

THE METHOD OF INTERCHANGE
July 12, 1984

INTRODUCTION

Several learnings have come to us out of the Experience of the International Exposition of Rural Development. One of the most far-reaching has to do with methods. At the Central International Event, we experienced having our methods rejected and replaced with others. This was not because the methods proposed are bad or invalid; it was because they were the wrong ones for the occasion. The approach of trends analysis and workshoping and corporate writing are very appropriate and effective for a research event, and, to some degree, for a planning event. That was not the kind of event we were in. We had billed it as an INTERCHANGE EVENT, and the participants were determined to have it be one. Now, drawing from the learnings of that experience and from the experience of eight Showcase Forums, the Colorado Exposition of Rural Development used a different set of methods with spectacular results. These remarks are an attempt to distill the basics of the Method of Interchange in a way that will make them available to the Order for refinement and use.

The Method of Interchange is appropriate in a situation where two or more groups need to talk with each other about their experiences for mutual benefit. Simply to get them together may provoke conversation, but to occasion profound interchange requires invisible intentionality. The appearance must be nonchalant and natural; the reality must be meticulous staging and orchestration. The best image is from Sun Tsu: "The best leader is the one who, when the war is won, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'" The mark of a successful interchange event is one where the leadership is not intrusive.

This does NOT mean there are no visible leaders. In fact, one person needs to be assigned the role of "In Charge" so that the group can relax. This role is that of the first person who speaks in the meeting. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," is the first line of this role. It has the effect of establishing in people's minds that someone IS in charge, that there IS a plan, and that I don't have to worry about details of the meeting. Providing a definite Emcee and someone at the head of the table is in fact a way to put a group at ease. Whereas leaderless groups and circular tables create anxiety about what is required of whom, a more formal style paradoxically creates confidence that someone is in charge; I know who to see if displeased.

The Interchange Method has a set-up and four levels. The set-up involves setting the tone and context of the session. The four levels are: 1 THE LEVEL OF OBJECTIFICATION; 2 THE LEVEL OF IDENTIFICATION; 3 THE LEVEL OF EDIFICATION; AND 4 THE LEVEL OF PROJECTION. I will use examples from the Colorado Exposition to illustrate these levels, but many others could be mustered. The point is to grasp the rational and existential intent of each level and some gimmicks that have worked in realizing them.

THE SET-UP

The beginning of an interchange event sets the context for what is to come. This does NOT mean explaining all the methods or procedures. It does mean communicating, through drama and decor, that a happening is at hand, that something significant is about to occur. In Colorado, we held an opening banquet with the Lt. Governor giving the formal Welcome. The content of her speech was

not important--though it was good. The important part was the communication to the participants that high-level state officials were interested in what they were doing. The decor of the room included a 20-foot banner and multiple copies of the symbol artfully displayed. When people walked in, they saw that something important was afoot. Following the opening talk, we had reports from the India Central International Event. This felt a little "off the wall" since most of the people had not heard of the IERD, and certainly had little immediate concern about India. Yet this presentation set a tone. It communicated that these activities were part of a global happening, and that some people were present who had personally set foot off the continent. In retrospect, it served to establish a mood. It would have been a mistake to refer to it in later sessions, or to study the documents from India as though this were a seminar. The Reports, like the Welcoming Speech were part of the set-up. They established a context of globality, significance and surprise.

THE OBJECTIFICATION

We used displays. Some 45 projects brought displays and set them up inside the meeting room. Upon walking in, your eyes were impacted by a concentration of local efforts, all presented with surprising finesse. The rational aim of this level is to manifest the scope and range of the topic. You don't want people to get into depth yet, but to find themselves grasping the diversity of content that is available. Existentially, the experience is surprise: "This is really something!" Our gimmicks were to place the displays inside the meeting room, and so to arrange them that several spilled out into the hallway. This intensified the sense of fullness, and in this particular space, did not cut them off from the room. We actually used two gimmicks; one was the displays and time to view them casually "around the edges." The second was to have 2-question interviews with each one over the microphone immediately before opening the second session. An emcee went to each display and asked the person there what issue their project was addressing, and something else like, "What was your most exciting accomplishment this past year?" The effect was to have everyone hear as well as see what was present. It piqued curiosity and generated intrigue. At the conclusion of this stage, people did not exactly know what all was present, but they had encountered the other objectively.

THE IDENTIFICATION

Still it was not time for depth content. People simply cannot and will not participate until they are allowed to participate. This sounds obvious, but most meetings carry on hours of context and instruction before the participant has a chance to open his mouth. The rational aim of this level is to communicate some details about all the groups present. People were asked to give 10-minute reports on their project; four groups met for the morning, and every person had his or her turn. The group then was asked to list what they had heard and experienced that were keystones to effective local development. This step thus involved not only providing the chance to speak and be heard, but also looking through the details of experience. This changed lives.

It has happened also in Showcase Forums. As near as I can tell, self-help projects live out of the sense of being "on our own." Finding themselves in a group and hearing reports from similar groups communicates, "We're all in this together." That is a different universe. It puts people in a different perspective and releases the capacity to listen and speak. The existential experience of this level is, "Hey! I'm part of a Movement that is changing history!" Until that stage of identification is reached, you may have an

audience, but you don't have participation. The more quickly it can happen, the better; the only reason for an extensive set-up stage is to release it. To say this one more time--it is important for our corporate meetings as well as for our facilitation of other groups--until you can speak, you cannot listen. This, not primarily the communication of data, is the intent of reports.

EDIFICATION

This may not be a good term, but the experience of the delegates to India on their field visits was one of profound edification/enlightenment/awareness. Most conferences begin on this level and wonder why they don't get anywhere. It is the exact parallel to beginning an art form conversation with the interpretive level--you literally don't know what you're talking about. But after identification has been reached, people are even eager to hear from "experts"--people who have pushed through their experiences to a new level. We embodied this dynamic through a series of special presentations of 1 hr. each (including time for discussion), and through site visits to selected projects in the immediate vicinity. The rational intent was to communicate technical data about the details of what is working effectively. The existential feel was, "I can use this!" One participant, during the reflection on this session, remarked that she now had five schemes she knew she could implement, and was itching to get back home to get started. It was a chance to communicate the "inside story" -- what REALLY works, and how to do it.

The appearance of the conversations around the edges changed dramatically at this stage. At first, there was polite inquiry. At the second level, there were groups swapping stories. At this level, people were huddled in small, intense groups taking notes as each other talked.

THE PROJECTION

The conference might have ended there--and gone the way of most conferences, having implanted cleverly some new insights. People would have been pleased, but not changed. The fourth level is that of projecting these insights into the future. Its rational intent is to initiate implementation planning; its existential aim is to build a resolve for practical action. Our method was to divide the group into sections of the state, and assign them to deal with the question of how best to accelerate effective local development in their area.

We (ICA) led this session, and each workshop began with a conversation on the unique gifts and contradictions faced by that part of the state. This put people into the context. They then listed possible actions that they had been considering; we clumped them, talked about them, and subdivided again to write them up. The reports were outstanding in their practicality and resolve. Out of this we now have self-conscious groups in three parts of the state, and self-generating programs locally initiated in each part.

This was the nearest we came to use of planning methods, but even they were altered. We did not HAVE a group ready for detailed planning, we were BUILDING that kind of group.

CONCLUSION

People appreciated the meeting. They even spontaneously generated a celebration the final evening. They unanimously recommended another exposition next year. And they thought they did it themselves.

They did and they didn't. We were in charge of the set-up, the details, the material, the decor, the supplies, and even, at the very last minute, procuring a piano. We worked our heads off. We used local workshop leaders, and trained them. We used steering committee members for emcee roles, and worked with them on the necessary dynamics. We led the plenaries and the opening and closing sessions. It felt like almost everyone present was somehow making the event happen, and so they were. The job of facilitator is to set it up and get out of the way.

But this is an important job, one that is rarely done, and almost never done well. We have the chance to flood the globe with life-changing interchange events. Underneath the four levels is a profound dynamic: Levels one and two absolve the past; level three acknowledges the present with appreciation; level four projects the future. The first two have to do with being--who we are. The third has to do with knowing--what have we learned. The fourth has to do with doing--how we will together build the future out of the new paradigm we have encountered.

This may not be completely right nor profound enough, but is an example of the facilitation method of the future. If the struggles of the IERD had not resulted in anything more than this, they would have been eminently worthwhile. But of course, they have.

--J. Epps
Chicago, July, 1984

I SETUP - Community

- 1 OPENING BANQUET.
- 2 BIG DECOR
- 3 REPORTS
- 4

"polite inquiry"

ABSOLVE THE PAST

"LETING GO"

II OBJECTIFICATION

- DISPLAYS TIME TO VIEW
- 2 QUESTION INTERVIEWS.

ISSUE ADDRESSING MOST EXCITING ACCOMPLISHMENT LAST yr.

"groups swapping stories"

III IDENTIFICATION

- Speak, Be Heard, Look thru detail of Experiences "vs Being on own"
- 10 MINUTE REPORTS ON PROJECT (SMALL GROUPS)
- EVERYONE HEARD
- LIST HEARD/EXPERIENCED AS KEYSTONES

"small intense nudged groups"

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PRESENT & APPRECIATION

IV EDIFICATION

- Communicate Technical Details & Data
- Special Presentations / Time for Discussion
- Site Visits to Selected Projects

LEARNING

PROJECTS THE FUTURE

V PROJECTION

- into the future
- implem. - Planning
- Build resolve for Real Action
- Divide groups into Section of State
- Assign deal w/ gln of How back to Acad to
- Conversation on Unique gifts & cont^{ss} faced...
List Possible Actions Considermg
Clump them, talk about them, subdividing again to write them up. - Building a group for planning

VI SPONTANEOUS CELEB