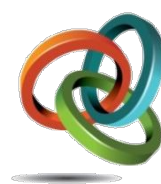




Wisdom in organisations

Part 1

**Journal of
the Association for Management Education
and Development**



amed

developing people
developing organisations

Guest Editor: Julie Allan



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The wisdom of Dynamic Facilitation

Andrea Gewessler



Just a few weeks before writing this article, I experienced Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils at first hand, hosting a workshop in London. Jim Rough, the creator of these approaches, came from the USA to deliver the workshop and I'm grateful to my colleagues in Austria and Switzerland for drawing my attention to this work. My company is always seeking useful ways of assisting meaningful and lasting change with organisations and communities, and this seemed to fit the bill. So here, I share what I have found about Dynamic Facilitation, including how these approaches are supporting political and social change in Austria.

Key words

dynamic facilitation, change, meaning, collaboration, wisdom, Wisdom Councils

The usual meeting ...

We have all taken part in conventionally facilitated meetings. Participants are usually led through a process in which the whole group is expected to move in linear fashion from one step to the next. Everyone needs to be on the same page in such a meeting. Step 1 may be that the group explores the nature of the problem in a degree of detail, step 2 may be an exploration of possible solutions, key barriers may be identified next in step 3 and, finally, in step 4 a SMART action plan tends to conclude the discussion.

I have facilitated meetings like this myself and they work perfectly well with certain kinds of problems - fairly simple ones. These conventional meetings serve to organise the thinking, get focus behind implementation and manage risks successfully. However, increasingly, teams, organisations, communities and society face issues that are highly complex. So much so that at times there is confusion or at least disagreement about what the problem actually is.

What's the problem? When we look at the global crisis that we are currently facing how would you define what the problem is? Is it human nature, population growth, religion, the neo-liberal economic system, climate change, our food system, the financial system, or addiction to growth? These issues create passion, emotion and energy but they remain unresolved. So, often, discussions are a battle between egos whether at international or local level. The situation gets polarised by people of different opinions, the focus is too often on determining who is right and who is wrong and which side we can agree with rather than on looking for resonance and for creating new choices which will resolve the situation.

Issues get analysed and divided into increasingly smaller chunks. This makes the chunks seemingly more manageable but they frequently cease to be representative of how we perceive the problem. This breaking down of the larger systemic issue also saps energy because somehow we don't feel so passionate about the bits as we did about the whole. The focus may be better but it is on something we don't much care about.

So, we waste time in irresolvable argument, focused in ways that can't add value, losing vital energy for change.

Creating choice

It is for such reasons as these, we learned through the workshop, that the intention of Dynamic Facilitation (DF) is choice-creating rather than decision-making. Dynamic Facilitation wants to use the energy we have for the issue by allowing us to deal with it in its full messiness.

So, in a DF meeting there is an apparently neat structure that aims to ensure engagement with messiness. Participants sit in a semi-circle, with four flipcharts and a trained facilitator in front of them. There is a flipchart each for: problem-statements, solutions, data and concerns. Participants are asked to be authentic in bringing their understanding of the problem, solutions, supporting data and concerns about the problem to the meeting at any time. There is no such thing as "not relevant at this stage" or, "can you hang on to this thought till later" or even, "maybe at a different meeting". Every contribution is acknowledged and written down on the flipcharts.



The facilitator:

- sorts the contributions by putting them on the most appropriate flipchart
- protects contributors and what they have said
- asks questions to elicit further details and
- helps individuals to be brought into the conversation.

It is tough work for the facilitator to keep the flame of a group of 8 to 12 people burning, whilst honouring each and every contribution and keeping the red thread going. Participants can, with their words and contributions, be on any flipchart at any time. The facilitator's role is not to guide people to focus on the categories of solutions, problems, concerns or data but to get their contribution most meaningfully into the space.

In the training, we used live issues brought to the group and Jim guided us through the series of stages. These usually start off with what is referred to as a purge, the stage when all the feelings that have been stored up about the topic come out. This can be a very heated phase which, because of its unloading function, rarely reveals novel insights. However, once people have said whatever they needed to say a very productive stage is reached that often culminates in an insight for the whole group. Participants reach conclusions, reframe the problem and generate the energy to do something about it.

We The People

Wisdom Councils are a particular type of gathering that uses Dynamic Facilitation. An interesting explanation of them and how they came into being can be found on the site of the non-profit organisation founded by Jim and others in 2002, the Center for Wise Democracy (see references). In brief, a Wisdom Council is a group of about 12 randomly selected people within a community or organisation, who come together for a day and a half, often a Friday afternoon and Saturday, to talk about issues that matter to them. We are not talking about a topic pre-determined as important by whoever is considered in charge but one that emerges from 'We The People'. These may often be individuals who do not carry any formal authority within an organisation or community.

The focus is choice creation, not decision making. Taking decisions is a cutting-away, while choice-creating is an adding-to. There is no voting on the best solution and no formal consensus but a working together till everyone feels it is quite clear what are the intelligent responses to the issue at hand. Participants bring their knowledge but also their feelings and experiences into the Wisdom Council.

After a day and half, that randomly selected Wisdom Council reports back its solutions and its thinking to a wider group, which in the case of large organisations may still only represent a small microcosm of the whole.

A commitment to act is not based on the Wisdom Council having the personal power to make changes across the whole organisation or community themselves. Instead, by bringing issues into the wider forum, the issues and solutions will find resonance and those who have commissioned the Wisdom Council are being held accountable by the people. Once a commitment to the process is made, Wisdom Councils are convened every six months and the conversation that follows is ongoing.

Social and political change in Austria

The potential of this way of working has been spotted by the Office for Future Affairs in Austria, where Dr Manfred Hellrigl has now ensured the training of several cohorts of facilitators and the use of Wisdom Councils as a vehicle for social and political change across the federal province of Vorarlberg in Austria. The Office for Future Affairs in Austria however is not alone in adopting the Wisdom Council as a way of creating

change through conversations that matter. Swisscom, a communications company in Switzerland, as well as communities in Canada, New Zealand and the US now work successfully with these processes.

It is human nature for people to want to make changes to processes and this has also happened in Austria, where a politician wanted the Wisdom Council to discuss a particular problem rather than leave it to We The People to choose. For the work that was pursued in Vorarlberg¹ this was an important step. Jim Rough, however, felt that it was important to make a distinction between these two processes and introduced the term Creative Insight Council, where the group of 12 talked about an issue that was given to them rather than chosen by themselves. I agree with this distinction as it slightly alters the way the voice of We the People is being used.

Here is a real live example of how Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils have been adapted to work effectively in Austria.



Dr Manfred Hellrigl, Director of the Office for Future Affairs , Provincial Administration of Vorarlberg Austria

How the Austrian Office for Future Affairs has used Dynamic Facilitation

On 25 April 2012, Andrea Gewessler interviewed Dr Manfred Hellrigl, Director of the Office for Future Affairs,

AG: How did you come to use Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils in Vorarlberg?

MH: In the 1990s the government of Vorarlberg ran a lot of environmental sustainability campaigns. The key things we learnt from these initiatives were that people do not like being told what to do, and that they were much more likely to be influenced in their behaviours if they were part of a conversation - and particularly one that was decentralised and participative.

We wanted to evaluate our earlier work and intended to adopt the approach of looking at what was not working as well as we wanted, so that we could improve. At that opportune moment we stumbled across Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and investigated what was working already instead. This in turn led us to appreciate the power of self-organising communities.

As a result we revisited our entire approach to change. Instead of going into communities with a project idea such as an energy campaign, we offered communities our support with their own concerns that they wanted to work on and find solutions for. We started to view and treat local residents as citizens again rather than as customers.

Then in 2004 Vorarlberg was determined to become a child-friendly place. We wanted to use the learning of using participative approaches, and organised a Citizens' Jury, inviting about 2,000 people and ending up with 75 local people who worked with us for four days to develop a child-friendly strategy for Vorarlberg. The interesting thing was that we also worked with some specialists in the field, and the insights and knowledge of citizens proved to be of the same quality as those of the 'experts'.

The only snag was that the Citizens' Jury turned out too expensive for us to pursue, so we went on the look-out for a viable alternative that would continue to provide a robust framework and results of high quality. This is how we came across Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council.

AG: What have been the challenges of using Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils?

MH: There are several factors which are central to using these approaches successfully. First of all it is challenging to find politicians who are willing to take the risk to work with approaches that do not allow for results to be pre-determined and where outcomes cannot be controlled.

The main fear that politicians have is that citizens could come up with fanciful wishes that require abundant financial resources and that are just not do-able. However, experience tells us that the opposite is the case – citizens generally recognise what is working and consider their own responsibilities in improving things further. Insights like this can only come from the people. If a politician claimed that things were going well and that we all had a responsibility to improve them further, it would sound inauthentic and like a party-political broadcast.

The next challenge is that once it is working, some politicians fear that their positions and roles become superfluous and again this is unfounded. Quite the contrary, these approaches give politicians finally a way of really knowing what concerns their local citizens, what their pains and wishes are and so are able to work much more productively for the people who elected them. Instead of second guessing, they tap into the wisdom of the people. And that insight is not just there, it gets created through and amidst the conversation.

What we have learnt is that these approaches work particularly well in two cases.

Firstly with communities which are simply innovative in their approach, who welcome change and creativity and always want to improve further – they really appreciate the insights gained from this type of work.

Secondly, we also find these approaches work when communities are at the end of their tether – when a problem has become so painful that a solution simply has to be found. The fact, however, is that this is a continuum with a rather large middle, and we are continually learning how to extend the effectiveness of what we are doing.

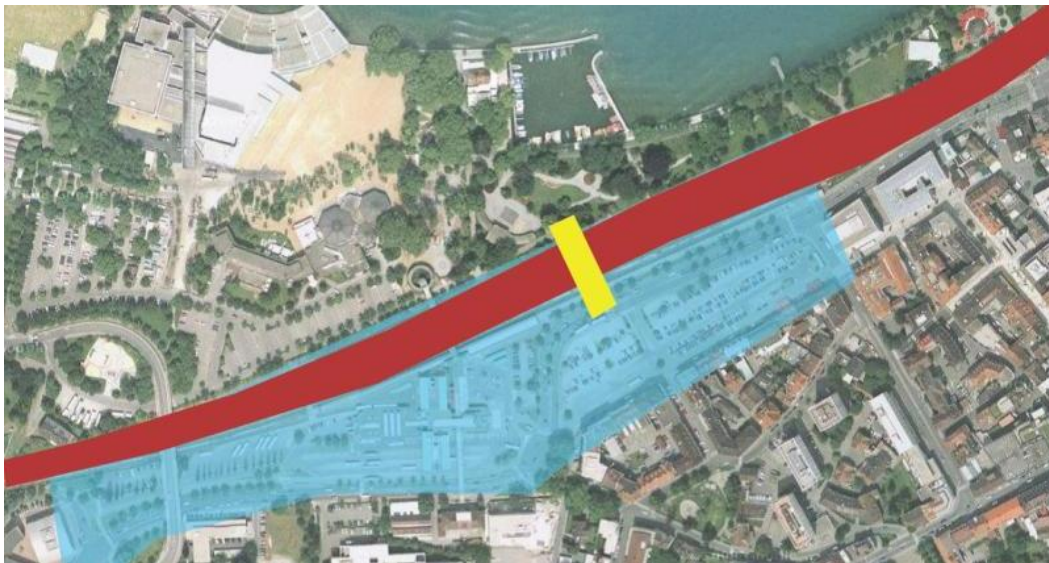
We do however know that unless politicians are signed up for the fact that this is an open process, there is no point in pursuing these approaches any further, which are quite far removed from the usual struggle for power and competitiveness.

AG: And what about the highlights?

MH: We have this great example of when we worked with the city of Bregenz, Vorarlberg's capital. There was a valuable piece of land right in the centre of town that had remained undeveloped for many years, and then the opportunity emerged to do something with it a few years ago. Architects had worked on the project for two years but it was also felt that citizens should be able to have a say.



First a different approach was tried which did not work, and then our Office for Future Affairs offered to support a participative approach using an amended version of the Wisdom Council, namely the Creative Insight Council. What was amazing was that the Creative Insight Council recognised what everyone else had missed, and that was that the town had been built with the railway line and the major road in town separating the city from the beautiful Lake Constanze, which in many ways defines the place.



The architects' plans had missed the opportunity to overcome the separation as it was perceived by the people. Even though they had planned an underpass, the citizens of Bregenz wanted an overt linkage between the two parts of town, a kind of Spanish steps that would become a new landmark, and a place for people to meet and enjoy themselves and the wonderful scenery. Far from criticising the architectural know-how of the experts, they added the wisdom of the local people, who knew exactly what was needed to make their city even more attractive, lively and liveable. The architectural plans were amended and the project has been a great success.



Reflections and resonances

What resonates deeply with me is that Dynamic Facilitation intends to work with the complexity of an issue and therefore focuses on the system rather than its components. Although tougher for the facilitator, there is a high level of scope for change that goes well beyond doctoring symptoms. Wisdom Councils appeal because they want to work with this passion that people have for complex issues, quite different from having people concentrate solely on their immediate circle of control and influence such as their diet, their own education and exercise habits. Wisdom Councils want to get people involved in the circle of concerns, which include things that we often feel powerless to change, and so they are a mechanism for organisations and society to reclaim the ability to influence and co-create.

I certainly don't think they are the only solution to our problems, but I would advocate the inclusion of Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils as important tools in any change agent's toolbox.



Seespange in Bregenz: Die geplante Überführung von der Seestadt zum Seerufer war im Bürgerbeteiligungsverfahren ein wichtiges Anliegen.
PHOTO: ARSIA ARCHITECTUR- & ZEICHNERLIEDSCHERLUTZ

Bregenz will Grundstücke veräußern

Stadt plant, Seestadt-Anteil und Gründe zu verkaufen, um „Spange“ zu finanzieren.

BREGENZ. Die Stadt Bregenz will sich von ihrem Fünf-Prozent-Anteil an Seestadt-Areal trennen. Beschlossen werden soll dieser Verkauf in der Stadtvertretungssitzung am 14. Oktober. „Es war für uns in der Planungsphase für die neue Seestadt wichtig, Miteigentümer der Liegenschaft zu sein, um sich damit das Mitspracherecht zu sichern“, betont Bürgermeister Markus Linhart. Es sei nun – da das Projekt auf Schiene ist

– an der Zeit, sich vom Anteil zu trennen. Zu den 360.000 Euro durch den Verkauf kommen weitere 620.000 Euro für zwei Grundstücke entlang der alten Bahnhofstraße. Diese knappe Million soll das „Startkapital“ für die „Spange“, die geplante Passage über die Bahn zum See, bilden.

„Wir wollen die Spange“

„Wenn wir die Spange wollen, dann müssen wir sie auch bezahlen“, meint Linhart. „Und die ‚Spange‘ ist ein unverzichtbarer Teil des Masterplans. Ohne die Einnahmen, die wir durch die

„Ohne die Einnahmen, die wir durch die Verkäufe lukrieren, wäre die Finanzierung nicht möglich.“

MARKEUS LINHART

Verkäufe lukrieren, wäre die Finanzierung aber nicht möglich.“

Befürchtungen, dass die Stadt mit dem Verkauf des Seestadt-Areals ihr Mitspracherecht in der weiteren Planungsphase verliert, zerstreut er: „Als Baubehörde

erster Instanz haben wir weiterhin die Sicherheit, dass der Masterplan eingehalten wird – und mehr Mitspracherecht hätten wir auch dann nicht mehr, wenn wir weiterhin den 5-Prozent-Anteil haben würden.“ Nun müsse zügig mit der Umsetzung des Masterplans begonnen werden. Die im September erzielte Einigung der ÖBB mit der Bietergruppe Rhombenbau und Scherler-Alge garantiere auch, dass gleichzeitig mit der Seestadt auch der Bahnhofsvorplatz in Angriff genommen wird. **FST**

Mehr zum Thema in der HEMAT BREGENZ und auf bregenz.vot.at

Notes

¹ Vorarlberg, the most westerly state in Austria, borders Germany, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. It has a population around 372,000. Further information: <http://www.vorarlberg.at/english/>;
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vorarlberg>

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More information

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Centre for Wise Democracy <http://www.wisedemocracy.org/>

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About the author

Andrea Gewessler is director of Change that Matters Ltd, an independent company working with organisations and communities to bring about transformational change through dialogue, collaboration and innovation, and is particularly active in the sustainability field. Her work is inspired by systems thinking, the U-process developed at MIT, and some of the emerging social technologies such as Future Search, Open Space, Change Labs and World Cafe.

You can [follow Andrea on Twitter](http://www.twitter.com/andreagewessler) (www.twitter.com/andreagewessler).

Contact: Andrea andrea@changethatmatters.co.uk, including for more information on training in Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils.

A note about AMED

AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations. Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

At AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations, to generate synergy and critical mass for change.

To find out more about us, you are welcome to visit our website www.amed.org.uk, or contact Linda Williams, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247

Invitations and notices

Happenings

Here is a selection of just a few AMED events and other milestones that occur between now and the publication of the Autumn 2012 issue of *e-O&P*. Everyone is welcome to come along, read or browse.

<p>15 June - AMED Writers' Group, Exploring work-life balance, with Shelagh Doonan,</p>	
<p>20-22 June – Tomorrow's Leadership Conference, Buckland Hall, Brecon Beacons, www.tomorrowsleadership.org</p>	
<p>17 August - AMED Writers' Group, Developing leadership and knowledge through the social process of writing', with Rob Warwick</p>	
<p>(25 July – 12 August: The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games) Plan your commitments to avoid the crush!</p>	
<p>24 August – Publication of the Autumn edition of e-O&P: Wisdom in Organisations, Part 2 www.amed.org.uk</p>	

For more information, visit www.amed.org.uk.

You and AMED



What's in it for you?

- Belonging to a committed team/community, having fun, and engaging with an interesting, creative, committed, diverse network of people.
- Experiencing the joy of contributing to leading edge thinking about personal, management, leadership and organisational development.
- Finding friendly support for your own personal and professional learning and development.
- Having opportunities to put into practice your insights into emergent, networked organisations.
- Experimenting with new ways of doing things.
- Gaining recognition for belonging to an outstanding community of practice – being asked to write for our journal and other publications, speak at conferences and facilitate seminars and workshops.
- Finding new business opportunities and connections through AMED connections.

What's in it for AMED?

- Lending your support for our commitment to co-creating knowledge, innovation and networking (KIN).
- Nurturing partnerships and collaborations with other like-minded organisations and networks.
- Introducing our quarterly journal e-Organisations and People to wider readerships.
- Seeking opportunities and facilitating activities for the benefit of our community.

Voluntary roles you might play

- For AMED Council, becoming:
 - A Trustee/Director if you are a full AMED Member, or
 - A Council Supporter if you are an AMED Networker.
- For e-Organisations and People, contributing as:
 - A member of the Editorial Board
 - Guest Editor
 - Author or Book Reviewer
 - Critical Friend
- Becoming Convenor of an AMED Special Interest, Local or Online Group
- Becoming an AMED Event Organiser, Facilitator or Speaker.
- Starting up and/or moderating an online Discussion Forum on the AMED website via NING.
- Initiating posts on AMED's Twitter and LinkedIn spaces.
- Becoming a contributor to AMED's 'think tank' conversations.

To find out more, you only have to ask.

Contact Linda at the AMED Office:

- 0300 365 1247; amedoffice@amed.org.uk; PO BOX 7578, Dorchester, DT1 9GD