SOFT SYSTEMS WORKSHOP

Bob Dick, an action research thinker and practitioner, became interested in the various dialectics that underpin SSM (Dick, 2002). In doing so, he re- framed SSM into a workshop-based method comprising four stages, one for each key dialectic.

The four dialectics are:

1. Between the situation as it is and the perspectives that can be attached to that situation
2. Between these perspectives and the possible ways of addressing the situation from each perspective
3. Between these possible ways of addressing the situation (i.e., the oughts) and the actual situation (i.e., the is)
4. Between the plan that emerges from the deliberation and the implementation of the plan (i.e., between steps 7 and 1)

The workshop can be described as a sequence of comparisons (this is a simplification of Checkland's own description). The following questions take you through the sequence.

1   What is happening here? What are people saying, doing, feeling, thinking?

2   What is most important here? What handful of things is this system trying to achieve?

3   **Comparing Q1 and Q2**, how well have I captured the important features?

4   How else might these important things be done? Ignoring how they are actually done, what are some other promising ways of achieving the same outcomes?

5   **Comparing Q2 and Q4**, how well have I devised alternative and effective ways of achieving the outcomes?

6   **Comparing Q1 and Q4**, which of the features of the model suggest better ways of doing things -- ways which are both improvements, and feasible?

7   How might we implement these desirable and feasible improvements?

8   **Comparing Q1 and Q7**, how well are the improvements being implemented?

So in practice :

Participants are divided into four small teams. Pairs will do. In a large workshop, the best – indeed almost ideal – approach is to have several groups of four teams running in parallel. This really enhances the learning that SSM can bring.

Team 1 discusses the situation (whatever it is) and captures it as a diagram. They explore what is happening here, what people are saying, doing, feeling, and thinking. They ask "What is most important here? What handful of things is this system trying to achieve?"

Team Two listens, and asks questions of clarification only.

Teams Three and Four listen and individually record any significant thoughts

Team 2 then identifies the different perspectives through which this situation can be viewed. It discusses these perspectives with Team 1. If more than one perspective seems important, then multiple teams can take one perspective each. When the key perspectives are agreed between the two teams, Team 2 then try identify this perspective in terms of a transformation (i.e. a change of something or somebody from one state to another state) – the T in CATWOE. After they've got a reasonable attempt, they discuss this with the first team. Team 2 completes the tasks in step 3 of the methodology; completing the rest of CATWOE and deciding on the root definitions for each perspective.

Members of Team's Three and Four listen and record any critical issues they think arise. They may ask questions of clarification, but must not contribute in any other way.

Team 3 is under instructions to forget the way in which the situation operates in reality. Team 3's only task is to devise ways of achieving what Team 2 identified but without any reference to reality. Their only task is to devise other ways of achieving the T, *that flow logically* from CATWOE. No other factors are allowed to be added.

At first they try on their own. Then, in discussion with the second team, they check that their creative transformations achieve the desired outcomes within the CAWOE constraints.

If you have a large workshop operating as a single unit (see above), then a really good idea is to have several Team Three's. In this way you get lost of different approaches to the "transformation", which is one of the great but often ignored strengths of SSM.

Team 3 then presents its ideas to Team 1. Together they discuss how well these transformations achieve the outcomes and how feasible it would be from technical, social and political angles.

Team 4 has been briefed to listen to the conversation between Team 3 and Team 1 and noting possible changes to the way things are currently done. Team 4 decides what changes are feasible and desirable.
Team 4 are given a couple of minutes to refine their list of possible desirable and feasible changes.

Team 1, in discussion with team 4, decide which changes *are* desirable and feasible.

Debrief

The debrief is critical since Checkland emphasises the learning process developed by SSM.

Here's some good debrief questions :-

- o   What happened that you expected to happen ?
- o   What didn't happen that you expected to happen ?
- o   What happened that was unexpected ?
- o   What still puzzles you ?
- o   What do you now think or know that you didn't before ?
- o   What "aha's" did you get ?
- o   Now what ?