Reflections

Emerging Knowledge Forum

What Can We Learn for the Next War?
The Story of the Metalogue Conference as a Large System Intervention

By Rudolf Attems, Christoph Mandl,
Hanna Mandl, Kuno Sohm, Josef M. Weber

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While this method has been used primarily in a business setting,
the authors illustrate the method with a conference (in 1999)
initiated to draw lessons from the war in Kosovo.

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*"The unit of evolutionary survival
turns out be identical with the unit of mind."*

—GREGORY BATESON, 1972

In this article we introduce you to the "Metalogue Conference," a type of LargeGroup Intervention, which we started to develop 1998 and which has been an ongoing "work in progress" ever since. It holds some by-now-well-known elements of other "classic" intervention methods, like Open Space (H. Owen) or Dialogue (M. Buber), but rather than focusing on a certain method, it looks at the process of managing diversity in a more fundamental sense. Different methods, "architectures of communication" as we call them, are used to create a diversity, in the process itself, that resembles the diversity of the content of the communication. The Metalogue Conference is suitable for all sorts of organizations and also for larger, more loosely coupled social systems. While we have used this type of intervention in many different situations — primarily in business organizations — we here exemplify this method with a case study in which we intervened in a very open, large system.

A Metalogue Conference Ends

Before you start reading, let us invite you to a simple experiment, which brings you right to the end results of the "Metalogue Conference on the War in Kosovo." Type "What can we learn for the next war?" into *www.google.com,* and then press "I'm Feeling Lucky." What you see on your screen is one of the last ripples in the web of a Metalogue Conference-type of intervention that took place September 11–12, 1999 in Vienna, Austria. The goals of this intervention were to engage people from various sides and groups to look at the war in Kosovo, which was then present in the heads and hearts of so many, and to help constructive forces to emerge in the public discussion and support such initiatives.

At the end of this Metalogue Conference almost 250 people from Albania, Austria, Bosnia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, and Yugoslavia are sitting in a circle. They are engaged in profound conversation. Their faces look content. In their contributions to the conversation, many of them are voicing their surprise at the fact that they have created clear views and actions concerning the future of Kosovo. Only a few days earlier none of them had thought this possible: their points of view were too different and their

opinions too conflicting. As people are looking around the circle they are aware of a feeling of having reached a mutual understanding, providing a sense of strength, commitment, and community. Their first Metalogue Conference has created a space for future collaborations.

As we go along with its story you will be introduced to the various phases of a Metalogue Conference.

What Does "Metalogue" Mean?

The term "metalogue" was originally coined by Gregory Bateson:

> A metalogue is a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject (Bateson, 1972).

Well equipped with knowledge and experience in communication architectures for large groups (Bunker and Alban, 1997; Holman and Devane, 1999), we agreed that, in line with Bateson's idea of a metalogue, a high degree of dialogic qualities was needed, in the sense in which David Bohm stated it:

> We have to share our consciousness and to be able to think together, in order to do intelligently whatever is necessary (Bohm, 1996).

In designing the Metalogue Conference we agreed that such a dialogic quality would be out of reach for a group of 50 or more — and certainly for a couple of hundred people — sitting in one large circle for an extended period of time talking about a highly controversial issue. As the process has to help to enfold and hold diversity, we needed a diversity in structures as well, supporting convergence and divergence, integration and differentiation. Thus, simply put, we needed the two gestures of coming together in one large circle and of spreading into small groups. These were the initial considerations that led to the development of the Metalogue Conference (Attems, 2003) in 1998, and also seemed the most appropriate communication architecture for our plan for an intervention in the case of the Kosovo War.

Preparing the Metalogue Conference (Phase 0)

Sound design work is key to any large group intervention and also when using the Metalogue Conference Design. All the different phases of the design can be improved if one is very well aware of the fact that every intervention touches ground on an already ongoing process, which is, in a sense, the subject of intervention. Hence, the notion of "intervening into the system" is misleading if we are not aware of the fact that the system is, in great part, its "processes," which means its past, its present, and its possible futures.

Here are some of the important questions we ask when preparing a conference like this:

- What Is the Issue?
- Who Comprises the System for Intervention?
- How Can We Intervene in the System?
- What Is an Appropriate Space for Intervention?
- What Is an Appropriate Time for Intervention?

All these question have to be considered before you start an intervention. Though it may look easier to answer them in less complex situations, as was the case in our example, one might easily underestimate the relevance of taking that closer look at the reality of your system. If you do, it will most probably reveal aspects not considered before. Therefore, we suggest using our example as a guideline for any situation in order to avoid underestimation of this preparatory step.

What Is the Issue?

This question is in most cases too quickly answered. Usually managers in companies can name "the problem" without further thinking. But what they have in mind are, more often than not, just symptoms for some deeper and/or unresolved conflicts or contradictions, be it between values, key strategic issues, or other unresolved but needed decisions. We have to trace that back in order to establish real meaning in the process as it unfolds further.

In our case this question had quite an historic dimension. For the sake of exemplifying roughly the depth this can take, we would like to involve you in that relevant past and give you a still-rather-sketchy picture of this dimension as it applied in the case of the Kosovo War.

The story can be seen to start with two historical events, 85 years apart but not separated from each other in people's minds, at least not for people living in Vienna:

> **July 28–August 4, 1914, World War I Starts**
> *(www.nato.int/sfor/indexinf/120/p03a/chapter4.htm)*
> On July 28, the successor to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was murdered in Sarajevo. Austria declared war on Serbia as a result of the Archduke's assassination, thus triggering a deadly chain of events. Russia supported Serbia; Germany mobilized in support of Austria against Russia; France mobilized against Germany. Germany then attacked France through Belgium, and England declared war against Germany.

> **March 25, 1999, Conflict in the Balkans**
> *(The New York Times)*
> Russia, stung by NATO's decision to carry out air strikes against Yugoslavia, suspended cooperation with the Western alliance and denounced the attack as an act of brazen aggression. President Boris N. Yeltsin urged President Clinton not to go through with the air strikes and made an impassioned television address carrying the same message.

Even though very few people in Vienna had personal memories of July 28, 1914 the reaction of Russia on March 25, 1999 triggered a collective déjà-vu. Commentators in the media raised this issue. And even though it was not believed that history was going to repeat itself, angst and aggression in Vienna were on the rise. There were demonstrations against Yugoslavia and there were demonstrations against NATO. And this mood of "who's right" and "who's wrong" was replicated in the newspapers with a fierce debate between those attacking NATO and those attacking Yugoslavia. The reality of what was going on in the Balkans fragmented into at least two contradictory realities and there was no process in sight to bring these two realities together again. After the collapse of the Kosovo Peace Talks on March 19, 1999, communication was replaced by war. It was, to be sure, the first war in

Europe since World War II and the similarities between the beginning of this war and the beginning of World War I were worrisome.

That was, roughly speaking, the situation when a group of 12 people met on April 6, 1999 in Vienna. Even though only some of them knew each other beforehand, they shared a common vision: to set a Large-System Intervention that could defy the fragmentation on the Kosovo issue and thus become a positive counter-model of communication and action for the Kosovo Peace Talks. Chances for success where dim. But the failure Martin Buber described in 1953 was actually a source of inspiration:

> *About Easter of 1914 there met a group consisting of representatives of several*
> *European nations for a three-day discussion that was intended to be preliminary*
> *to further talks. We wanted to discuss together how the catastrophe, which we all*
> *believed was imminent, could be avoided. Without our having agreed beforehand*
> *on any sort of modalities for our talk, all the presuppositions of genuine dialogue*
> *were fulfilled. From the first hour immediacy reigned between all of us, some of*
> *whom had just got to know one another; everyone spoke with an unheard-of unre-*
> *serve, and clearly not a single one of the participants was in bondage to semblance.*
> *In respect of its purpose the meeting must be described as a failure (though even*
> *now in my heart it is still not a certainty that it had to be a failure); the irony of*
> *the situation was that we arranged the final discussion for the middle of August,*
> *and in the course of events the group was soon broken up. Nevertheless, in the*
> *time that followed, not one of the participants doubted that he shared in a triumph*
> *of the interhuman* (Buber, 1965).

Because first we had to get a clear picture of the issue behind the issue, it took us nearly two months and a couple of dialogues to settle the question "What is the issue?" The war was the obvious issue. But it was just an event, though a deadly one. The issue behind the issue was the longer-term patterns that eventually led to the war. But how to phrase such an abstract, systemic viewpoint to make it thought provocative? This was the really tough part. How to name the basic question? How to find thought-provoking, brain-hitting wording? We finally decided on the German "Was lernen wir für den nächsten Krieg in Europa?" — in English, "What can we learn for the next war in Europe?" The most interesting experience with this question was that people and the media quickly reacted by assuming that we already were implying a specific set of learnings, i.e., how to make the next war more efficient or how to trigger the next war. Nothing of the kind can be deduced from that sentence, but it helped to get the idea across that what each person learns depends on each person's inner state of mind vis-à-vis the idea of a next war in Europe. On a more subtle level, this question also suggested that it is not only They, e.g., NATO, the Yugoslavian politicians, the European Commission, the U.S. Government, that are responsible for what is emerging, but We as well — an idea that met some resistance, not unexpectedly.

Who Comprises the System for Intervention?

The obvious answer is: the group comprising those people who are in command for action. But given the hopefully long-term future aspect — "the next war in Europe" — of the question, who might these people be? Unable to answer this question and inspired by Underwood (1991) we opted for another approach: to take a system that is clearly addressable and complex enough to constitute a microcosm for the issue in such a way that we could safely

assume that all points of view would be present in the microcosm. With the large minority of people from Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia living there, as well as with the OSCE Headquarters and the embassies from all NATO countries, Vienna and its people were a natural choice as the microcosm for intervention. But that still left us with two million people.

How Can We Intervene into the System?

The basic idea was to expose the people of Vienna to the issue "What can we learn for the next war in Europe?" on two different levels: through personal participation in the conference on "What can we learn for the next war in Europe?" and through coverage of this event in one of the major Austrian newspapers, as well as on Austrian public radio and through the Web (*www.ig-openspace.magnet.at*). We aimed for 150–500 people as participants at the conference, but our main concern was representation rather than numbers. We needed to make sure that the idea of the microcosm would also be manifest at the conference. And even though the combined possibilities of the social networks of 12 people are quite substantial, we could not assure the microcosm through these social networks. So, we translated our invitation into Albanian for the people from Kosovo; into Serbian and Serbian Cyrillic for the people from Yugoslavia; and into English for the people from NATO – (see *www.ig-openspace.magnet.at/fotherlang.html*). We also left open the question of in what language the Conference would be held. In fact, we were prepared to hold the conference in any language the majority of the participants would speak. For that reason we also asked each person to list her spoken languages at registration. And through our collaboration with one newspaper we had, in all four languages, full-page announcements and invitations to the conference. That, together with the title of the conference, certainly aroused interest in Vienna, leading to more coverage in the media and, finally bringing the microcosm to the conference. So, at the conference we did not need to ask "Who Speaks for Wolf?" (Underwood, 1991) because the Wolf was there.

What Is an Appropriate Space for Intervention?

The effectiveness and efficiency of a Metalogue Conference also depend on the choice of location. A space with an atmosphere that invites to stay and feel comfortable has a more beneficial impact on communication than a space that fulfills purely functional criteria. Features such as brightness and character of the rooms, number and size of the rooms, accessibility for participants, flexibility of the interiors, and ambience of the surroundings are therefore more important than one may think.

That was our concept. Reality was quite different as we gladly accepted a sponsor who offered us his conference facilities for free but without an inspiring atmosphere. But together with 30 participants and borrowing from the ideas of The Empty Space (Brook, 1988) and of wrapped buildings (Christo and Jeanne-Claude) we created space that lived up to our idea of thinking together. It is amazing how completely the atmosphere of a space can be changed by throwing out all stuff except for necessary seating and by wrapping all walls that are not white and are not empty with white paper.

What Is an Appropriate Time for Intervention?

The appropriate duration of a Metalogue Conference depends on the number of participants, as well as on the complexity of the issue. One full day and the evening before are the absolute minimum. If most of the participants are attending a Metalogue Conference for the first time, a minimum duration of two days is required, since the participants need to famil-

iarize themselves with the unusual communication architecture. As we wanted all participants to come by their own choice (without having to ask permission from their employer and without being sent by their employer) we choose a weekend, starting with Phase 1 on Friday evening and ending late Sunday afternoon.

Setting the Tone (Phase 1)

We knew that there is no such thing as an emotionless Dialogue. But not all emotions are particularly helpful for thinking together. And, as was pointed out in an article about Large Group Dynamics (Bunker, 1997) emotions tend to become contagious in large groups. The issue at stake, we assumed, would especially strongly influence the emotional state of the participants. May be we collectively behave according to a cultural norm that one should talk about depressing and conflicting issues only in a depressive and aggressive mood. But that is not helpful at all. So, setting the tone is Phase 1 of any Metalogue Conference. It is not about getting rid of depressive or aggressive emotions. But it is about allowing people also to be or to become playful, curious, serene, and sincere when relating to the issue. Not all people want that but given the chance, an amazing number of people do.

As we have been in conversation at different places around the world we knew that the quality of place and the quality of conversation are systemically linked. Conversations at McDonald's differ vastly from conversations in Viennese coffeehouses. Conversations in chat rooms are quite different from those in a Bedouin tent. Of course, it has to do with cultural norms, but it has also to do with expectations and social norms. And these we use to set the tone.

The Metalogue Conference begins with conversations in small groups set on different stages. The time after dinner is inviting for a playful and creative approach to the issue of the gathering. In the large meeting room, different areas of communication have been prepared and remind the participants of different "sets" on a stage and suggest typical "scenes." These "sets" represent different meeting places that are either familiar or normally not found within a conference setting, i.e., an executive meeting room, a Viennese coffeehouse, a chat room, an Oriental tea room, a McDonald's, a Bedouin tent, a classroom, a waiting room, a meditation room, a meeting room in a convent, etc.

The verbal "direction" and the affection of the facilitator encourages the participants to contribute creatively, to improvise, exaggerate, be a certain character or just be themselves. "Parts" are invented and sometimes experimented with, e.g., the devil's advocate, the tourist, the host, the practical man/woman, the expert, the philosopher, or the cool observer.

In these small scenes everyone can share their opinions, emotions, and experiences. Long before everything has been said or (dis)agreed upon, people move on to other "sets" and everything starts anew. Until now, no notes have been taken, no thought has had to be pursued nor anything concluded. The playful approach dissolves sharp lines and makes spaces in between opinions accessible. Tensions are interesting and remain unresolved (e.g., the equality of all those present versus the typical inequalities based on gender, culture, and/or various functional roles and hierarchies, or varying degrees of knowledge and experience).

In this way, people are encouraged to allow themselves to be playful, curious, serene, and sincere. This experience of conversations during the first evening creates an atmosphere in which opinions and ideas can be voiced without fear. Thought processes begin in a playful manner. The "sets" challenge the imagination and ability to explore unknown territory and

encourage everybody to question familiar realities and to allow others to do the same. When the participants meet in the large circle during Phase 2 the next morning, many faces will evoke the agreeable memory of common laughter and mutual understanding. The spirit of learning is unleashed; the tone has been set.

Unfolding the Structure of the Conversation (Phase 2)

At the beginning of Phase 2 the participants — through the arrangement of the seats — are sitting in a large circle (with 250 participants we had to arrange two concentric circles).

> The circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. There is
> no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people — face to face
> (Owen, 1997).

In the center of the circle lies a talking symbol, i.e. a talking stick, a stone, or with 250 participants, a wireless microphone. The rule "Whoever takes the talking symbol may speak" establishes clear roles of speakers and listeners. At the same time, the talking symbol requires the intention to act and prevents interruption. If somebody wants to speak, that person has to go and get the talking symbol from the center and has to put it back when finished. Even in large groups this enables an intense, but not necessarily dialogic, conversation.

So, before actually starting the conversation, people were invited to consider the following ideas that might help them to think together (Bohm, 1996) and to learn (Argyris, 1991):

- We are here to think together, to explore each others' views and to discover new insights.
- When we really listen we allow ourselves to be influenced.
- The challenge is to appreciate every opinion, while suspending one's own judgment.
- What stands in the way is holding on to our own assumptions and opinions.
- Appreciative questions enable assumptions, hidden behind opinions, to emerge.
- It takes courage to speak from the heart and it takes even more courage to really listen to others speaking from their hearts.
- *If I can "look out" through your view and you through mine, we will each see something we might not have seen alone* (Senge, 1994).

This first conversation in the large circle is limited to 45 minutes. For the first time the participants have the opportunity to speak to all about the issue. This conversation is marked by intensive listening and little disagreement. No conclusive statements are made, but the different points of view are voiced.

This conversation has several effects. Speaking from the heart increases attention; an appreciative communication is established that is common among friends and rather uncommon in a professional context; ideas cross-fertilize each other; and a person cannot immediately speak whenever she wants, thus slowing down the conversation with an ambience of thoughtfulness.

At the same time, people are experiencing the reality that the breadth of the issue and the diversity of views cannot be dealt with satisfactorily in this kind of setting. This creates tension and people start wondering how to deal with all this in an appropriate way. At this point we use the concept of self-organization from Open Space Technology (Owen, 1997).

Persons who care about a specific question are invited to take responsibility for it. Each

one of them writes her question and her name on a piece of paper, chooses the time and space for her workshop based on a pre-defined schedule of the break-out rooms, announces her workshop from the center of the circle, and tapes the piece of paper on the wall.

Now all participants decide which workshops they wish to attend and confirm their decisions by signing the specific pieces of paper. A special rule for attending the workshops is introduced, The Law of Two Feet:

> If, during the course of the gathering any person finds him or herself in a situation
> where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go
> to some more productive place (Owen, 1997).

In less then two hours the structure and atmosphere of the Metalogue Conference has unfolded, the tenseness induced by the issue has diminished, and Phase 3 could begin.

Thinking Together About the Issue (Phase 3)

As has been scheduled in Phase 2, people in Phase 3 take part in the workshops, document them, think together in the large circle, listen to and make announcements in the large circle, and participate in conversations during breaks. The workshops take from one to two hours. All gatherings are transparent and open. The complexity of what is going on cannot be grasped or controlled by the individual; this mirrors the complexity of the issue addressed. Interesting views and new insights emerge and spread. The flow and mode of communication are not controlled, but are self-induced and spontaneous. There is an industrious hustle and bustle. People are walking from one workshop to the next, come together in the large circle, or are deeply engaged in conversation over a cup of coffee or a meal. One rarely notices the typical sense of being locked-in when conflicting views meet and tension rises.

At first, the atmosphere within the workshops is very much influenced by the interior condition of the respective initiator. But after some rounds and after having gathered more experience with thinking together in the large circle, the workshops become more intense, deeper, and more insightful.

During breaks, important results and new insights from every workshop are documented on a computer by some of the participants to make them available to all participants. The results from the 45 workshops held September 11–12, 1999 can still be visited on the Web at *www.ig-openspace.magnet.at/fdokus.html*. Alternatively, documentation can be done on flip-charts and then displayed. This documentation process creates an additional loop of reflection and learning for those taking part in it.

During the daily announcement time in the large circle, all participants have the opportunity to reschedule workshops, present new workshops, cancel announced workshops, merge workshops, or change their questions. This process reflects the continuous expansion of knowledge of the participants.

In the conversations in the large circle that take place after every two-to-four workshop sequences, the strings are being tied together: all who before had attended different workshops, whose opinions might have shifted, or who have been moved, now come together in a single arena of communication and share their present thinking on the issue, continuing their thinking together. While the workshops foster differentiation, the large circle integrates. An atmosphere of community is created. Shared meaning and creativity of the group as a whole are being experienced. This conversation is not just an intellectual activity, but a social

and communal act with real impact on the way people will collaborate in the future.

After approximately one-and-a-half hours of thinking together in the large circle, enough spirit and energy have been created for new announcements or the next workshops.

With this interplay of convergence and divergence, of integration and differentiation one finds oneself in a developing learning spiral. The two gestures of all coming together and spreading into groups becomes like the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, an organic and highly inspirational process.

This phase ends with a sequence of workshops. It's time to think together about the future and collaborate accordingly.

Bringing Forth the Future (Phase 4)

Phase 4 of the Metalogue Conference begins with a Dialogue in the large circle. This conversation is shaped by the results and new insights in Phase 3: What is different about the issue now? What knowledge did we create? What was the beauty of the time spent together? How and what did we learn? What insights emerged? But also: How can we connect to the future? What has not yet been addressed? What wants to be done? The purpose of this specific Dialogue is *to sense collectively what it is that is wanting to be brought forth in the world* (Scharmer, 1999).

When the Dialogue comes to an end there is a break, during which people continue this conversation over a cup of coffee.

Back in the large circle, people are invited to take responsibility for action. Each one who wants to act writes her intention and her name on a piece of paper, chooses the time and space for her meeting based on a pre-defined schedule of the break-out rooms, announces her intention from the center of the circle, and tapes the piece of paper on the wall.

Again, each person decides which meetings she will attend and confirms her decisions by signing the specific pieces of paper. But the Law of Two Feet is declared over — the time has come to make real choices and to bring forth the future.

Meetings are now highly focused on creating action together: Where will we go from here? Which steps will we take? How will we sustain the collaboration attained? How will we commit ourselves to what we want to bring forth together? And as before, the results from every meeting are documented.

Through these meetings priorities, engagement, and commitment are enacted. And it becomes clear who is particularly committed to which future activity, who is willing to take on responsibility for what, and what activities have greater, what activities have lesser resonance.

The course of action after the conference becomes clear for everyone. The priorities are obvious. The complexity of the issue is reduced to what can be done and what is most likely to be successful. All this has been achieved through the initiatives and actions of the participants. The fruits of Phase 3 are harvested.

After one-to-three meeting sequences and a break, the participants gather in the large circle for the last time. Symbolically, the circle of the Metalogue Conference is the closing event: what began as a communal activity is now being finalized together. Often, this last session is an emotionally touching moment. The talking symbol is passed on from participant to participant around the circle. Everybody has one last opportunity to address the whole group. Sometimes it is enough just to hold the talking symbol in order to feel the togetherness

and appreciate what has been created. Then the circle opens and people depart. The Metalogue Conference is over.

Under the headline "War is Always a Sign of Weakness," *Der Standard*, the Austrian equivalent to *The New York Times (http://derstandard.at)*, wrote the next day, September 13, 1999, about the conference:

> Out of the individual needs initiatives were created that will be implemented in short time: Magdalena Lederer for example, a psychologist from the Diakoniewerk in Traun, will put a pool for social work into practice, that should be immediately employable in cases of crisis abroad. The psychologist herself has worked after the war for two months as an aid in the Kosovo.

Effects of the Metalogue Conference

We have been applying the Metalogue Conference, as a method with great leverage for Large System Change (Attems, 2003), to all kinds of human systems, organizations, corporations, networks, communities, and regions in the German-speaking countries. And we have found it particularly effective when a system is experiencing a kind of stuckness, or lock-in.

During the conference an open communication with regard to unresolved issues and to the future is established even among groups that could not talk openly with each other beforehand. Effective action is initialized. People experience the Metalogue Conference as a path to common perspectives and actions, and in that way, to new capacities.

Another important aspect of the Metalogue Conference is that people are empowered to take on personal risk and responsibility. To step into a large circle and to present an issue that needs to be dealt with is indeed a new and important step for many. One has to "stand up" for one's concerns and beliefs. And this "standing up" for something goes, very naturally, hand-in-hand with taking on the responsibility to bring something forth in the future.

Thinking together in the large circle proves itself to be just as challenging. Every contribution receives undivided attention, which results in verbalizing only the essential. Brief spurts into the conversation or cunning remarks are not possible. Concise personal opinions or questions are required. In this way a quality is introduced into the conversation that enables expression of authenticity, openness, and clear positions, carried by the courage of one's own convictions. If a person makes a contribution, she stands behind it.

During the Metalogue Conference the perspectives of the participants begin to drift: the system is being experienced as a whole. People gain enormous insight into the resources, moods, and readiness of everyone to deal with the issue. People discover how much untapped energy and how much spirit for change are available. Commitment and a sense of "we are all in the same boat" make it possible to learn from different opinions, and to see how many differences and how much common ground exist, as well as what potentials are available.

The dynamic of the Metalogue Conference lays the foundation for the systems capacity for change. This capacity is based on the common experience of discovering new possibilities while reaching for an answer to the basic question: "How can we turn our system into what it could be, based on its available resources and capabilities?"

Lessons Learned

Each Metalogue Conference in the last five years has been a learning journey. Here are our most important learnings (though the journey is not over yet and probably will never be):

The Metalogue Conference is Appropriate When the Future is the Issue

The conference is particularly useful when the issue is the future of large numbers of people, e.g., strategic questions important to an organization, a network, a community, or a region; specific questions such as the capacity for innovation and effective change; and projects, decision making or leadership, as well as issues, that can only be analyzed and resolved using a very broad base of knowledge.

Bringing Forth the Future Requires a Sufficiently Large Diversity of People

Ashby's Law is perhaps the most famous principle of Cybernetics and Systems Science (Ashby, 1956). The law has many forms, but it is very simple and common-sensical: a control system can only control a system to the extent that it has sufficient internal variety to represent it. This is a profound theoretical statement but basically conveys the same truth as does "Who Speaks for Wolf" (Underwood, 1991). Thus, bringing forth the future requires a sufficiently large diversity of people who, in their collective knowledge, are able to represent the human system whose future they are dealing with. Single individuals or executive committees simply do not have sufficient internal variety.

Bringing Forth the Future Requires a Sufficiently Large Number of People

Realizations, conclusions, and measures about the future can best be understood by those who created them. These people know why other futures were not given a chance and discarded. They have experienced the intensity of the process required to bring forth the future and they are aware of the insights that were necessary to reach the final results. Only for those who participated in the Metalogue Conference is it easy to take on responsibility and to make a valuable contribution.

Bringing Forth the Future Requires a New Point of View

The nature of something new, something innovative, means that it cannot be born of perspectives and capacities from the past. It needs a new point of view. This "drifting and shifting" does not occur only after finding solutions, but mainly during the search for solutions. During this search the reasons for the "new" become evident, motivating people to change behavior and to share the responsibility for new measures.

The Participants' Freedom to Choose and to Act is Mandatory

The participants' freedom to choose and to act requires that the results of the conference need not to be confirmed by outsiders to the conference, that participating executives cannot remain in control during the conference, that all issues can be addressed, and that participants do not regard themselves as representatives who have to represent interests and opinions of others.

The Success of a Metalogue Conference Depends on the Interior Condition of the Facilitating Team

The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor (William O'Brien).

From our experience this quote is only too true. Even though the facilitating team is not and should not be too visible (except briefly), its emotional state transmits to the participants. We do not understand how this happens but we know it does.

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