

Envisioning the perfect meeting

1. Images and ideals

In recent years many people have deplored the inadequacies of the visions of society in the future. It is argued that credible visions offer a vital guideline to long-term policy. Clarifying such visions is a useful focus for debate. As a central process in society, meetings also merit this form of concern. Indeed if the problems inherent in meeting cannot be solved, is it possible to move toward any better society? What could constitute a perfect meeting in the future? Adequate images of such ideal meetings can guide reflection on present inadequacies and on how they may be overcome. The following points identify aspects which can be usefully borne in mind.

2. Inter weaving resources

Rather than the present emphasis on isolated participant contributions, the emphasis will be on interrelating contributions to form a pattern whose form evokes further contributions thus bringing about an appropriate balance of perspectives. Representatives of each discipline of approach will strive for better ways to evoke that pattern. Lengthy contributions (in time or on paper) will become secondary to the contribution of specific ideas, values, facts, problems or relationships. Those which significantly improve the emerging pattern will be valued most.

3. Pace

Rather than the present hectic exercises in maximizing «communication», many meetings of sessions will bear a greater resemblance to a public game of chess or go. Periods of silence will be interspersed with brief contributions to the emerging pattern on whose evolution all are reflecting.

4. Status and reward

Rather than status being accorded or acknowledged by protocol and «prime time» privileges, it will be self-evident from the record of the relative significance of the contributions made to the emerging pattern. This will be the prime source of personal satisfaction.

5. Process

Rather than the simplistic overt processes of present meetings (made possible by a complex of covert processes) the range of processes will be understood to interweave as they do in a complex but healthy ecosystem - of which there are many types.

6. Maturity

Rather than the present possibility of immaturity in a meeting of the most eminent, the maturity level of the meeting will be a matter of explicit concern and many will have skills to evolve the meeting beyond the characteristic traps of the present.

7. Roles

Rather than the limited range of roles in present meetings, those of the future will be characterized by a rich variety of supporting, guiding, informing, facilitating roles. The potential of a meeting may well be judged by the «participant/supporting role» ratio (of the teacher/pupil ratio in schools) as well as the number of «jargons» between which «interpretation» is provided.

8. Modes

Rather than the limited range of modes now permissible in a given meeting, it will be possible for a meeting to move flexibly between many modes according to the energy requirements of the participants - and without losing a sense of coherence.

9. Conceptual environment

Rather than the crude (lack of) awareness of meeting conceptual dynamics, participants will be much more conscious of the «species» of each contribution made, the effect it can have on the evolution of the conceptual environment, and the constraints on its viability.

10. Physical environment

To those involved in such perfect meetings, the negative effects of the many subtle and less subtle design factors in present conference centres will be obvious. Conference environment design will focus on enabling the many aspects of conceptual pattern formation rather than «processing» participants and inhibiting synthesis. Flexible settings will adapt to the changing conceptual environment.

11. Technology

Aside from the already evident move towards «electronic meetings» between distant participants, much greater use will be made of technology to enable spontaneous communication between participants (rather than at them), to represent graphically the pattern emerging from the contributions made, and to facilitate synthesis whilst protecting variety.

12. New challenges

Because the environment will enable collective reflection on much more subtle questions than at present, new challenges will emerge - possibly to be recognized as of greater (or more fundamental) significance than the often simplistic pre-occupations of present meetings.

Meeting focus : a description

1. Agenda in focus

In a discussion an individual may be rebuked for not «keeping to the point». In a meeting this may refer to relevance to a point on the agenda. It is the agenda which is used to focus the meeting pro-

cesses, although when there is a programme, focus may only be achieved through the agendas of individual sessions or possibly through a concluding plenary session. What is focus in a meeting and what is its significance, especially in relation to the aim or objective of the meeting?

2. Imposed focus

A meeting may be convened to focus on a particular concern decided in advance. In such a case those present and the points raised will present. Focus is thus a question of establishing and maintaining the relationship of a variety of subsidiary concerns to one central concern, even though the proponents of particular subsidiary concerns may not recognize each others relevance to that central concern.

3. Emergent focus

A meeting may be convened in the hope that a point of common focus will emerge as a basis for interlinking a variety of partially (or un-) related concerns. The problem is then to facilitate its identification and emergence.

4. Multiple focus

Whether imposed or emergent, it may be a question of a multiple focus, rather than a single one. There may be no intention, desire or ability to relate the multiple points of focus to one another or to a single underlying concern. This may be reflected in a variety of unrelated points in an agenda or meeting programme.

5. Degree of focus

Whether a matter of ability or intention, the meeting may resist any classification or sharpening of focus in preference to a diffuse focus or none at all. An unfocused meeting may be viewed as more creative or effective under certain conditions, or perhaps all that is feasible. Note that focus may be achieved without any verbal acknowledgement of its nature.

6. Aims, objectives and goals

Although it is possible to make useful distinctions between these, it is their difference from focus which should be noted. Each of them is in one way or another an intention or desire as opposed to the definite achievement characteristic of focus. But focus is also a precondition for them, in that it interrelates the relevant elements necessary for their achievement, whether any subsequent action is taken or not. In this way a meeting can focus on its objective, for example or may fail to do so because its ability to focus is inadequate.

7. Focus and transformation

To achieve whatever transformation it intends, a meeting must bring the resources it has assembled to bear, bringing them appropriately into focus. This establishes the critical quantity or variety of factors

necessary to the transformation. Focus ensures that the configuration of factors rather than allowing it to dissipate ineffectually. Individual actions are then mutually reinforcing rather than allowing it to dissipate ineffectually. Individual actions are then mutually reinforcing rather than multiplying. Depending on the nature of the meeting, focus may also be required to disseminate or contain the energy released by the transformative process.

8. Strategy and process

Focus may be brought about by an appropriate strategy for a process from the prior unfocused condition - a focusing procedure. Such strategy may even be considered the time dimension of focus.

9. Structure and focusing

One method of ensuring focus is through the conventional hierarchical structure of executive and other programme committees and officers, culminating in the meeting president. The weakness of this approach results from the limitations of the simple hierarchy as a means of appropriately channelling and interrelating the information flows associated with interrelated topics. This is especially true when the hierarchy also has to perform protocol and other non-substantive functions which prevent either the executive director or the president from ensuring a substantive synthesis, even if they were able.

10. Focus and configuration

Where hierarchical ordering of the meeting programme or lines of responsibility no longer suffices to contain the complexity of the subject matter, a programme matrix may be used. When this is inadequate more complex configurations are required (e.g. critical path and network diagrams). There is however a major constraint in that focus is no longer possible if the complexity exceeds the ability of participants to comprehend. And in order to maintain comprehensibility the configuration of issues must contain elements of symmetry and pattern to reinforce memorability and communicability. Whilst it is not necessary for all participants to comprehend the whole configuration, there must be sufficient overlap both to maintain connectedness and to prevent loss of confidence in the chain of overlaps linking the most distant parts of the configuration.

11. Focus and the individual

The adequacy of the configuration depends on the quality of the participants and the extent to which its features engage their attention and energy. The greater the variety reflected in the configuration, the greater the potential, but also net greater the risk that participants will only be engaged partially or superficially and that the focus will be trivial. Powerful focus is achieved when the meeting configuration matches to a significant degree

the psychic configuration of the participants. Participants respond to finding their own condition reflected in the meeting configuration, and the meeting reflected within themselves - it is this resonance which energizes the meeting. Any action through the meeting is then directly consistent with the individual's own development and calls upon all the participant is able to contribute because of the manner in which that contribution results in personal growth through the meeting. The meeting configuration thus reinforces connections which enable focus and transformation at a new level of significance, both collective and individual.

Focus : a checklist

Below are listed, in no particular order, different aspects of focus, or processes which tend to occur when a meeting is in focus.

Checklist :

- Category transformation : a condition of focus should permit a reordering of the categories governing the meeting (or the organization of its subject matter) into a less Procrustean pattern corresponding more appropriately to the reality encoded.
- Organizational transformation : in a condition of focus the organizational units or sub-divisions whereby it has been brought about can be reformed into a pattern more appropriate to the functional categories.
- Problem sensitivity (resolving power) : a condition of focus permits problems (otherwise considered identical) to be appropriately distinguished.
- Problem subtlety : certain all-pervading subtle problems can only be detected in a condition of low « noise-level » characteristic of focus.
- Stabilized overview : focus is a necessary condition for a stable overview of the meeting's domain (possibly as a meta-dimension) otherwise viewed as a multi-faceted image.
- Contribution of seemingly irrelevant : only in a condition of focus can the contribution of otherwise « irrelevant » resources to the balance of the whole be understood.
- Hospitable to divergent perspectives 3 a condition of focus is hospitable to otherwise « divergent » perspectives.
- Sensitivity to new options : the reduction in « noise-level » associated with a condition of focus permits new options and directions to emerge.
- Transformation of collective self-awareness : the condition of focus facilitates the emergence of a collective sense of identity at a new level of integration and immediacy.
- Transformation of personal awareness : a condition of focus enhances the processes of personal transformation in each participant and in relation to the here-and-now.

- Energy containment and release 3 a focussed configuration is able to contain and anchor the synergy normally dissipated during a meeting (possibly as a temporary state of enthusiasm or euphoria).
- Emergence of simplifying perspectives : a condition of focus enables simpler descriptions of complex conditions to emerge, possibly as appropriate metaphors.
- Empowerment: a condition of focus empowers the meeting or act at a new level of significance in the light of emergent values.
- Risk : a condition of focus, because of the radical nature of the transformations which are then feasible, is also a condition of high risk. Such risk is a necessary « investment » (in the sense of « nothing venture ; nothing gain »).

Losing focus

1. Maintaining focus

The nature of focus may be partially understood from the various ways in which it may be lost during a meeting. These are the processes which may be guarded against although they are not necessarily independent.

2. Loss of immediacy

Participants may lose any sense of immediacy and allow discussion to focus on questions which erode their sense of urgency and responsibility. The assumption that necessary action can be taken on some other occasion, possibly by others, gradually holds sway.

3. Attention absorption

Topics become a focus for attention for different participants to the exclusion of any understanding of the context from which they emerge and by which they are linked.

4. Attention spam

The complexity of the topic is such that participants do not have the patience to attend to any discussion of its intricacies and thus fail to comprehend it. This situation may be aggravated by poor verbal presentation, particularly when an audiovisual presentation would be clearer and quicker.

5. Topic change too rapid

When the meeting is switching between supposedly related topics, this may be done too rapidly for the participants to retain any permanent understanding of their connection.

6. Topic change too slow

Time spent by participants in treating one topic may be too great to retain adequate understanding of the previous topic. In this way they lose sight of the whole and may in fact become bored with excessive

détail of they are not unnecessarily fascinated by it.

7. Loss of connectedness

Participants, for any of the above reasons, may lose understanding of the web of relevance interlinking the different topics under discussion. Conceptual fragmentation holds sway and most topics appear irrelevant to the participants major interest.

8. « Topic twigging »

Topics may be explored with such enthusiasm, that issues are broken up into sub-issues, sub-sub-issues, etc. without any control over how to maintain the connection between such « twigs » or branches and the trunk of the « tree » from which they spring.

9. Games and traps

Discussion of topics may become enmeshed in various games and traps from which participants find it impossible to extract themselves. Such « sub-routines » may divert all energy from the fundamental or underlying issues.

10. Superficiality

The focus of the meeting may be trivialized by unnecessary enthusiastic interventions which do not take participants forward.

11. Disruption

The « noise-level » of the meeting may be such that no focus may be shared amongst participants.

12. Polarization

Discussion of the focus may provoke some participants to advocate a counter-focus, thus dividing the meeting.

13. Energy drain

The structure and processes of the meeting may be such as to drain participant energy rather than enhancing it. This weakens any focus which is still possible.

Focus subtleties : public relations

1. Although strong criticism can be made of the conventional use of « public relations » techniques in meetings, especially when crudely done for simplistic purposes, skilled practitioners are sensitive to dimensions otherwise ignored. It is this sensitivity which can contribute considerably to the « magic » of whatever occurs in a condition of focus.

2. The major problem of public relations as applied in meetings is that it is conceived in terms of the priorities of the meeting sponsor or organizer. A major concern then is to stress at all cost the qualities and significance : of those responsible for the event, of the event itself, of the parti-

cipants, and of whatever is achieved. The techniques are necessarily so pervasive in their application that they cloak every facet of the event in a concealing garb of seeming glamour and significance. This of course serves to « paper over any cracks » in the arrangement, effectively tuning each moment of the meeting into a piece of theatre, however flimsy the sets. Participant awareness of the reality, as it contrast with the image, generates cynicism and is counter-productive.

3. One feature of this problem is the tendency to reinforce the status quo and to conceal weakness and conflicts which can provoke and justify healthy change. (Existing categories are effectively treated like icons requiring appropriate praise and decoration).

4. Another feature of this problem is dependence upon the « showmanship » strengths of PR techniques to provide « attention grabbers » to absorb the time of participants. These may extend from glossy audio-visuals through sumptuous feasts to tourist attractions. This leads to a simplistic conception of meetings, and a total disrespect for participants and the issues on which they supposedly hope to act. Sad to say, many meeting sponsors are evaluated by their peers in terms of « how good a show they put on » and the meeting market is such that it is unlikely that they would fail by underestimating the level of sophistication of participants.

5. Another feature of this problem is the stress on the impact on participants of « messages » fired at them as « targets » in the marketing « communications » approach which has given birth to most public relations techniques.

6. Despite these present defects, the practitioners are nevertheless especially sensitive to configuration, place, timing, non-verbal stimuli and their effect on image. The question is whether these skills can be employed in the interests of participants and their concerns, rather than as a manipulation of them.

7. The question is how can meeting participants themselves engender collective sensitivity to these dimensions, correcting continually for any excesses. The process of building up and focusing significance collectively is one known through the rituals of less artificial cultures with a more organic response to a happening. It would appear that the « civilized » conscious emphasis on rational discourse in meetings has left them exposed to manipulation of any unconscious emotional needs which would otherwise provide a healthy equilibrium. How can the power of any such emotional arousal of the imagination be consciously evoked by participants to weld their perspectives together more effectively - to « get their act together » and get the meeting into focus ? The

« primitive » approach, the « PR communicator » approach, and the « small group process » approach are extremes, each with important clues and dangerous traps.

Focus subtleties : « meeting magic »

1. Catalysis

Occasionally, perhaps under special circumstances, meetings « come together » and « take off » as if by magic. It might be called serendipity. There is very little indication of why this comes about or how it is to be described objectively. It can happen when every care has been put into arranging the meeting and selecting the participants, or it can happen under extremely non-ideal circumstances. The following notes indicate some possible directions for further reflection on the question.

2. Indirection

In such a case then seems to be a strength in defining the central point of focus by discussions which use it as an unspoken reference point. The totality of tangential dialogues is then facilitated by this approach, whereas « going to the heart of the matter », and efforts to tender it explicit, effectively only introduce perturbation and fragmentation. (Note that non-directiveness, being the non-imposition of a line of discussion, is only loosely related to indirection in this sense).

3. Paradox

There usually seems to be a strong element of paradox in such cases, or at least a tolerance of it and a suspension of judgement. (The meeting could almost be considered a collective reflection on a Zen Koan).

4. Incompatibility

Associated with paradox is a context which permits incompatible perspectives' to be « bracketed » and held in complementary juxtaposition. It is the shared attitude underlying this contextual awareness which provides a subtle interface between the perspectives.

5. Attunement

The magic tends to occur when participants are attuned to each other or empathize with each other, possibly stimulated by a quota of antipathy which provokes a search for a more fundamental level of harmony (cf. the use of this concept in certain group meditation techniques).

6. « Chemistry »

As in the previous point, when the right mix of participants is present, they react in unpredictable ways to produce interesting transformation for all concerned. (The « recipe » analogy may also be used).

7. Aesthetic elegance

There seems to be a special economy and proportion of structure and process which can only be described in aesthetic terms.

8. Drama

Relating to the previous point, there is often a sense of evolving and mounting drama, engendering appropriate events at each stage. There is a collective awareness of how each event is changed with significance.

9. « Invisible hand »

Relating to the previous point, at certain moments events seem to be guided by an unseen hand, so well do they emerge spontaneously and fall into place unplanned. There is a strange « rightness » to the flow of events.

10. Non-action

During the course of such meetings, deliberate actions usually tend to be of less significance or else their significance emerges totally transformed in relation to the original intent. The more participants can approximate to the Taoist attitude of non-action, the better the event for all concerned (cf. the adage: « Don't push the river. Guide the canoe »).

11. Non-conscious

Relating to the previous point, participant appreciation of the event depends on ability to « let go » and « flow with the stream of things ». This seems to call upon instinctual and intuitive aspects of personality, appropriately blended by the participant (cf. the Japanese concept of *hara*). It should perhaps be contrasted with consciousness and « stream of consciousness » monologue.

12. Humorously quixotic

In contrast to the heavy quality of conventional meetings, such events have an underlying thread of humour strangely blended with wisdom (cf. the Sufi tales of Nasrudin). This also serves as a very powerful and rapid means of conveying an explanation.

13. Innocence

The flow of such events tends to evoke a childlike innocence and sense of wonder in participants, which is to be contrasted with conventional meetings with the defensive attitude towards ignorance, a pervasive cynicism, and childishness under certain circumstances.

14. Magical shifts of perspective

Characteristically in such meetings, apparently insignificant events brought about in an unforeseen manner can trigger major shifts of perspective (cf. the Zen tales concerning achievement of *salon*)

Interdisciplinary

1. The need in meetings of interrelate the approaches of different disciplines, in order to understand a social problem situation and to be able to recommend appropriate remedial programmes, is now increasingly recognized. The « inter-disciplinary » approach is now in fashion and an essential element in many requests for programme funds.

2. On closer examination, however it is possible to discover that this requirement, far from constituting any form of progress, is only the symptom of the pathological state of knowledge at this time. The specialization without limit of scientific disciplines has resulted in an increasing fragmentation of the epistemological horizon.

3. Specialists cannot be asked to testify in meetings with regard to the unification of the sciences, or an « integrated » action programme, insofar as these specialists by their vocation and training are ignorant of, or deny, this very unity. Even those who profess to stand for the unification of the sciences cannot always be trusted, for each one of them unification of the sciences cannot a. Even those who profess to stand for the unification of the sciences cannot always be trusted, for each one of them would be satisfied in defining his familiar point of view, and more or less justifying his own individual presuppositions.

4. Teaching and research institutions reinforce the above separation through administrative procedures which tend to eliminate communications with institutions associated with other disciplines. This is reflected in conference programme events sponsored in parallel by such bodies. The division of intellectual space into smaller and smaller compartments, and the multiplication of institutions which assume the management of each such territory, results in the formation of a feudal system which governs the majority of scientific teaching and research enterprises and is clearly reflected in the organization of meetings.

5. When an « interdisciplinary » approach is used in a meeting, it most often consists in bringing together specialists from different disciplines, in the simplistic belief that such an assembly would suffice to bring about a common ground and a common language between individuals who have nothing else in common. The reports or results of such meetings neither achieve, nor attempt to achieve, any synthesis - other than the purely spatial juxtaposition of viewpoints and constraints, and subsequently, a judiciously worded editorial overview for the published proceedings.

6. Few of the societal problems which give rise to large conferences at this time can adequately be handled within any one dis-

cipline. Such problems result from the interaction of social, economic, technological, political, religious, psychological, biological and other factors. Understanding requires an integration of the relevant disciplinary perspectives. Such integration however must be much more than the synthesis of results obtained by independent unidisciplinary studies conducted prior to the meeting. The synthesis, to be useful, must come before the unidisciplinary commitments have been made and the conclusions frozen, without having been tempered by exposure to other constraints. This should be the true function of an interdisciplinary « meeting » - to act as a « transformative crucible » from which a new perspective emerges and is tempered in a number of stages. If the result is merely an agglomeration, then no transformation has taken place and the process has failed.

7. Where such interdisciplinary synthesis does take place, however, it is most successful between two closely related disciplines. Such integration is decreasingly successful as the number of disciplines involved increases. This is matched by a rapid decrease in the sophistication of the synthesis and a reduction in expectation of its benefits by those involved. A « synthesis » of results in itself dangerous in a meeting if it is superficial, but nevertheless succeeds in removing the stimulus to greater collective effort.

8. The difficulties are increased when the disciplines are of a different nature, have fundamentally different methodologies, or focus on very different subject matter. As the variety of disciplinary perspectives increases, so does the tendency of each subgroup to perceive the activity of others as being of marginal relevance or importance.

9. The challenge in meetings is to face up to the failures of the past (particularly those disguised as successes) and to find new ways of interrelating the intellectual resources available in order to guide significant change.

Integrative failure

1. Definition

Although integrative skills may be successfully applied to a situation their elusive nature can be partially defined by the ways in which such skills may fail or be used to conceal abuse.

2. Reduction in variety

A simple way to ease the integrative problem is to reduce the diversity of elements present in the situation using an argument for standardization and against any « hodge podge » mixture of elements. This of course eliminates some minority interests. In the extreme case of destructive or « meltdown » synthesis, all variety is eliminated.

3. Reduction in quantity

By eliminating a significant number of the elements, the problem may also be eased. The argument that can be used is that they are well-represented by the variety of elements that remain and that any « proliferation » of elements is disorderly. In practice this results in the absorption of some elements by others, such as in the case of minority groups.

4. Simplification

Subtleties and nuances, possibly defended by specific minority groups, may be ignored. Interconnecting webs of relations can be ignored.

5. Tokenism

Emphasis may be placed on the image or desirability of synthesis in order to conceal inability to achieve any steps towards it.

6. Temporary synthesis

In a dynamic situation it may be possible to achieve some measure of integration in the short-term by ignoring factors temporarily absent or only emerging over longer time cycles.

7. « Coloured » synthesis

A significant degree of synthesis may be achieved, but from a particular viewpoint or in terms of a particular mode, approach or strategy. The narrowness of such a synthesis, coloured by the perspective of those who achieve it, may be difficult to communicate within the framework established by that synthesis.

8. Enforced synthesis

In some instances, as with a dynamic set of minority interests, a form of integration may be imposed by constraining the dynamics (although without reducing the number or variety of the elements).

9. Dogmatic synthesis

An impression of synthesis may be achieved by stating frequently and forcefully that it has been achieved and thus eroding expectation that a greater degree of synthesis is possible.

10. Laissez faire synthesis

By interpreting the nature of synthesis or integration, it may be seemed to exist under any circumstances as the pattern of interaction amongst the elements. No intervention is required, although if undertaken it would merely add to the pattern of interaction.

11. Agglomerative synthesis

Appropriate integration may be assumed to have been achieved simply by ensuring the juxtaposition of the various elements or viewpoints. This corresponds to the use of the prefix « multi » (e.g. in multidisciplinary).

In books reflecting such a multidisciplinary synthesis, it is the binding which provides the synthesis, given the absence of any relationship between the constituent disciplinary chapters.

12. Comparative or cross-referential synthesis

Integration may be assumed to have been achieved by recording comparisons between the perspectives or elements. This often corresponds to the use or the prefix, « cross- » (e.g. in cross-cultural).

13. Cross-impact synthesis

Integration may be assumed to have been achieved by taking into account the constraints and feedback loops emerging from other disciplinary perspectives. This may correspond to use of the prefix « inter- » (e.g. in interdisciplinary). Note however that it is only with the emergence of a new level of order that a synthesis breakthrough may be said to have occurred (this may correspond to the use of the prefix « trans- » as in transdisciplinary).

Meeting self-image, self-reference and self-reflexiveness

1. It seems obvious that the participants at a meeting should be collectively aware of the meeting as a whole and be capable of collective consideration concerning its significance. (This is even built into resolutions of the form « The conference, recognizing. »). But frequently such acknowledgement is purely formal and disguises the lack of any coherent collective self-image.

2. This point may seem subtle, trivial or irrelevant but its importance has been very effectively demonstrated in the case of the individual. Whilst an individual may appear to be well-defined, if only physically, the sense of self-identity is acquired only through a long process of maturation. And during that process the individual constantly claims a sense of identity whose relative superficiality is only comprehended in later years.

3. In the absence of mature sense of self-identity, it is to be expected that the collective actions of the participants will tend to be unbalanced, overreactive. Unnecessarily defensive and generally immature. In extreme cases this may conceal a deep sense of collective insecurity, however it is disguised. The depths of this may be illustrated by the following classic description for the case of an individual :

« Even when one felt that what was being said was an expression of someone, the fragment of a self behind the words or actions was not Julie. There might be someone addressing us, but in listening to a schizophrenic, it is very difficult to know « who » is talking, and it is just as difficult to know « whom » one is addressing... One may begin to recognize patches of speech, or frag-

ments of behaviour cropping up at different times, which seem to belong together by reason of similarities of the intonation, the vocabulary, syntax, the preoccupations in the utterance or to cohere as behaviour by reason of certain stereotyped gestures or mannerisms. It seemed therefore that one was in the presence of various fragments, or incomplete elements, of different « personalities » in operation at the one time... With Julie it was not difficult to carry on a verbal exchange of a kind, but without her seeming to have any overall unity but rather a constellation of quasi-autonomous partial systems, it was difficult to speak to « her ». However, even this state of near chaotic nonentity was by no means irreversible and fixed in its disintegration. She would sometimes marvellously come together again and display a most pathetic realization of her plight. But she was terrified of these moments of integration, for various reasons. Among others, because she had to sustain in them intense anxiety ; and because the process of disintegration appeared, to be remembered and dreaded as an experience so awful that there was refuge for her in her unintegration, unrealness, and deadness. Julie's being as a chronic schizophrenic was thus characterized by lack of unity and by division into what might variously be called partial « assemblies », complexes, partial systems, or « internal objects ». Each of these partial systems had recognizable features and distinctive ways of its own. By following through these postulates, many features of her behaviour become explicable. The fact that her self-being was not assembled in an allover manner, but was split into various partial assemblies or systems, allows us to understand that various functions which presuppose the achievement of personal unity or at least a high degree of personal unity could not be present in her, as indeed they were not. Personal unity is a prerequisite of reflective awareness, that is the ability to be aware of one's self acting relatively unself-consciously, or with a simple primary non-reflective awareness. In Julie, each partial system could be aware of objects, but a system might not be aware of the processes going on in another system which was split off from it. For example, if in talking to me, one system was « speaking », there seemed to be no overall unity within her whereby « she » as a unified person could be aware of what this system was saying or doing. In so far as reflective awareness was absent, « memory », for which reflective awareness would seem to be prerequisite, was very patchy. The absence of a total experience of her being as a whole meant that she lacked the unified experience on which to base a clear idea of the « boundary » of her being. Such an overall « boundary » was not, however, entirely lacking. Rather, each system seemed to have a boundary of its own. That is to say, to the awareness that characterized one system, another system was liable to appear outside itself. It was only « from the outside » that one could see that different conflicting systems of her being

were active at the same time. Each partial system seemed to have within it its own focus of centre of awareness : it had its own very limited memory schemata and limited ways of structuring percepts ; its own quasi-autonomous drives or component drives ; its own tendency to preserve its autonomy, and special dangers which threatened its autonomy. She would refer to these diverse aspects as - he -, or « she », or address them as « you ». That is, instead of having a reflective awareness of those aspects of herself, « she » would perceive the operation of a partial system as though it as not " her », but belonged outside. She would be hallucinated. »

(R.D. Laing, The Divided Self; a study of sanity and madness. London, Tavistock, 1960, p. 214-7).

4. A widely evident characteristic of lack of collective self-awareness in meetings is the tendency to separate totally the substantive issues which are the concern of the meeting from the administrative and procedural issues which determine the meeting's ability to focus on them. In the case of meetings concerned with social systems, this amounts to a form of schizophrenia in which the participants collectively perceive themselves as divorced from the social system on which they comment. This attitude may also be reflected in any associated bodies or programmes which are organized such that the need or possibility of their own transformation does not emerge from the substantive investigations with which they are concerned, except possibly as an administrative postscript in the light of administrative criteria. This situation can be caricatured by the example of a meeting, in a smoke-filled room with unopened windows, on the subject of « environmental air pollution », during which participants fail to reflect on their own condition, their unwillingness to act (to open the windows), and the significance of this attitude for their substantive concerns.

5. A number of factors contribute to a sense of collective identity :

5.1 A collective awareness of the range of processes to which the meeting is subject, namely the types of interaction which occur and the conditions or states into which the meeting may be drawn, whether usefully or uselessly.

5.2 A collective awareness of the context of the meeting, the uniqueness of the meeting in relation to that context, and the contribution to change within the contextual environment.

5.3 A collective sense of the limitations of the meeting as a whole and in terms of the abilities of its component groups and the illusions to which they tend to be subject. This includes an acceptance of its finite nature and its necessary termination.

5.4 A collective recognition of the developmental potential of the meeting, namely the ways in which the meeting processes can become more mature and the possi-

ilities that will thus be opened up for action more appropriate to circumstances.

6. There is much to be said for the Delphic « Know thyself » and the Biblical « Physician, heal thyself » as applied to a meeting. From this collective awareness of the meeting as a whole emerges a new ability to respond to social conditions.

« A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, live, whole, and in temporal sense, continues person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others : a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole and continuous. The individual, then, may experience his own being... as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question... as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth ; as spatially coextensive with the body- Such a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a central firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity. It is often difficult for a person with such a sense of his integral selfhood and personal identity, of the permanence of things, of the reliability of natural processes, of the substantiality of others, to transpose himself into the world of an individual whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties, (such as) an over-riding sense of personal consistency of cohesiveness. » (R.D. Laing, The Divided Self, p. 40-3).



Participant and meeting transformation : the assumption that none is required

1. There is an implicit assumption in meetings that the psychosocial environment can be observed and acted upon without here being any associated change in the observer or in the change agent, in this case the participants or the meeting format through which they are acting.

2. The academic assumes the ability to take up some neutral stance, often at a higher level of abstraction, from which effective observation can take place without either changing the observed social processes or being changed by them. For example, political scientists or peace researchers are able, as consultants or in their academic work, to ignore or explicitly deny the value of organizational and meeting structures through which they will report on and discuss such work with colleagues. Yet within those frameworks they will deplore the lack of attention paid to their conclusions. The question of im-

proving the organization or meeting structures through which they work is considered an administrative detail unrelated to their substantive concerns and the lack of attention accorded to them.

3. Organizations and institutions act in the belief that they can intervene in social processes without there being any negative consequences and without they themselves being changed by the action. In both cases there is an assumption of independence from social processes, although both are forms of social activity.

4. Such change agents, especially when they act in meetings, tend not to be aware of their own role as social entities. They have no built-in self-reflexive capacity.

- No academic discipline provides for serious examination of its own social role (e.g. the sociology of : political science, chemistry, economics, etc.), except for sociology itself, and it is doubtful whether much attention has been paid to research in this domain.

- No institution can build in a self-critical capacity which cannot be ignored or restrained to guarantee the continued functioning of that institution.

5. Associated with this is the assumption, in preparing or attending a meeting, that (new) content can always be treated formally without the necessity for exposure to (new) learning experience. This is particularly the case with values. It is assumed that all those who make reference to « peace », « quality of life », « justice », « freedom », etc. have been exposed to positive experiences with which such terms can be associated- and that such experiences are equivalent to those experienced by those with whom they are communicating. There is thus a widespread assumption of common understanding of values which obviates any need for shared experience or any self-change in order to acquire that understanding.

6. This assumption justifies the absence of macro-social experiments to determine whether particular social policies and value mixes are viable and in conformity with the verbal formulations and claims made in meetings.

7. This assumption suppresses any recognition of the possibility that, in order for a meeting to act effectively in response to new problem complexes, it may be necessary for the participants and the meeting to undergo a process of transformation. And without such transformation any conclusions will have little significance of impact. This assumption is only recognized as invalid by those who work on group therapy and related forms of personal development. (Unfortunately those expert in these fields themselves have difficulty in ensuring acceptance of their perspective without making meeting processes dependent upon them or their favoured method).