



engaging people

specialists in engaging people

Volume 13 No. 2 NOVEMBER 2008

An Approach to Messiness

BY JOHN DENGATE

I need order, structure, the right answer! After all I am a scientist (metallurgist) by training, and all my background has been that certainty and rigour are essential to get good results. In fact I spent a good part of my career at BHP installing quality systems. These were rigorous, documented systems and processes to provide increased confidence that we would get consistent, effective results.

But then...In working with the operators many years ago, it soon became clear that better outcomes often emerged if I could let go a bit from the structure, live with a bit of uncertainty, and allow solutions to emerge from the people doing the job.

The structure was still important to provide a boundary to the work, but allowing a bit of uncertainty and "mess" seemed to stimulate people to think and act and to bring in new ideas that often gave better results.

I constantly see the same today as I and my colleagues work in projects with clients to engage different stakeholders, including local communities. We face the same tension. As professionals, we have the answer to engaging. We have objective x, process y, activity z. After all, people do engage us to be the expert.

But I have also learned to let go, live in the chaos and let the process details emerge more with a diversity of input.

And when I do, the result is inevitably better with more ownership of both the problem and the solution, a richer experience and a more enduring outcome.

But boy, am I nervous with the mess!



JOHN DENGATE

Twyfords New Senior Consultant

Twyfords is pleased to introduce our new Senior Consultant, Dr Susan Goff. Susan is passionate about participation. She sees it as a natural human right and responsibility, central to the integrity of democracy, and crucial to regeneration.

Drawing on eighteen years of practice, study and writing, Susan believes that participatory approaches to public and organisational development create the most viable knowledge with which people can work to meet their needs. In her experience, participatory interventions generate informed political support avoiding time-wasting conflict. They strengthen community and culture, and perhaps most importantly, recognise and celebrate human dignity even in difficult situations.

Susan works in three modes: process design and management, participatory strategy and engagement facilitation, and knowledge

generation. Her work involves designing structures and frameworks of participation to support multi-stakeholder engagement strategies in the interests of social and environmental sustainability. As a qualified Social Ecologist she brings collaboration and knowledge generation to strategic planning, problem solving and conceptual development in "new horizon" domains.

Susan believes that learning (inquiry, reflection, collaborative action) is the key to transforming our problems into shared wisdom for human and natural system well-being. Working one-on-one, in groups and across strategies she helps people to learn about participation in governance, development, learning and activism. As Susan sees it, participation is sustainability.



SUSAN GOFF

Messiness - a driver for change

BY MAX HARDY

“We can’t go out to the community with something this messy!”

I’ve heard this statement, or something similar, many times. In recent months I have been working on a large, long term, multi-agency, neighbourhood renewal project. The timeframe to present a business case to Cabinet had been abbreviated. Panic was setting in. Nothing unusual really.

The team I was advising had to decide how to involve the community. There were already challenging dynamics as agencies learned to work together as an internal community. There seemed to be a multitude of factors that worked against officers from different levels of government collaborating effectively.

Inviting people into the mess and working through it together, means there is a greater potential to clean it up. We share the real world of the mess, find possible solutions together and gain a new level of confidence and insight.

Then we debated how to involve the local community of residents. The team was nervous about “going out to consultation” with something sketchy, perhaps even messy. Would the community think poorly of them? Would the team seem unprofessional?

In our experience project teams often wait to talk to the community until their proposal looks very neat and finished. The professionals are comfortable, after all they are the experts here and they have developed a “good” proposal. However the community feels very little ‘ownership’ of the plan. Members feel they cannot influence anything of substance. They feel ‘done to’ and not ‘done with’.

Messiness, uncertainty and realities

BY SUSAN GOFF

Truth is, messiness has always been the seedbed of our good life. It is our fear-filled desire to control, absorbing our concentration and resources, that has allowed mess to grow out of sight and come back in bucket loads to mess us up.

But being messed up is not so far away from being loved up – it’s energetic, surprising, fertile and keeps us awake at night with all kinds of heart-beating thoughts. Mess is just a new pattern waiting to be seen – waiting for us to let go of the old ones so we can learn our way into the new. Mess flirts – it hides from us, shows only bits of itself, and changes in front of our eyes just when we think we have spotted the tangle.

But we are rarely successful if we try to sort it out logically. Yes, reconnaissance is essential in a renaissance, but mostly we let our

There is something magical and respectful about inviting a community into the ‘messiness’. Our purpose and the scope of the engagement must be clearly defined. This is where the project team needs to focus. We can allow the content, the process, even the outcomes of the engagement to emerge from the mess, confident that, if we follow clear and transparent principles of engagement, we will achieve an outcome that works for the project and that all stakeholders trust. It will fit a local culture more precisely than any pre-planned approach.



MAX HARDY

In this project, some said it would be sheer stupidity to involve the community when plans are in their embryonic form. I was tempted to quote Will Rogers – “If stupidity got us into this mess, then why can’t it get us out?” Then again, I am reminded of Einstein’s over quoted adage that we can’t solve the problems we have with the same thinking that created them in the first place.

Inviting people into the mess and working through it together, means there is a greater potential to clean it up. We share the real world of the mess, find possible solutions together and gain a new level of confidence and insight.

There is wisdom in making the transition from: ‘We are really clever, well qualified people – and we want you to listen to us as we explain our strategies and our solutions, so that you can trust us’ to a different more respectful, proposition: ‘This is really complicated, messy, complex. We need you in this space with us to expand our collective resources so that we can make a difference together’. I think the latter approach is a lot less messy.

fingers explore their way in to that knot and – before we know it - suddenly it falls away. Chaotic and volatile systems are like that too. It takes a different way of being to move into this place. Perhaps it was there all the time but was just parked in someone else’s reality – someone who could not afford to control it, or who did not want to.

Mess is just a new pattern waiting to be seen – waiting for us to let go of the old ones so we can learn our way into the new.

Tacit knowing, trust, experimentation, and principled risk-taking are the new skills of engagement. Never before has rapid learning from

Continued next page

Stepping into the mess of collaboration

BY VICKI VAARTJES

As the parent of two teenagers, I am very much accustomed to the notion of “mess”: messy bedrooms, messy schoolwork and purposely messy hairstyles!

Despite our constant exposure to mess, and some of the frustrations that we experience, we also purposefully introduce the possibility of mess into our work every time we seek to “collaborate” with others.

This year we developed and have run the Advanced Community Engagement Practitioner Masterclass in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The program is designed specifically to engage the participants in a collaborative process to decide what learning topics will be worked on. In part this is because as an advanced program we acknowledge the expertise and specific interest that each participant brings to the program. It is also because we believe that we learn best about engagement by being engaged and using this grounded experience as a way of understanding the challenges and impacts of collaborative processes.

It is fair to say that our Masterclass experiences feel and look messy, and that this messiness can result in both excitement and frustration. The more we get to know about who is in the room and what they bring, the more divergent the process seems to be. Instead of producing clarity, it produces more data to struggle with. This experience may be described as a kind of “groan zone”¹ – a period during which the group struggles with the sheer volume of information that has been generated. It seems at that point that it will be impossible to come to any sense of clarity about what the group will focus on.

This is the point where as a facilitator, it is tempting to exert control and create clarity by imposing order and telling the

¹ “Groan zone” is a term used by Sam Kaner in his work on consensus decision making

group what they should focus on. There are some contexts in which this is appropriate such as in project settings where our role is to draw on our expertise and focus project activities.

However, this is not appropriate in the Masterless. A deal of value in the program comes from the experience of sitting with the diversity and ambiguity, taking opportunities to explore the habitual responses and tensions that occur throughout the process, and understanding the role of the engagement practitioner in supporting a collaborative process. Participants experience the energy that is released as ideas start to converge. They come to clarity and generate outcomes that are rich and resonant with the needs of the whole group.



VICKI VAARTJES

As a facilitator of this process in the Masterclass I am encouraged time and again by the value and richness of the outcomes if we allow ourselves to wallow in the mess and trust in the ability of the group to find convergence.

If we truly believe in the value that each person brings to the discussion, and we truly want to “walk this talk”, then we must be prepared to make the space for diverse voices to be heard. This means mess.

As a facilitator of this process in the Masterclass I am encouraged time and again by the value and richness of the outcomes if we allow ourselves to wallow in the mess and trust in the ability of the group to find convergence. I figure that a big part of being an effective facilitator of such a messy process is managing oneself within the mess. As my teenage son might say to me, when things get messy, just chill!

Messiness, uncertainty and realities (continued from previous page)

experience, integrity, timely dialogue and confident interrogation of assumed truths been more vital to create new cultures.

How can we make that leap together when we are suddenly surrounded by what now looks like old culture? How can mess support us? What new words, ways of spending our time, new values, do we need to agree on to make each day a new strength?

For us at Twyfords, what really, really matters is that we don't default to retreat/repeat messes. We don't try to restore old orders

for their comfort zone despite their obvious failings. So much work and thought has already gone into this moment of profound transition, let's not squander the opportunity to use our wisdoms including compassion, seasoned capabilities, intuitive ethics and really clever process and system design, for starters.

It's really about good governance! In our view this includes principled practice, social and environmental justice and economic transformation; turning our backs on exploitation and proudly living the consequences of our actions.

Maps and Mess

BY STUART WATERS

Navigating across unfamiliar cities can be tough. My wife and I recently drove across Melbourne to visit a friend. Neither of us knew Melbourne. We didn't know exactly where the friend lived and we didn't have a map, and out of sheer stubbornness I was determined to just keep driving until we arrived at our goal. And arrive we did, but it almost caused a divorce and I nearly died from the murderous glances I received for the remainder of the trip. In hindsight I should have had a map.



STUART WATERS

Not surprisingly, the same can be said for community engagement projects. While pondering a major community planning project they were about to embark on, a local government client recently expressed concern about the messiness of the project. "We don't know what it looks like yet. We don't know what we want from engaging the community or what the outcome will be". In short, the upcoming engagement looked a bit like Melbourne without the map.

The unknown is always a part of community engagement and it's where the potential lies for so much that is positive. At the same time, too much uncertainty can be a problem. To navigate through the mess I like to create a road map together with the team that does four important things:

1. Sets out the project stages. For example, what are the steps that the project team will take in order to reach their decision?
2. Establishes the objectives for engaging the community at each of these steps. For example, an objective in the early stages of a construction project could be to Inform the community about the need for a bridge and the process for selecting the best option. Another could be To work directly with the community to establish the criteria by which the options are to be evaluated.
3. Determines the level of influence the community of interest can have with regard to each community engagement objective.
4. Identifies the most appropriate technique for meeting each community engagement objective.

When clients see their projects mapped out like this they can see their way through the mess. It doesn't make the mess go away but it describes the way to achieve positive outcomes within a complex environment.

Now I'm a great fan of maps. Whether achieving good community engagement outcomes or navigating across Melbourne they help me reach my destination while maintaining positive relationships. I am a map convert. One day I may even try holding one upside down.

Congratulations to Vivien

Twyford, founder and director of Twyfords, who was a finalist in the 2008 NSW Business Women's Awards. She received her finalist certificate at the NSW Awards lunch on Friday, 14 November at the Hilton in Sydney from Scott Stacey, Executive General Manager of Hudson.



specialists in
engaging people

EDITOR:

Vivien Twyford

WRITTEN BY:

Vivien Twyford

Max Hardy

John Dengate

Dr Vicki Vaartjes

Stuart Waters

Dr Susan Goff

DESIGNED BY:

Graphic Connection

PRINTED BY:

Westonprint, Kiama

1st Floor
156 Keira Street
Wollongong
NSW 2500
Australia

MAIL

PO Box 6004

Wollongong

NSW 2500

Australia

TELEPHONE

+61 2 4226 4040

FACSIMILE

+61 2 4226 4042

EMAIL

twyfords@twyfords.com.au

WEBSITE

www.twyfords.com.au

UNSUBSCRIBE

If you no longer wish to receive the Twyfords newsletter, please email twyfords@twyfords.com.au, phone +61 2 4226 4040 or fax +61 2 4226 4042 to ask to be removed from the mailing list.