*

*George Aslinger*

*&*

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**Avery Dennison Creates SWARM Process**

# To Improve Customer Responsiveness

by

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with

George Aslinger and Glen Whipple  
Change Agents at Avery Dennison

Continuous learning is a mainstay of life at Avery Dennison, a world leader in office products and pressure-sensitive base products. A while back, Avery's Ohio-based Fasson Roll Division, the leading manufacturer of pressure-sensitive paper for labels, found itself struggling to retain customers because competitors were quoting and negotiating final prices faster. They assigned three functional task teams to come up with solutions.

Months later, nobody was making headway. There was a lot of cross-functional finger pointing for why solutions weren't being implemented. Because the teams were part-time and functionally organized, finding time to meet cross-functionally to resolve issues was a frustrating challenge. And the failure to include key stakeholders early frequently meant that proposed solutions were rejected downstream.

During a discussion of the problem with VP and general manager Dean Scarborough, Fasson organizational effectiveness leader George Aslinger suggested that they needed a large group process to break through the log jam. Scarborough mentioned that he'd heard a fellow general manager talk about getting a group of employees to swarm over a problem. They agreed to try it and Aslinger decided to call the new process SWARM.

Says Aslinger, *"Look at honeybees. As spring comes and the cold weather gives way to warmth and spring flowers, the bees leave their hive and seek to build a better place to live. Then they go out and gather the necessary ingredients and come together to produce a product that provides energy to carry them into the future."*

## A MARRIAGE OF FUTURE SEARCH AND WORK OUT

In creating the SWARM methodology, Aslinger relied on more than observations of honeybees. Together with a colleague, organization development director Glen Whipple, they combined the best practices of the Future Search approach, the General Electric Work Out process, and ideas on results-focused consulting gleaned for Stamford, CT-based consultant Robert Schaffer.

Originating in the British mining industry in the late 1940's, the Future Search conference methodology ( currently popularized in this country by Marvin Weisbord ) convenes diverse stakeholders to find common ground and plan their own future. Based on the premise that any organization is a whole system that exists in direct relationship with its larger environment, a search conference brings together reps from each key part of the system to focus on how to improve.

It's not a conference in the usual sense: it skips outside experts and talking heads. Given their detailed knowledge of how the system works, diverse perspectives, and the potential to implement any plan they develop, it assumes that the participants themselves - working for a concentrated period in an open learning environment - have all the expertise needed to envision a viable better future.

In its pure form, Future Search is open-ended and tends to drive toward a fresh, robust vision; what Aslinger and Whipple borrowed from GE's Work Out and Schaffer was a focused drive for a specific, targeted results. Says Aslinger, *"As I understand Work Out, it involves bringing together an entire facility or department around a clear charter to work a problem; management stakeholders empower employees to develop solutions to problems like waste, cost reduction, work flow improvement. After two to three days of work, they leave with a sense of urgency. The key principles are involvement, empowerment, teamwork and fast results."*

Adds Whipple, of Schaffer's influence, *"We are believers in Bob's main point that, as consultants, we must ensure that our efforts and those of our clients are driven by and toward, clear and concise business results that are documented at the start of the work."*

The amalgamated model they called SWARM zeros in on six targets:

- 4 Environmental Scan: What's going on in the world that's important to our future?
- 4 History: Where have we been and what can we learn from that?

- 4 Current State: What are we doing today? What works? What doesn't?
- 4 Future State: What would be our most desirable future?
- 4 Action Planning: What would it take to get to that desirable future?
- 4 Implementation Planning: Who will do what and when?

## FIRST GROUP GOES FIRST

Fasson calls its sales and customer service unit FIRST - fast, integrity, reliability, speed, teamwork. The company selected 38 people from this group who interact with each aspect of the pricing process to participate in an off-site event. Whipple uses specific criteria in selecting participants: all affected functions and all levels of the hierarchy should be represented, and participants should have high credibility in the organization, lots of experience, be open minded, have a stake in the outcome and the future, and be critical to successful implementation.

Consistent with the Work Out / Schaffer approach, instead of the generalized question, *"How can we serve our customers better?"* the group charter focused on targeted results: *"How can we deliver price quotes in less than an hour, implement a price increase in two weeks, enable all orders to be correctly priced when the order is taken, improve the contract pricing process? How can we implement this by October 1st?"*

Before gathering for the SWARM, they asked participants to pull information from their areas about how the process currently worked. They then met in a hotel ballroom for two-and-a-half days. Aslinger recommends using one large room and insisting that everyone stay overnight in the same hotel. "I recommend keeping the space open to facilitate more "buzzing"

around, more communication among sub-teams. In our early SWARMS, including this one, we let local participants go home in the evenings. But this reduced interaction hurt the creative process, so now we design in evening meals, social hours, and after-dinner tasks to encourage informal conversation.”

They used the six general targets (environmental scan through implementation planning) and the specific process targets (How can we deliver price quotes in less than an hour? etc.) to draft an agenda. Did it change as they went along? What if they got stuck? Says Whipple, *“It didn’t happen with the pricing SWARM. But in our last SWARM, after the current state analysis, we sensed low commitment, so we intervened with a two-hour dialogue to test for commitment. Based on this dialogue, during the lunch break the facilitator team got buy-in for an agenda change from the sponsors, reworked the entire agenda, and moved forward with a new process.”* Whipple thinks knowing how to do this kind of mid-process correction is the facilitator team’s most important role.

At the end of the SWARM, the participants presented their recommendations to key stakeholders and got a green light, ending the log jam, and solving the problem.

### **MORE THAN BRAINSTORMING**

How is SWARM different from creative brainstorming? Whipple says they use brainstorming - especially in the visioning piece of the work. But, given SWARM’s drive for specific results, much of the work focuses on learning, not idea generation: *“In the history portion, we focus on gaining a common understanding. In the current state analysis piece, considerable learning takes place, stimulated by pres-*

*entations, dialogues, and questions and answers.”*

He sounds like a man who’s seen one-too-many brainstorming sessions where jillions of ideas get written on newsprint and are quickly forgotten: *“In the future state or search portion, you might use brainstorming as one of a variety of techniques to generate alternatives, but the key is to synthesize all the guidelines of the charter, the history review and the learnings from the current state analysis so that you create realistic, measurable solutions that can be implemented. The solutions must be fact based and data based, verses free-form with no constraints.”*

### **SENIOR MANAGEMENT SPONSORSHIP AND CAREFUL CHARTERING ARE CRITICAL**

Since it is designed to solve problems that cut across organizational boundaries, Aslinger and Whipple agree that for SWARM to work you need senior management commitment and a clear charter. Says Aslinger, *“To accomplish significant change you must have leaders committed to change. The cost in time and dollars is significant: hotel, meals, travel, system programming, etc. The sponsor must be willing to commit the organization’s resources. Finally, the sponsor must commit to empowering the SWARM and to implement its recommendations, within the limits set in the charter. All of our SWARMS have had multiple sponsors due to our organization structure.”*

Do the sponsors attend? Aslinger says it’s a good idea because it shows commitment and eliminates suspicion that the sponsor will block results. Sponsor / stakeholders have tended to participate in

later SWARMS, but some who could derail the effort did not attend the pricing SWARM. Says Aslinger. *“ During the chartering phase. we made it clear that if they chose not to attend they had to accept the results as long as those results were within the charter and met the deliverables. This worked.”*

Time spent up front drafting a careful charter pays off downstream. Whipple recommends that this be done by a group of at least two facilitators working with the key stakeholders of the business issue to be addressed or content experts - ideally four to seven people. The charter needs to spell out the SWARMS purpose, objectives, scope, deliverables, metrics, structure, level of decision-making authority, and what pre-work needs to be done. Cautions Whipple, *“After you’ve developed your charter, it’s wise to review it with any additional key executives who are in a position to support or block implementation.”*

### **SWARMS ARE A TERRIFIC IDEA BECAUSE....**

We asked Whipple and Aslinger why they think SWARMS are a good idea. Responds Whipple, *“It can be summed up in one word - learning. The SWARM process creates energy around defining needed change and the best way to make it hap-*

*pen. It gives executives a chance to gain appreciation of how strategic decisions and plans get operationalized and at the same time it gives the average employee an opportunity to see all the factors that must be considered in making a strategic decision.”*

He continues, *“The combination of the two learning experiences increases knowledge and understanding. More important, it builds trust. While people don’t necessarily resist change they resist being changed. The SWARM process goes far toward instilling in participants feelings of ownership for change and empowerment over their work.”*

Adds Aslinger, *“The learning occurs in many ways, on several levels. Everyone learns about how the organization works. Manager and leaders learn about what really goes on. They also learn a great deal about the employees’ capabilities. One new high-level manager said he learned more in a three-day SWARM than in his first six months on the job.”*

Any final words of wisdom? Concludes Whipple, *“George went to Walmart and spent \$100 on toys - Nerf balls, Gak, Slime, balloons, Frisbees. We passed them out around mid-day on the first day. We didn’t say anything, but people figured out what to do with them. I think it helped lighten the mood.”*

George Aslinger is currently the Organizational Effectiveness Leader for Fason Roll Division of Avery Dennison. Previously he has worked in Maintenance Management, Plant Engineering Management, Production Management and Technical Management. George holds a B.S. in Engineering Management from the University of Tennessee / Chattanooga and a M.S. in Operations Management from Georgia State University.

Glen Whipple holds a B.A. in Psychology and a Masters in Business Administration from Kent State University. He has worked in Manufacturing Management, Human Resources and Organizational Design & Development. He is currently the Director of Organizational Development for the Fason Roll Division of Avery Dennison.