

THE CONTRIBUTION OF EVALUATION TO PROGRAM AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT - THE USE OF "WHOLE SYSTEM" GROUP PROCESSES

THE BASIC ISSUE

Essentially I'm interested in exploring how evaluation approaches can be improved by incorporating large-group methods, and how organisational change approaches that use large-group processes can be improved by incorporating evaluation methods.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is a field that accurately, validly and rigorously explores the value or worth of human activities. The term is most commonly applied to the assessment of publicly funded social programs, but can cover just about any human endeavour. In recent years there has been increasing focus on the role of evaluation as a learning or organisational development tool. There are also debates about whose values are used to judge the worth of projects, programs or activities.

In the USA – and to a lesser extent Australasia and the UK – the methods of evaluation have been drawn from the applied social sciences. Interview, survey and small group processes have been the dominant data collection tool. Written reports and oral presentations have been the dominant reporting tools. The inherent assumption that underpins most evaluation methodologies is that valid and accurate data leads to reliable information; and reliable information influences appropriate organisational and individual behaviour.

These assumptions are being increasingly challenged. The experience of many in the evaluation field is that accurate, valid and appropriate information per se does not necessarily promote program development, or appropriate responses. Organisations often respond defensively to uncomfortable results, individuals feel exposed to ridicule and information is selectively used.

In other words, established evaluation approaches have a good record at providing accurate, valid and appropriate insights, but have had mixed success in getting these incorporated into individual and organisational decision making.

In order to overcome these drawbacks, evaluation methods have increasingly drawn from the action research, strategic planning, business planning, community development and organisational development fields. Underpinning these approaches is the assumption that the joint and open exploration of possibilities, interpretations, problems, puzzles, contradictions and conflicts leads to innovative and sustained improvements. There is substantial debate about which of these approaches and under what circumstances satisfy the requirements of accuracy, validity and appropriateness.

One area that has relatively little attention is the potential role of large "whole system" group processes in evaluation.

LARGE GROUP BASED “WHOLE SYSTEM” ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE PROCESSES

Large group based, whole system organisational change processes have a long history. The idea of gathering large numbers of people with different perspectives in one place at one time in order to explore and resolve important issues is hardly new. The traditions of Maori hui in New Zealand, Quaker meetings in the UK, town meetings in the USA all have origins that stretch back centuries.

What I want to explore is the particular form of large group processes that have emerged in the last 50 years based on the groundwork of people such as Bion (group dynamics), von Bertalanffy (systems theory), Lewin (action research), Revans (action learning), Lippett (experiential learning), Emery (organisational design) and Trist (socio-technical systems).

Out of their initial work has evolved a wide variety of processes that as a major (but not exclusive) feature groups between 20 and 2000 or more to identify key issues and resolve them. The fundamental idea is that all, or at least a major proportion of those affected by an issue or development process have direct input into its resolution.

Such processes include :-

- Search Conference
- Future Search
- Real Time Strategic Change
- SimuReal
- Participative Design
- Gemba Kaizen
- Dialogue
- Whole-Scale Change
- Open Space Technology
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Conference Model

Some of these date back to the early 1960's (eg Search Conference), whilst others (eg Real Time Strategic Change) are relatively recent. Consequently many approaches are very well tried and tested. The claims that these methods provide a successful means of sustained organisational and community development appear valid. Inevitably, there are debates about the relative merits of these methods, and when (and when not) to use them. Although these debates are important and may be critical, that is not what I wish to focus on.

SO WHAT ?

My primary interest is that evaluation *and* large group approaches share many similar objectives. They both wish to assist appropriate responses to issues that are informed by insights from a wide range of sources. They often use similar methods for collecting and analysing data, developing insights and promoting appropriate responses.

Indeed, they frequently share the same underpinning principles, even though historically they have travelled different paths. Both have an “insight” component and both have an “action” component.

On the other hand some of the differences are striking. What intrigues me, is that in my own experience, the major strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches are often complementary. In my experience, the main weakness of many large group oriented approaches is the quality of “insight” – which is precisely the main strength of evaluation approaches. The main weakness of evaluation approaches is the quality of “action” – a major strength of large group approaches.

THE BIG QUESTION

For me the big question is whether it is theoretically and practically possible to blend the strengths of both approaches, and arrive at a more powerful process.

Some large group based approaches (eg those developed by Dick Axelrod and Paul Tolchinsky) come close. Some evaluation approaches do too (eg the “Snyder” evaluation in the Bob Dick version, some methods that have developed from so-called “Utilization” or “Empowerment” approaches).

However, on the whole the answer is not clear cut.

Evaluation approaches generally seek to get to the core issues, and as a result often explores “undiscussibles” and raises issues that expose deep divisions within the community it is investigating. Traditionally this favours the individual, anonymous data collection approach and analytical methods that tend to rest on “expert” opinion, or “independent” viewpoints.

Large group processes are often seeking commitment to agreed change; and have a “first safe steps” approach to action. This can mean that deep conflict or undiscussible issues remain unaired or unresolved until more appropriate times.

Some tell me that resolving these two are impossible – large group process is inherently consensual – seeking out and building on common ground; evaluative processes are not. Others disagree.

I want to see if it is possible, and if so what benefits it brings to both approaches.

WHERE THE ANSWERS MAY LAY

Where to start looking

The question of where to start looking is an interesting one. In my view, two countries have people that are closest to resolving these issues; Australia and the United States. Australia has a long and innovative action research tradition, whilst the US has had the intellectual and institutional capacity to allow the widest range of large group processes to be extensively researched and developed. New Zealand has a unique process the Maori hui. From an organisational development point of view

this hui are largely unresearched and may provide some clues that are particularly useful within a New Zealand context. Perhaps beyond.

What to start looking at

Notions of common ground and the use of “difference”

To what extent is common ground essentially to large group processes, and how much can “difference” be explored constructively ?

Many of the large group processes are based around the notion of basing action around “common ground”. Many of the processes spend much of their time identifying what that ground might be. This approach is backed up by substantial literature that suggests that finding a shared link between individuals leads to more sustainable resolution of issues than that focussing on what people differ on. My own view is that in practice, things might be a bit more fuzzy. To demonstrate this I’m going to focus on two large group processes – Future Search and Search Conference.

Billie Alban and Barbara Bunker point out in their book *Large Group Interventions*, that one of differences between Future Search and Search Conference is the way they handle conflict: Future Search puts it to one side, and Search Conference seeks to identify what is truly conflicting and then puts it to one side. I am wondering whether there is a difference between “espoused theory” and “theory in use” here. My experience is that in practice, even Future Search does quite a bit of negotiating around the conflict zone, and that the differences are never really put aside. The question then needs to be posed whether this sends mixed messages to participants, and if it does, how significant the impact is.

For these and other reasons, there seem to be a number of people who are seeking to go beyond the identification of “common ground” and avoidance, or downgrading, of “conflict”.

There are two discernible threads to this.

One implicitly rejects the notion that people can only move forward into difficult areas when they have found an area of common ground around which they can start.

The other challenges the depth of the common ground developed during Search processes. Again there seem to be two threads :-

- i. Working on difference, and establishing some form of dialectic around it, may uncover more profound areas of common ground - perhaps nearer to Emery’s four basic human values. The argument is that initiatives based on this kind of common ground may in the end may prove more sustainable, and more transformative. Ann Martin at Cornell for instance, suspect that the process of dialoguing around areas of difference might lead to deeper insights and perhaps firmer common ground. Some believe that failure to surface differences leads to “group think” and to the perpetuation of unchallenged assumptions.

Simply maximising the range of stakeholders, or encouraging an egalitarian spirit may not be good enough on their own.

- ii. The concept used in the process that “all ideas are valid”, gets confused in participants’ minds with “all ideas are true”. The avoidance of conflict may perpetuate organisational and community myths which may go unchallenged. It does not guarantee that the “undiscussibles” with a community of practice become discussible and thus able to be worked on. This is where some of the ideas around using Chris Argyris’ and Don Schon’s work seems to fit (see later).

Some mechanical issues about identifying common ground

There are clearly some mechanical issues about how Future Search is put together. I have similar concerns about Search Conference, but for clarity am focussing on Future Search.

The major problem to be resolved seems to be *identifying* “common ground”. What I have witnessed in several Search processes is not so much identifying common ground as two things in parallel :-

- i. Negotiating majority ground
- ii. Clarifying meanings

In some large group processes this occurs throughout the event, in Search Conferences it tends to be around the middle, and in Future Search it is towards the end. In Future Search participants are often at this point being required to do conceptually a heck of a lot of things at the same time, and the mechanics of the process don’t seem to help very much. In particular, Future Search for the first time requires skilled facilitation.

Can we find a way mechanically which smooths this process ? Or is the very struggle important (I think Wiesbord & Janoff in their book *Future Search* imply that it is). If it is, then how can we improve on the current impact, because what I believe a lot of participants remember is not that they learned a lot in the struggle, but that the process was “wrong”.

Negotiating majority ground

The first question to ask is whether negotiating majority ground is, in practice, any less desirable than seeking common ground ? Intellectually my answer is yes; if you base the method around achieving common ground then that is what it should achieve. In practical terms, I am not so sure.

One of the things that has struck me a few times is that participants often cannot get any quantitative idea of how common or uncommon the ground is. When a person expresses disagreement with an emerging agreement, the text book answer in Future Search is to ask who else shares that view. In most cultures, merely asking whether anyone else agrees is not enough. There are a couple of reasons here :-

- i. Reluctance to be seen challenging established norms. I am reminded of my partner's recent experience in a discussion of a week long residential course he was on. There were some widely acknowledged and privately discussed problems about the catering, but the few who spoke out about it at the end of the week were heavily criticised by others for being insensitive to the host's hospitality.
- ii. There is a ping pong match, where participants constantly restate their positions almost like a reaffirmation, rather than trying to move the discussion forwards.

Both dynamics appear to be tinged with an anxiety that they may be the minority view.

Voting, either using a show of hands or display of the inevitable red dots, seems an inadequate and rather static means of resolving this issue. Dick Axelrod mentioned that he sometimes get participants physically to stand behind the identified areas of potential "common ground" they feel committed to. This achieves two things. It helps quantify the level of feeling for and against, and it also provides a physical setting and metaphor for negotiation or clarification between the two positions. It strikes me that there could be all kinds of interesting variations on this technique.

You are still faced however with the potential problem of clarifying "meaning".

Clarifying meaning

What often happens in the processes of identifying "common ground" is a definitional debate over wording. However, what I sense is often *really* going on is a search for meaning. The large group processes I'm most familiar with, don't seem to structure this search for meaning very well, except at a very high meta level.

Dave Deshler at Cornell University described to me a process using a history line technique to get participants to identify key words about their joint pasts and discuss the meanings, to them, of those words. This was an exercise carried out in the early stages of a large group process. Thus participants got a chance to understand and explore these differences and begin to identify which ones are essentially definitional confusions, and which ones may touch on some quite profound contradictions and conflicts.

Surfacing the learning process - an aid towards sustainability ?

There seem to be four different perspectives about sustaining ideas generated during large group events :-

- Trust the principles, process and the people. It will all come out in the wash.
- Include some methods and tools in the process which will be useful to ensure sustainability
- Ensure that the follow-up is planned with the event. Even better, drop the event into an overall process, so that it doesn't dominate.
- Surface the learning process, so that participants understand the learning those not participating will have to go through.

I have views and ideas about the first three, but want to focus on the last one. I would like some help here, since it relates to several interests of mine. In particular, what ways are there for surfacing the learning process? I have tried reflection techniques, and critical incident questions, but they often seem just a bit contrived and cumbersome.

The first question that occurs to me is how explicit does the learning have to be? For instance, does the smoothness of group processes (especially Future Search) actually work against participants learning about the learning process they have been through? Or is that the wrong question? If it just as powerful for the learning to be tacit then what methods are available to large group processes which help or hinder tacit learning? How can people “pass on” tacit learning?

If it is a good idea to try and surface the learning process, then what are the best processes for achieving this?

For instance, is it a bonus that the final discussions around “common ground” can sometimes be difficult? Is this the opportunity where participants can consciously learn about even the difficulties of working around “common ground” and thus the problems of focussing solely on areas of differences? Is this, as was suggested by a the Future Search facilitator, the point at which participants can learn about what they are likely to encounter when they go back into the outside world (ie having to explain what you meant, argue over definitions etc). If so, how do we exploit that moment of potential learning?

Would structured reflection processes be helpful? How can they assist the learning process whilst keeping the integrity of the overall process?

Questions

Out of this a series of question flow.

1. To what extent is the discussion about “common ground” and “difference” a mechanical one. Is it a matter of finding the right method or technique? If so, are there any “evaluation” methods that are appropriate?
2. To what extent does “surfacing” the learning process contribute to sustainability, and how much would that improve large group’s abilities to evaluate effectively? What ways are there for surfacing the learning process?
3. What methods and techniques are good at allowing people to discuss “meaning” in order to gain greater evaluative insights?

The Ideas Of Argyris And Schön

The work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön is increasingly part of evaluation debates. The debate about whether evaluation is about double or triple loop learning. Their work is also widely used in the organisational development field. Many (including myself) find the theory powerfully insightful, but devilishly difficult to translate *safely* into practice. I have often found that the instruments are so sharp and cut so

deeply into fundamental organisational and personal conflicts that people do get hurt and bleed.

However, the very precision makes the approach attractive from an evaluative point of view, and some of versions lend themselves to group process.

To the best of my knowledge no popular, and easily managed, large or medium scale group process has been developed based directly their ideas. There are a range of exercises which move in this direction such as those in the *5th Discipline Field Book*, Tim Dalmau and Bob Dick's "Discussing Undiscussibles" process, Robert Kegan's "Big Ass" process, and my own "Evaluating organisational culture" workshop.

So is it both desirable and possible to develop a safe, widely applicable medium to large group process drawing directly from Argyris and Schon's work? Over the past few years I've floated the idea with a wide range of people involved in evaluation, action research, organisational development and large group processes. In general terms, there was quite a bit of interest, although :-

- there was also a sense that this is a hard area (both technically, and also something which people find intellectually difficult to do).

and

- it is not clear whether the route is to start completely afresh; build outwards from existing exercises; or modify well tried methods such as Search (assuming it was consistent with the underlying methodological principles of Search).

Questions

1. What are the benefits to evaluation or organisational development, if any, of developing such processes?
2. If it is a desirable and possible idea, where is a good place to start?
 - i From first principles - in which case what should they be?
 - ii From some existing exercises and techniques. If so which ones?
 - iii From some existing large or medium group processes. If so, which ones and what are the key modifications needed?
3. What should be the underlying philosophy of such a process?
4. How do we ensure that the processes are "safe"?
5. To what extent is the discussion about "common ground" and "difference" a mechanical one (ie how do we get "espoused" and "in-use" better aligned).
6. To what extent is the discussion about "common ground" and "difference" a shift in thinking about large group processes (or the introduction of old ideas from new sources). If so, what are the implications?
7. To what extent does "surfacing" the learning process contribute to sustainability, and how important is it in relation to other strategies? What ways are there for surfacing the learning process?

8. What methods and techniques are good at allowing people to discuss “meaning” ?
9. To what extent can the history of hui contribute to the development of large group theory and practice; and vice versa ? Does anyone know of anyone with the skills, knowledge and openness to begin the exploration ?

BOB WILLIAMS
bobwill@actrix.gen.nz