# Future Planning Methodology – Liberative Consultancy with Community Organisations

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**ABSTRACT:** *Community groups of many kinds are typically finding they need to undertake critical reviews of their life at least as rigorously as those by corporations. Such reviews may be undertaken as part of showing accountability to funders, in preparation for making key appointments, or as a platform for various forms of strategic planning.*

*This paper suggests a methodology for working with community groups that seeks to overcome what are claimed to be serious limitations of common approaches used. The approach proposed takes seriously some particularities of working with community groups and is designed to be 'liberative' for the organisation in the sense that the organisation is left more empowered to effect its own strategy and direction without undue dependence on the external consultant or on internal hierarchy.*

*Keywords: Community organisations, liberative, Soft Systems Methodology*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is bring together key elements of Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981, 1999; Checkland and Scholes, 1990) with insights from selected other approaches in order to describe a methodology for planning in Community groups.

Community groups, in common with commercial and public organisations, have used forms of organisational review based on various models to describe structure and performance. Often these have been shaped by a structured tool that elicits particular sets of data and opinion which is then analysed or summarised by a consultant or according to a set process.

Two important limitations can be suggested in relation to these 'conventional' approaches to reviewing community organisations as part of a planning or an appointment process.

The first is that a review based only on a collection and analysis of data sets is likely to focus unduly on performance indicators of sub-systems and miss important aspects of interrelationship. This not only fails to harness the potential of systems thinking but can consolidate dysfunctional and/or limiting relationships within the organisation.

The second limitation is that a structured inquiry and expert or formula analysis can leave members of the organisation ascribing authority to the instrument and/or consultant used. This can have the effect of disempowering people in the organisation, negating the possibility of them becoming a 'learning organisation', and setting the organisation on a problem solving cycle based on external expertise or instruments that does not allow for a shared systemic approach leading to shared commitment to learning.

A 'soft systems' approach incorporated with visual and active methods, use of narrative and of well chosen frameworks for inquiry offers the whole system an opportunity to reflect on its own dynamics and make choices for future action.

## PARTICULARITY OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Community organisations have certain characteristics that need to influence organisational consultancy.

Distinctive characteristics may include, a mixture of paid and unpaid workers; a mixture of professional commitment and 'lay' commitment; motivation based around belief systems and common values rather than employment security or financial reward; family-like community dynamics; multiple roles held by most participants (individuals occupy several or all the roles of shareholders, governance, clients, management, and staff); scarcity of resources without the ability to relate costs to return for product; and, that the organisational purpose and criteria for success and viability are likely to be more complex than satisfaction of shareholders, sound financial performance and responsible corporate citizenship.

Perhaps the principal distinction commonly found between employment focused organisations and community organisations is the organisation's self-understanding. The 'myths' of identity or the stories and metaphors that

are treasured by the organisation as ways of representing to themselves who they are and what they are there for typically cluster around different themes than those of organisations in the private or public sectors. The insights of Checkland (1994) in critiquing the goal-seeking model of organisations are not only specially relevant to community organisations but are also more obvious and appreciated.

> The experienced day-to-day reality of organizations is that they have some of the characteristics of tribe and the family as well as the characteristics necessary if they are to order what they do rationally so as to achieve desired objectives such as, in the case of industrial companies, survival and growth. (Checkland, 1994)

Checkland points to "an alternative, richer perspective … provided by the systems thinking of the 1970s and 1980s, and in particular by Vickers's development of appreciative systems theory and by an approach to intervention in human affairs that can be seen as making practical use of that theory, namely soft systems methodology."

My own context has included working as a volunteer in a number of community groups and professionally in several roles within mainstream churches. Currently I design and offer consultancy services within a mainstream church in New Zealand. This experience has led to the observation that community groups are typically highly complex organisations. There is frequently confusion between formal and informal structures, for example for decision making and information flow, and the organisation can appear to lack the environmental disciplines imposed by market or governance. While these distinctions turn out to be more apparent than actual, perception is determinative.

Hawkins (1997) in his application of learning organisation theory to church congregations has noted the importance of "a culture that preserves learning" and identified three ways in which the culture of an organisation is preserved, stories about the group's heroes and heroines, symbols and rituals. It is common for community organisations to be rich in culture in all these ways but also to underestimate the significance of their culture for organisational learning and planning.

## TOWARD A LIBERATIVE METHODOLOGY

Experience with community groups would indicate that many processes and structures result in or confirm the group's entrapment. This may be expressed as powerlessness, lack of sense of agency, resignation, cynicism, rigidity, fighting for 'turf', and/or limited imagination. A methodology is required, then, that is 'liberative' in the sense that it enables a group to recognise new possibilities and ways of achieving them. A truly liberative methodology also values the development/learning of individuals within the organisation and of the organisation as a whole, and the way in which the individuals and the organisation thereby contribute more fully to making and maintaining a world marked by social and ecological justice and responsibility.

In seeking such a methodology I have looked for some distinct features. A liberative methodology will need to enhance the authority of the community group in question rather than the authority of any instrument or consultant. It will need to engage the group in uncovering and making choices about its own life in ways that respect the motivation (often voluntary and passionate) and the experience of all parties. This means it will need to find ways to make the organisation visible and available to its own participants, and will need to involve as many people from the whole system of the organisation as possible. It will need to help the group to set its life not only within a broad context of stakeholders and organisational narrative, but also within an ethical frame positioned in a wider society. It will need to be thoroughly 'systemic' if it is to avoid subsystems competing for attention and a culture of finger pointing and blame. It will need to maximise individual and corporate learning; and if learning is to be true to the culture of the organisation and enhance the authority of the group it needs to be 'generative learning' from within the process itself.

In developing such a methodology I have drawn on a number of recent thinkers and practitioners and placed them in dialogue with one another and with my own twenty-five years of leadership within community groups in various places around the South Island of New Zealand. The methodology is clearly based on a framework of Soft Systems Methodology.

## BUILDING A METHODOLOGY WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S BRICKS

### Soft Systems Methodology

SSM (Checkland, 1981, 1999; Checkland and Scholes, 1990) outlines a disciplined iterative process of model development and puts the focus on conversation and accommodation of differing views. These are important principles in working with community groups because they provide the framework and orientation for broad based participation by those in the organisation. SSM also helpfully puts the consultancy process within the disciplines and understanding of 'action research' which emphasises the way in which every inquiry is also an intervention and so places great importance on the mode of inquiry. This aspect is further developed within

Appreciative Inquiry methodology (see below).    Finally, SSM usefully emphasises a distinction between systems thinking models and the 'real world'.   Too many consultancy processes and client organisations fail to make this distinction and so fail to consider and test the translation of interventions indicated by a model into real-time processes.   This can lead to unpredicted and unsatisfactory outcomes; it can also lead an organisation to 'fundamentalise' the model as if it is a authoritative description and then attempt to live within the constraints and biases of the model; the model, not seen as model, can end up being the driver and determiner and so becomes more 'real' than the organisation itself.

## Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1987, Hammond, 1996, Bushe, 1995) builds on the Foucauldian assumptions of action research and adds the insight that if the frame and method of inquiry is already an influential intervention, this is because whatever is focussed on thrives; so inquiry needs to focus on an organisation's 'best self' in order to enable the learnings and characteristics experienced positively in the past to be resource and guide for the future.   Community organisations are often characterised by a focus on problems and weakness.   Indeed the initial framing that leads to organisational review or consultancy is likely to be one of problem solving.

   A further strength of AI in developing organisational reviews is its use of narrative.   Organisational strengths and resources are identified by eliciting and reflecting on stories held by people throughout the organisation. The process is typically very inclusive and participatory.   The use of narrative as data ensures that planning and future action is based on real experience.   It also encourages a more systemic view of the organisation rather than one based on discrete indicators, which again can skew attention to 'solving' or modifying aspects of the organisation in isolation.

## Sociodrama

Williams's (1991) has developed an approach which uses sociodrama to concretise organisational dynamics in order to make them visible and discussible.   This is a way of group model building which enables participants to literally stand in the model and try out possibilities, and to relate the experience within the model to experience and knowledge in the 'real world'.   This approach not only encourages participation, it can lead to a high level of shared ownership of both model and possible scenarios.   It also builds mutual understanding between subsystems within an organisation.

## Chaos Theory and Windows on Systems

Flood (1999) helpfully critiques "normal organisational life" and summarises "the problem with problems," "the issue with issues," and "the dilemma with dilemmas."   He sets consultancy and systems thinking thoroughly within an understanding of chaos theory and complexity.   More significantly Flood develops two concepts which are useful in working with community groups.   The first is his four 'windows' for deepening systemic appreciation.   These enable an organisation to view its life in relation to process, structure, meaning and knowledge-power.   The value of this is in making some dynamics visible and available that might easily otherwise be neglected.   Flood's other important concept is that of "prismatic thought," a metaphor "for creative and transformational thinking."   What is seen through the four 'windows' is transformed through the use of stories, metaphor and diagrams.   These are techniques of generating a wide range of possible images.   The value I see in this approach is like that in Appreciative Inquiry.   It uses the imaginative and experiential resources of those in the organisation to generate learning and possibilities rather than relying on simply making predictions based on a theoretical model.

## Congregational Studies

Hopewell (1987) has studied church congregations from a religious studies and a sociological perspective.   He identifies some signal characteristics of congregations and he builds on the idea of congregations (and other community groups) being "thick" expressions of culture.   He explores congregations through a metaphor which has four dimensions: contextual, mechanical, organic, and symbolic.   These have some similarities to Flood's four 'windows'.    'Contextual' focuses on how the congregation/group relates to the 'world' around; 'mechanical' focuses on how well the structures of the congregation/group function to achieve their purpose; 'organic' focuses on how accommodating the congregational/group life is to the diversity of its members and their needs; 'symbolic' focuses on sense of identity and meaning.

## Learning loops and Model I, Model II theories-in-use

An understanding of 'Model I' and 'Model II' behaviour and theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978; Schön, 1987) has proved valuable in consulting with community groups. 'Model I' and 'Model II' provide a language that assists a group understand in a non-judgmental way aspects of their own and others' theories-in-use. It also helps to validate the fact of 'knowing-in-action' as a form of tacit knowledge which is important in empowering people. Where the only or most important valid knowledge is either hierarchically defined or an expression of expertise an organisation can become further disempowered and so will be less likely to make positive change. One of the main features of Model II behaviour is that it opens the possibility for double loop learning. Double loop learning is rare in community groups, partly, I think, because of the culture of volunteers and the desire to care for those involved and not question too deeply. Such organisations may also function on a theory-in-use that everyone involved shares the same values and that the values are well known and appreciated. This may be associated with the further theory-in-use that to question and potentially disrupt the assumed value base would be destructive to the organisation's cohesion, functioning and, possibly, its very survival.

## A FUTURE PLANNING METHODOLOGY

A methodology which seeks to integrate the above elements is illustrated in the diagram, see figure 1, and its component parts described below.
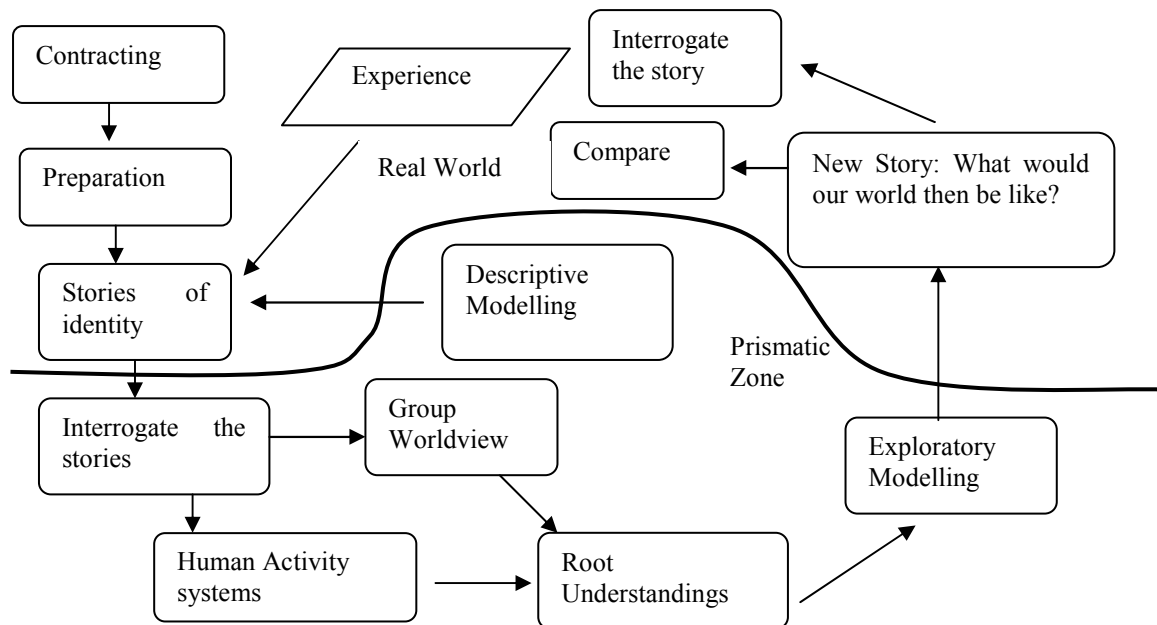


Figure 1: Future Planning Methodology

## General

It will be noticed that this methodology is significantly different than SSM in not seeking a real world appreciation of a 'problem' situation. The aim here is to move into a playful, evocative world of story, metaphor and symbol as soon as possible. Thus the whole system is more easily able to be involved in the process, no 'problem' is presupposed, which might then dominate the frame, and participants can enjoy *dis*-covering their own system in surprising and enjoyable ways. It also provides a rich quarry in which to mine for expressions of *world-view.*

   I have borrowed Flood's metaphor of the prism to describe what happens in the area below the line in the diagram figure 1. This is the area Checkland calls 'systemic thinking' as opposed to 'real world.' I have called it the *prismatic zone.* This is the zone in which we learn to see things in new lights. This is the world of metaphor, surprise and possibility. It is the source of liberation.

## Contracting and Preparation

Another distinctive feature of this methodology is the attention given to contracting and preparation. That is because these processes are powerfully instrumental in determining the frame of the whole process and so in determining the outcomes.

Contracting includes how a consultant and the process become known to the client organisation, how the 'brief' is elicited and negotiated, and the framing of the contractual offer. The aim in all this is to follow the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, focussing attention on the organisation's own sense of best self and commitment to the future.

Preparation includes care in the way the process is advertised within the organisation, commissioning preparatory work and processes and eliciting preparatory information. The latter needs to be kept to a bare minimum if the process is not to be seen as consultant centred. Part of the preparation is to invite (with due attention to process and method) the collection of stories from throughout the organisation. The stories are to speak of identity. "What are some of stories that would pretty well sum up this organisation at its best?"

## Descriptive Modelling

In order to elicit some immediate stories which will also reflect a deep level of the identity and dynamics of the organisation, members are involved an active visible modelling process. This may involve sociodrama, group diagramming, 'artistic' expression, or developing metaphors together. The process is one of interactive iteration. The model is developed and refined interactively by the players from the organisation itself. The model then becomes a source of story. "What was that like for you?" "What did you notice?"

## Interrogation of the Stories

Next there is an opportunity to help the group to learn from their stories and learn to play with the stories. It is a process of taking a step away from the historicity of the story to discover its symbolic or totemic use. Interrogation follows the categories suggested by Hopewell (context, mechanical, organic, symbolic). Suggestive questions are offered. A further layer of reflection on the stories seeks indications of the group *world-view*.

## Human Activity Systems and Root Understandings

These are concepts used after Checkland (1990). Human activity systems are a systemic model of the activities people need to undertake in order to pursue a particular purpose (Flood, 1999, 57). Root understandings are called by Checkland root definitions. They are an attempt to name for the sake of conversation and modelling what it is we are dealing with. They are based on the group *world-view* and incorporate an awareness of the context of the system. Checkland's check list (CATWOE) for this is useful. The group needs to be active in generating the list of human activity systems that emerge from the stories and their interrogation, and also with the generating of root understandings of these activities.

## Exploratory Modelling

Now is the stage to invite the group to develop some new models, using all the creative techniques already introduced. Now they are modelling how life might be in the light of the values and understandings that have already been gained.

## Story, Interrogating and Comparing

Again modelling leads to story telling. "If our modelling is good enough, then what would our world be like?" The story is interrogated first using the Hopewell categories and compared for flavour with that coming out of the earlier story telling. An iterative refining of the Exploratory Model might result. Favoured stories are then interrogated for what they say to the group about their own life. The four windows offered by Flood (1999) are useful for this; what does it imply about process, what does it imply about structures, what does it imply about meaning; what does it imply about knowledge-power. This latter helps situate the group's processes in the wider ethical and social frame.

## OUTCOME

The methodology described here provides an organisation with enriched recast story/stories based on creative corporate experience.   Typically this is used for the organisation to then move into strategic planning to give new effect to the enriched story, or for the organisation to negotiate position descriptions and expectations for strategic appointment/s.    Instead of basing planning or appointments on past assumptions or on goal/objective statements, this methodology enables planning or expectations to be based on narrative and shared interaction with participatory modelling.    The extent of group ownership of plans or expectations can be expected to be enhanced by this foundation.

## CONCLUSION

Community groups need and are demanding of strategies on which they can base responsible planning or prepare for new appointments.   The systems methodology outlined here is an attempt to develop such strategies in a liberative framework.   Although it requires a skilled consultant, the consultant's expertise is never to the fore. By using a combination of playful elements with disciplined interrogation and participatory, interactive and visual modelling processes community groups are enabled to assume a high level of empowerment through an organisational review.

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