The Whole May Be Less than the Sum of the Parts:
A Fable on How Not to Plan and Work Together

Their business was designing and building airplanes. They had done it a long time and were fairly good at it. But one day, everything changed. Business had begun to decline because of competition. The old business had run its course and someone proposed that they needed a whole new plane in order to be competitive.

The corporate gurus on the faraway mountain sent a message that the company should design a whole new airplane. Since all of the airplane designers and builders were very busy keeping the old company alive and everyone was focused on his or her incentive compensation objectives, the design of the plane was done by individuals and small groups in a very unorganized way with little commitment to the outcome.

One individual went off to build a wing because he thought wings were essential to the plane; another focused on engines for they are the source of power; another started on the cockpit for it was the key to making the airplane work; and so on.

Each designer would go off to the corporate castle every few months to report on his or her accomplishments to date. They would usually take books about their efforts, lots of colorful transparencies, and considerable evidence that their work was making great strides toward the best possible airplane of the future.

And so it went for months and months. There were occasional squabbles over who would get what resources to build their part of the plane, but these were worked out through old, established, organizational political networks within the company and made no discernible impact on the airplane design efforts which was slowing down and behind schedule.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. It was time to assemble the plane for a corporate review. Up to this point, each group had done its own design with little concern for how it fit in the overall airplane (or even whether it would fit). Everybody showed up with their components of the plane. One set of wings was too long; the other set too short. There were too many engines for an economical design. The cockpit was too small for the fuselage which was too wide for the kind of craft the corporation had in mind. Each part, when viewed alone, was fine. Together they were a mini-disaster.

Then the blaming started. The corporation blamed the various groups for not designing the plane correctly. The various groups blamed the corporation for a lack of leadership. The wing group thought the fuselage group was out of touch. The engine group said that if the fuselage group had done their job right, the engines would have worked.

And so it went, day after day, each group pointing at the others as the source of the problem—never looking at either within or at the whole situation. The groups were just a bunch of "parts" representing lots of resources, but yielding little value when they tried to become a whole. In this case, the "whole was <u>far</u> <u>less</u> than the sum of its parts."

So what did they do? Did they learn from the event? Was there a time when the various people assigned to the various airplane parts were able to see the whole? Was there a moment when they knew that the absence of a plan at the outset would set them adrift in a sea of confusion and lost resources? Did they ever see what they contributed to the outcome?

It's hard to tell. In fact, we'll only know if they learned when they try to do it again.