

How to make planning by committee a success

Start with clear goals, prune failures and build on what has worked in the past



The D-Day commanders, overseen by General Eisenhower, centre. The invasion of northern France was planned by committee © Popperfoto/Getty

David Bodanis Thursday, 9 April

With so many companies and government agencies reconfiguring their plans in light of the coronavirus pandemic, a great number of committee meetings have been taking place.

To cynics that is disheartening. Aren't committees, after all, so inherently incompetent that "the camel is a horse designed by committee"?

Yet, the D-Day landings were planned by committee, and the King James Bible was translated by committee, and no one would argue that those were anything but spectacular successes.

That is the model we want to match today. A closer look is in order — and our humble camel is an excellent guide. This is a creature that repeatedly evolved superb adaptations to its environments.

When much of North America was still tropical 50m years ago, camelids about the size of large hares flourished in the warm forests. As the climate dried and cooled, different variants arose — a few as small as before, others 19 feet tall.

They survived and flourished for millions of years. Crossing the then-walkable Bering Strait to Asia, yet more adaptations took place, yielding the creature we know today.

If you think of natural selection as a camel-design “committee” then it’s one that has been convening pretty much nonstop since the Eocene Epoch. Its strategic rules are very simple, yet very powerful:

- 1. Start with clear goals (in this case, successful reproduction)
- 2. Try practical possibilities
- 3. Ruthlessly prune failures
- 4. Build on what works

Our own committees have rarely run that long (even if some in these stressed days feel like it), and natural selection of course isn’t the only model. But as natural selection has had a certain success in developing millions of species across millions of years, it is worth seeing more of what such strategies can achieve.

First are the clear goals. The King James Bible translators were not set the vague task of improving on translations of the Bible. The man who ran the project, the hard-eyed Archbishop Richard Bancroft, knew there would be months of aimless argument that way.

Instead he set a sharper task. The translators were to propose wordings that would bridge the gap between those who believed the Bible backed strict hierarchies, and those who found more egalitarian messages there.

The D-Day invasion work also started with a clear goal: get a large Allied force into northern France early enough in 1944 for the summer campaigning season, and be able to resupply it.

First steps like these can’t be resolved in committees, but must take place beforehand. There is a reason one of the central principles taught in war colleges is “Selection and Maintenance of the Aim”. Even with a clear goal, however, committee heads usually fail at rules two and three: being open

enough to encourage a range of possibilities, but firm enough to prune those as well.

In the King James translation, Bancroft made sure he had a wide range of academics and clerics. But he also split them into six subcommittees, each given strict deadlines to prune what the others had tried.

General Dwight Eisenhower, running key D-Day committees, also had staff who were never going to run out of fresh ideas they could squabble over (the contrasting British and American traditions they came from saw to that). All he had to do was insist neither side closed the other down. Whether they liked each other or not was of no importance.

For the third requirement, of being sure the range of possibilities were ruthlessly sieved, Eisenhower led by example. He had been responsible for the poor results in Italy the year before, when four Allied divisions had come near to destruction after landing without enough heavy reinforcements or air support. That was not going to happen again. Proposals — even ones from Churchill — that recommended otherwise were discarded.

Both Eisenhower and Bancroft also — rule four — built on past successes. For Bancroft that meant encouraging his team to draw on scholar William Tyndale's translation and other earlier translations where possible. For Eisenhower, with a modesty rare among the military elite, it meant building on the detailed plans that the assiduous British General Morgan and several hundred officers had been working on for nearly a year.

Get these four rules wrong, however, and it is almost certain committees — and sometimes even the entire organisations around them — will collapse.

Donald Trump's travails in getting these steps right are instructive for all of us. The US president failed at step one. First he tried ignoring the entire coronavirus issue. Then when he finally did recognise it, he wobbled between goals: minimising economic disruption, versus minimising short-term deaths, versus minimising any advantage to his political opponents.

He also failed at step two, by not ensuring the full range of relevant possibilities were firmly presented, and did not pay attention to the few presentations that did get through.

That lack of sufficient possibilities — let alone the lack of clarity in carrying them out — is one of the most common errors. After the disaster of the failed American-led invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, President Kennedy brought in the recently retired Eisenhower for a postmortem.

Eisenhower listened to Kennedy waffle, then asked the key question: Had he, JFK, had individuals with opposing views discuss the matter at the same time in front of him? Kennedy, chastened, had to say no.

Leaders in many other countries made this mistake with the coronavirus, though to their credit they — like Kennedy — turned out to be quick learners. Often within just a week they brought in more rounded discussion, giving rise to the firmer measures now taken, based on broader scientific data.

How the world handles stage four — of building on what works — will be indispensable. Countries and companies keen to learn from how others have been succeeding will be at an advantage in the months ahead.

The writer is author of 'Einstein's Greatest Mistake'