Envisioning the perfect meeting

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

2. Interweaving resources
Rather than the present emphasis on iso-
olated participant contributions, the em-
phasis will be on interweaving contribu-
tions to form a pattern whose form evokes
further contributions thus bringing about an
appropriate balance of perspectives. Represen-
tatives of each discipline of ap-
proach will strive for better ways to evoke
that pattern. Lengthy contributions (in
time of on paper) will become secondary
to the contribution of specific ideas, va-
ues, facts, problems or relationships.
Those which significantly improve the
emerging pattern will be valued most.

3. Pace
Rather than the present hectic exercises in
communicating. Many meetings of sessions will bear a
greater resemblance to a public game of chess
or go. Periods of silence will be inter-
spersed with brief contributions to the
emerging pattern on whose evolution all are
reflecting.

4. Status and reward
Rather than status being accorded or ac-
knowledged by protocol and a prime-
time position it will be self-evident
from the record of the relative significan-
tce of the contributions made to the emerg-
ing 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 inter-
weave as they do in a complex but healthy
ecosystem - of which there are many types.

6. Maturity
Rather than the present possibility of im-
maturity 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. Rates
Rather than the limited range of roles in
present meetings, those of the future will
be characterized by a rich variety of sup-
porting, guiding, informing, facilitating
roles. The potential of a meeting may well
be judged by the number or participants/attending
role = ratio (of the teacher/student ratio in
schools) as well as the number of + par-
ticipants +

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 crudely (lack of ) aware-
ness of meeting conceptual dynamics,
participants will be more conscious
of the « species » of each contribution made,
the effect it can have on the evolu-
tion of the conceptual environment, and
the constraints on its viability.

10. Physical environment
To those involved in such perfect meet-
ings, the negative effects of the many
subtle and less subtle design factors in
present conference centres will be obvi-
ous. 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 to-
wards electronic meetings between dis-
tant participants, much greater use will be
made of technology to enable spontane-
ous communication between participants
(rather than at them), to represent graphi-
cally the pattern emerging from the con-
tributions made, and to facilitate synthe-
sis whilst protecting variety.

12. New challenges
Because the environment will enable col-
lective reflection on much more subtle
questions than at present, new chal-
enges will emerge - possibly to be recog-
nized as of greater (or more fundamental)
significance than the often symptomatic pre-
occupations of present meetings.

Meeting focus :

7. Agenda in focus
In a discussion an individual may be re-
jected for not « sticking to the point ». In such 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 pro-
gramme, focus may only be achieved
through the agenda of individual ses-
sions or possibly through a concluding
plenary session. What is focus in a meet-
ning 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 ques-
tion of establishing and maintaining the
relationship of a variety of subsidiary con-
cerns to one central concern, even though
the proponents of particular subsidiary
concerns may not recognize each other's
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 par-
tially (or un-) related concerns. The prob-
tem 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, de-
sire or ability to relate the multiple points
of focus to one another or to a single un-
derlying 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 retain any classification or
sharpening of focus in preference to a
more diffuse focus or none at all. An uncooked
meeting may be viewed as more creative or
effective under certain conditions, of
perhaps all that is feasible. Note that fo-
cus may be achieved without any verbal
acknowledgement of its nature.

6. Aims, objectives and goals
Although it is possible to make useful dis-
tinctions between these, it is their differ-
ence from focus which should be noted.
Each of them is in one way or another an
intention or desire as opposed to the def-
ite achievement characteristic of focus.
But focus is also a precondition for them,
im that it interrelates the various ele-
ments 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 inade-
quate.

7. Focus and transformation
To achieve whatever transformation it in-
tends, 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.

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necessary to the transformation. Focus ensures that the configuration of the participants rather than allowing it to displace inciden
tually. Individual actions are then mutually reinforcing rather than allowing it of displa-
palpably ineluctably. Individual actions are then mutually reinforcing rather than mutu-
ifying. Depending on the nature of the meeting, focus may also be required to disperse as it is not the here-and-now.
8. Strategy and process
Focus may be brought about by an appro-
riate strategy for a process from the prior unfocused condition - a focusing procedure. Such strategy may even be 
considered a function of focus.
9. Structure and focus
One method of ensuring focus is through the 
conventional hierarchical structure of executive and other programme comit-
tees and officers, culminating in the meet-
ing president. The weakness of this ap-
proach results from the limitations of the simple hierarchy as a means of appropri-
ately channeling and integrating the in-
formation flows associated with interre-
lated topics. This is especially true when the hierarchy also has to perform protocol and other non-substantive functions which prevent either the executive direc-
tor or the president from ensuring a sub-
stantial synthesis, even if they were able.
10. Focus and configuration
Where hierarchical ordering of the meet-
ing takes place, the lines of responsibility no longer suffice to contain the complexity of the subject matter; a programme matrix may be used. When this is inadequate a more complex configuration is required - for example, the critical path and network diagrams. The purpose of such a diagram is to reveal the dependency of events in that focus is no longer possible if the com-
plicity exceeds the ability of participants to comprehend. And in order to maintain comprehensibility the configuration of is-
sues must contain elements of symmetry and pattern to reinforce memorability and comprehensibility. Therefore, it is a necessary « investment » for all participants to comprehend the whole configuration, there must be suffi-
cient overlap both to maintain connected-
ness and to prevent loss of confidence in the chain of overlaps linking the most dis-
tant parts of the configuration.
11. Focus and the individual
The adequacy of the configuration de-
pends on the quality of the participants and the extent to which its features en-
gage their attention and energy. The gra-
ter the weight reflected in the configura-
tion, the greater the potential, but also not necessarily so that participants will only be engaged partially or superficially and that the focus will be trivial. Powerful fo-
cus is achieved when the meeting config-
uration matches to a significant degree the psychic configuration of the partici-
pants. Participants respond to finding their own condition reflected in the meet-
ing configuration, and the meeting reflect-
ed within themselves. It is this resonance which energizes the meeting. Any action through the meeting is then directly con-
sistent with the individual’s own develop-
ment and calls upon all the participant is able to contribute because of the manner in which that contribution results in per-
natural growth through the meeting. The meeting configuration thus reinforces connections which enable focus and transformation at a new level of signifi-
cance, both collective and individual.
Focus : a checklist
Below are listed, in no particular order, dif-
ferent aspects of focus, or processes which tend to occur when a meeting is in focus.

- Category transformation : a condition of focus should permit a reordering of the categories governing the meeting and its organization.
- Transcendental transformation : a condition of focus empowers the meeting or act at a new level of significance in the light of emer-
gent values.
- Risk : a condition of focus, because of the radical nature of the transforma-
tions which are then feasible, is also a condition of high risk. Such risk is a ne-
cessary « investment » (in the sense of « nothing venture nothing gain »).

Losing focus
1. Maintaining focus
The nature of focus may be partially un-
derstood 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.

- Topic change too rapid
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 situa-
tion may be aggravated by poor verbal presentation, particularly when an audio-
visual presentation would be cleaner and quicker.
- Topic change too subtle
When the meeting is switching between supposedly related topics, this may be done too rapidly for the participants to re-
late any permanent understanding of their connection.
- Time 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
9. Games and traps
Discussion of topics may become enmeshed in various games and traps from which participants find it impossible to extricate themselves. Such « sub-routines » may divert all energy from the fundamental 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 the 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 weakness is the focus which is ill possible.

Focus subtleties: public relations
1. Although strong criticism can be made of the conventional use of « public relations » techniques in meetings, especially when clumsily done for simplistic purposes, skilled practitioners are sensitive to dimensions otherwise ignored. It is the sensitivity which can contribute considerableness 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 stress at all cost the qualities and significance of those responsible for the event, of the event itself, of the participants, 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 garment of seeming glamour and significance. This of course serves to « paper over » any cracks in the arrangement, effectively turning each moment of the meeting into a piece of theatre, however thinly the sets. Participant awareness of the reality, as it contrast with the image, generates cynicism and a counter-productive « magic ».

3. One feature of this problem is the tendency to reinforce the status quo and to conceal awareness 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 dependency upon the « showmanship » strengths of PR techniques to provide « attention grabbers » to arrest the time of participants. These may extend from glossy audio-visuas 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 both 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 sensitivity collectively is one known through the rituals of less artificial cultures with a more organic response to a happening. It would appear that the « civilization » concept underlying 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 their perspectives together more effectively, in order 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 fuller 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 tend 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 empathise with each other, possibly stimulated by a quote of antipathy which provides 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).
Interdisciplinary
1. The need in meetings of integrate 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 accept. 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 defending his familiar point of view, and more or less justifying his own individual pre-suppositions.
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 so-called «academic» ideas. 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 social problems which give rise to large conferences at this time can adequately be handled within any one discipline. 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 consultants. 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 aggregation, 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 personalize 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 integrating the interdisciplinary resources available in order to guide significant change.

Integrative failure
1. Definition
Although integrative skills may be successfully applied to a situation their efficacy 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.
9. Dogmatic 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 remembrance of such a synthesis, coloured by the perspective of those who achieve it, may be difficult to apprehend. Hence, it is possible to achieve a sense of synthesis 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 by recording comparisons between the perspectives or elements of interest, but only if the synthesis is recognized as such. This corresponds to the use of the prefix « trans- » as in transdisciplinary.

6. Temporary 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).

5. Tokenism

Emphasis may be placed on the image or desirability of synthesis in order to conceal inability to achieve any steps towards a significant degree of synthesis, coloured by the perspective of a particular viewpoint. This corresponds to the use of the prefix « trans- » as in transdisciplinary.

4. Simplification

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

3. Reduction in quantity

In a dynamic situation it may be possible to achieve some measure of integration in extreme cases this may conceal a deeper sense of collective insecurity, however it is to be expected that a greater degree of synthesis is possible.

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.

1. 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, oversimplified, unnecessarily defensive and generally immature. In extreme cases this may conceal a deeper sense of collective insecurity, however it is disguised. The depth of this may be illustrated by the following classic description for the case of an individual: « Even when one finds that what one is doing is wrong, one is unable to stop, unable to do anything about it. »

1.1. Agglutinative 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 of 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 the 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 recognizes... » But frequently such acknowledgement is purely formal and disguises the lack of any coherent collective self-image.

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5.3 A collective sense of the limitations of occur and the conditions or states into the meeting as a whole and in terms of the processes to which the meeting is sub-

5.1 A collective awareness of the range of fail to reflect on their own condition, their ministrative criteria. This situation can be reflected in any associated bodies or pro-

5.4 A collective recognition of the develop-

Participant and meeting trans-
formation: the assumption that none is required

1. There is an implicit assumption in meet-

2. The academic assumes the ability to take up some neutral stance, often at a higher level of abstraction, from which ef-
factive observation can take place without either changing the observed social pro-
cesses or being changed by them. For ex-
ample, political scientists or peace re-
searchers 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 col-
leagues. Yet within those frameworks they will deplore the lack of attention paid to their conclusions. The question of im-

proving the organization or meeting struc-
tures through which they work is con-
sidered 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 nega-
tive consequences and without they themselves being changed by the action. In both cases there is an assumption of in-
dependence from social processes, al-
though 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 se-
rious examination of its own social role (e.g. the sociology of political science, chemistry, economics, etc.), except for sociology itself, and it is doubtful wheth-

5. Associated with this is the assumption, in preparing or attending a meeting, that (new) content can always be treated for-
matically without the necessity for ex-
pose to (new) learning experience. This is partic-
larly the case with values. It is assumed that all those we make refer-
ence to « peace », « quality of life », « jus-
tica », « freedom », etc. have been ex-
posed 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 communica-
ting. There is thus a wide-
pread assumption of common un-
derstanding of values which obtrudes any need for shared experience or any self-
change in order to acquire that under-
standing.

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

7. This assumption suppresses any re-
ognition of the possibility that, in order for a meeting to act effectively in response to new problem complexes, it may be ne-
cessary for the participants and the meet-
ing to undergo a process of transfor-
amion. And without such transformation any conclusions will have little significance of impact. This assumption is only recog-
nized as invalid by those who work on crop therapy and related forms of person-
development. Unfortunately those ex-
cept in these fields themselves have diffi-
culty in ensuring acceptance of these
spective without making meeting pro-
cesses dependent upon them or their fa-
voured method).