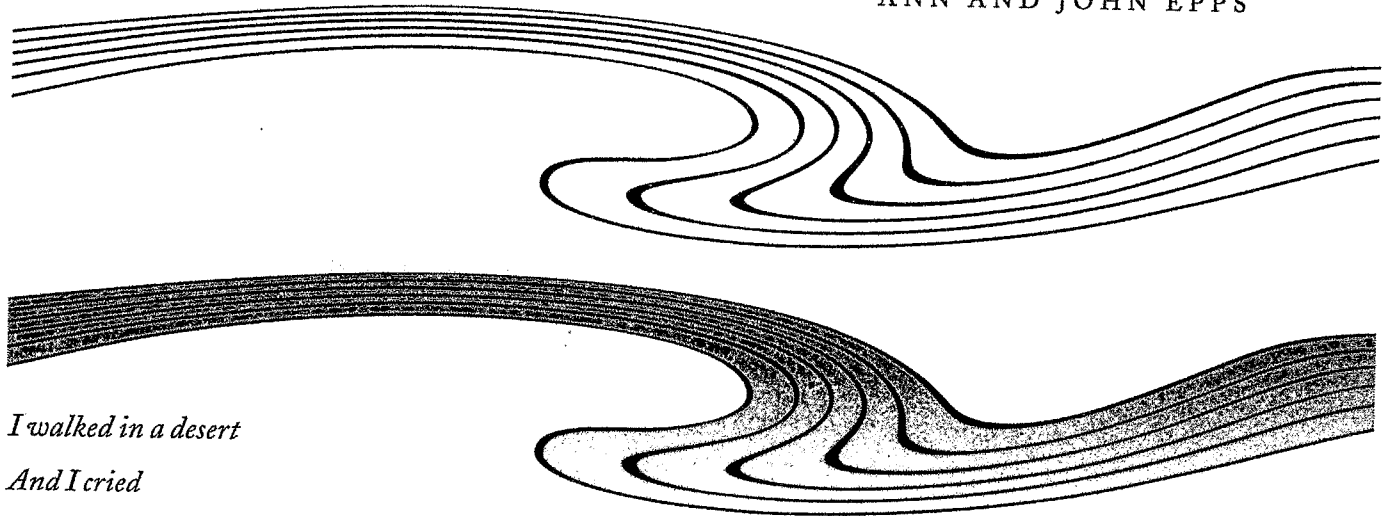


# TRANSFORMING THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK: *Next Steps in the Technology of Meaning*

ANN AND JOHN EPPS



*I walked in a desert*

*And I cried*

*'Ah God, take me from this place!'*

*A voice said, 'It is no desert!'*

*I cried, 'Well, but the sand, the heat,  
the vacant horizon...'*

*A voice said, 'It is no desert.'*

—STEVEN CRANE

The IAF think tank on the Technology of Meaning began in 1994 at our Denver Conference, where more than 100 participants listed various methods for disclosing the dimension of meaning. The think tank continued at the Dallas and Tulsa IAF Conferences with increasing interest. In Santa Clara, three think tanks were held, each focusing on a different dimension of the topic. The sessions to date have concentrated on developing methods for discerning the dimension of meaning at work. They have assumed the existence of meaning and attempted to find practical ways that we, as facilitators, can assist others to discover the deeper dimensions of their work. This session in 1999 builds on all this and raises a question posed by those who have seen through to the depths.

"Seeing through" the mundane events of work to the realm of meaning is the be-

ginning of a journey, not its conclusion. When one perceives the realm of meaning, one usually "sees" something quite different from what was expected. Meaning, as experienced, is not user-friendly. What one "sees" may give an offensive, depressing, sometimes infuriating glimpse into the way life is at its depth. That is most often what we were trying to avoid.

When faced with insight into depths, one has a simple but stark choice: 1) to reject reality as a source of meaning, or 2) to embrace it as meaningful, and undertake a lifelong journey of appropriation. The question here is: "What methods can we as facilitators use to assist ourselves and others in choosing the second option?"

## **The Midas Touch—Transforming Trash into Treasure**

The encounter with meaning usually has five distinct stages, although each one is unique in its appearance. These are: Intrusion, Offense, Decision, Death and Rebirth. Insight into the radical and ultimate dimension of work usually intrudes into "business as usual." It may come through a market slump, an ethics crisis, a labor dispute, a product liability suit, a hostile

takeover, a downsizing exercise or any other of the major or minor crises that seem to occur regularly. The insight those crises convey is deeply offensive to our sense of rightness and propriety. We want to say, "It should not be!" So we conceal, deny, threaten lawsuits, develop PR "spins," become cynical, or otherwise attempt to cover up what has emerged, in the hopes that it will go away. It doesn't, and we face a choice of saying "yes" or "no" to this organization and situation.

Saying "yes" means affirming, "That's us." And that affirmation often involves a kind of death—to the corporate identity we have worked hard to achieve and promote. It may mean realizing that our old vision is unreachable and it's all a sham. The rebirth comes with a decision to be the ambiguous struggling, half-baked, incompetent, insensitive, superficial, immoral organization we are, and to affirm our reality rather than our illusion. It means accepting the organization for what it is (and for what it is not) in a style of affirmation. And it may just mean recognizing that the organization already is accepted, or it wouldn't be here. Such recognition produces an unexpected sense of relief and delight. The defects have not gone away, but now they

appear in a new light that discloses the wonder of it all.

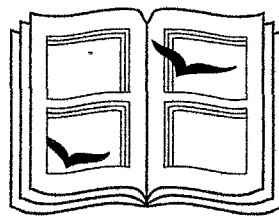
### “Dark Night of the Soul” or “Spotlight of Significance”

Affirming “That’s us” means relinquishing certain aspirations and goals we hoped for. And giving them up usually comes hard. We encounter a certain level of despair over what might have been, but never will be. Organizations, perceiving their built-in compromises and violations of individuals, are prone to develop a corporate tendency to throw in the towel, to highlight weaknesses, and cynically wallow in their predicament. Holding on to the stance of affirmation requires continually addressing this tendency and finding ways to rehearse the affirmative stance, even while recognizing and attempting to remedy the defects. This constant rehearsal of affirmation adds a dimension of significance and delight to the corporate culture. Reform comes only after realistic affirmation of the organization. As long as you are convinced it is a hopeless, corrupt mess, no real change is possible.

### “The Long March of Despair” or “The Endless Journey of Discovery”

Perhaps later it may be appropriate to make changes and reform the organization into a more service-centered, customer-oriented group that values people more than procedures. But that comes only after a realistic affirmation of the organization as it is. As anyone who has tried it knows, reforming an organization is not a one-time thing. It is a long and continual process that thoroughly exhausts the energies of even the most enthusiastic proponents of change. It is a long march. And yet every step of the way is interesting. Boredom is not an issue. The style of affirmation during this stage of operation is the dance of delight, a voyage of discovery. ❖

*Presented at the International Association of Facilitators 1999 Annual Meeting, Williamsburg, Virginia, January 14, 1999. Permission granted. Ann and John Epps are founding members of the IAF. They work in Malaysia as senior facilitators and consultants in LENS International (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, a consulting company with clients in the banking, petroleum, insurance and manufacturing industries in Malaysia and Singapore. They initiated the Technology of Meaning think tank in 1994 and have been guides for its progress.*



## Good Reading

### More Recent Books from the World of Facilitation

Rosaline S. Barbour & Jenny Kitzinger (Eds.): *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London, 1999, Hardcover, 225 pp., US\$25.95, ISBN: 0761955682.

Ingrid Bens: *Facilitating with Ease: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Facilitation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1999, \$39.

Stanley Gajanayake & Jaya Gajanayake: *Community Empowerment: A Participatory Training Manual for Community Project Development*, PACT Publications, New York, 1993.

Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey & Bill Taylor: *The Art of Facilitation: How to Create Group Synergy*, Fisher Books, Tucson, AZ, 1995, Paperback, 256 pp., ISBN: 15556-1101X.

Barry Johnson, Ph.D.: *The Handbooks of Structured Experiences and Annuals, 1982-1999*, Pfeiffer and Co., 1999.

Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk & Duane Berger: *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, 1996, ISBN (USA) 0-86571-347-2.

A. Glenn Kiser: *Masterful Facilitation: Becoming a Catalyst for Meaningful Change*, AMACOM, New York, Toronto, 1998, 224 pp., ISBN: 0814483980.

Harrison Owen: *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 1997, Paperback, US\$24.95.

Berrett Koehler: *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolved Problems*, 1992, paperback, 267 pp., ISBN: 087425-1761.

N. Pretty, Irene Guijt, Ian Scoones & John Thompson: *Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide*. International Institute for Environment and Development, London, 1995. For ordering, see Webpage: [www.iiied.org/bookshop/index.html](http://www.iiied.org/bookshop/index.html).

S. Priest, M.A. Gass, & H. L. Gillis: *The Essential Elements of Facilitation*, Kendall-Hunt, Dubuque, IA, 2000.

Roger Schwarz: *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1995, (second edition) Hardcover, 314 pp., ISBN: 1555426387.

Katrina Shields and Phil Somerville: *In the Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide for Social Action*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, 1993, Paperback, 172 pp., ISBN: 08657-12875.