Technology of Participation

In-depth
Adaptable Method
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Purpose:

To elicit participation of a group, organization, or community in creating a thoughtful discussion, consensus formation, or the collaborative creation of short-term or strategic plans.

Outcomes:

- Create solutions that represent a group's best thinking and which it will own
- Deeper understanding of and commitment to decisions and directions

When to Use:

- A group, organization, or community has a question or concern related to change and future action
- New strategies and focused directions are needed
- People need in-depth dialogue to allow them to operate with a common understanding and focus

When Not to Use:

- Severe and unyielding group conflict is present
- The outcome is predetermined
- Key stakeholders will not be present
- No leadership support for decisions the group might make

Number of Participants:

- 5–1,000

Types of Participants:

- Those directly involved in the issues or who will be affected by any solutions
- Those expected to support or implement any plans developed

Typical Duration:

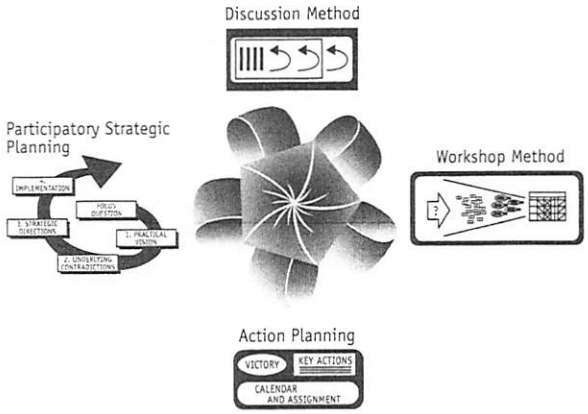
- Preparation: 1–3 days
- Process: Typically 1–3 days
- Transition: Variable

Brief Example:

A 40-person state government department used ToP methods to restore communications and trust and to develop a vision and new direction. Some outcomes: new in-house facilitators helped sections develop goals and mission statements; assessment of staff needs resulted in computer and quality training; and the office restructured, folding many functions into other departments.

Historical Context:

Developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs in the 1960s and 1970s for change initiatives in different countries, especially community development and corporate strategic planning.



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MARILYN OYLER AND GORDON HARPER

The Technology of Participation

We are all much more likely to act our way into a new way of thinking than to think our way into a new way of acting.

—R. Pascale, M. Millemann, and L. Gioja

Eradicating Meningitis

Meningitis epidemics occur with predictable regularity in some of the poorest countries in the world. Following a predictable cycle, nearly 200,000 cases were reported in the "meningitis belt" of Sub-Saharan Africa in the last major outbreak, killing and debilitating thousands.

Eradicating this menace is the aim of MVP, the Meningitis Vaccine Project, a unique partnership between the World Health Organization (WHO) and Seattle-based Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH). MVP is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In October 2002, MVP used the Technology of Participation (ToP)® methods to create a five-year strategic plan to address the question, "What must the WHO/PATH partnership do as a team by 2007 to successfully deliver on the mission of the Meningitis Vaccine Project?" To create the plan, ten WHO and PATH staff members met for two lively days at MVP's offices in Ferney-Voltaire, France.

The MVP partners followed the classic ToP Strategic Planning sequence: practical vision, underlying contradictions, strategic directions, and implementation. The MVP partners' vision captured the full range of scientific, logistical, and communication complexities they needed to meet. It takes extraordinary effort to invent a safe vaccine, produce it at an affordable price, and immunize nearly 250 million people in settings with hit-or-miss vaccine programs today. Yet that is exactly the picture the MVP team painted as their vision unfolded.

With the bilingual skills of the participants, we were able to use French in some cases to round out the vision, which was largely expressed in English. For example, "It works! It's safe! It's salable! Voila!" captured the vision for the vaccine itself.

Participants identified critical impediments to success. Achieving MVP's ultimate objective would be impossible, they said, unless more staff with critical scientific and business qualifications were added quickly. Surfacing this central obstacle early on led directly to creating a launch activity that made filling needed positions a top priority.

Throughout implementation, participants said, significant attention must be paid to building and sustaining positive relationships with a wide range of governments, businesses, and beneficiaries. One telling part of the vision expressed this last idea succinctly: "All friends count."

Four strategies emerged in the two days, each accompanied by quarterly work plans for 2003. The participants also created a "Level of Effort" chart to estimate allocation of time and resources for each strategy during the five-year period.

"The ToP strategic planning process faithfully yielded a product in the five-year plan itself and built a stronger team in doing so. MVP staff clarified their vision, gained confidence in the prospect of achieving it and identified concrete steps," according to Richard Wilkinson, learning and organization development officer for PATH.

In a Nutshell . . .

The Institute of Cultural Affairs' Technology of Participation (ToP) consists of methods that enable groups to (1) engage in thoughtful and productive conversations, (2) develop common ground for working together, and (3) build effective short- and long-range plans. The institute developed and tested the initial forms of these processes in the early 1960s in a new style of self-help community development called the Fifth City Project on the West Side of Chicago.

In the years since then, these methods have been used in more than 50 countries, in major international social change ventures, in United Nations and World Bank programs, and in hundreds of organizational and corporate change initiatives, adopted as internal processes by government agencies and made part of the staff training systems of international nonprofits.

The Focused Conversation Method

As first born of the ToP methods, Focused Conversation was adapted from a format for engaging groups in serious conversations about art. It has since become one of the most used core processes in the ToP tool kit. It helps a facilitator to maintain a conversational focus on a topic while personally remaining content-neutral. It is designed to maximize the participation of everyone in the group and to bring people out at a new place of awareness at its conclusion.

This method is based on a model of human consciousness that identifies a four-stage progression as the natural flow in a person's thinking process. The acronym that has become widely known as the shorthand for this life process is ORID—Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional levels (figure 1).

A facilitator begins by asking questions that elicit what is known—the data—about the topic to be discussed. The questions then invite people to share their initial reactions to the data, both positive and negative, as well as past experiences and associations that may bear on the

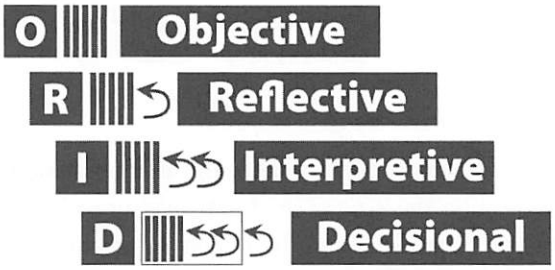

Figure 1. Four-Stage Progression of the Thinking Process

topic. Following this, the questions turn to a consideration of alternative ways to interpret or respond to the data. The final questions allow either individuals or a group as a whole to make a decision about how they will in fact relate or respond to the topic.

The Consensus Workshop Method

This method helps a group form a working consensus, discovering and creating the common ground it needs in order to move ahead. It asks a question that seeks multiple, agreed-upon answers. An example of such a question might be, "What are our foundational values as an organization?" By the end of the workshop, the group will have generated and considered a number of possible answers to that question and come to a point of agreement on several of them.

The five-step process (figure 2) begins by developing the *Context* for asking and answering this question. People then *Brainstorm* individual answers to the question, share these in small teams, and select a certain number to put before the whole group. These are written on cards, posted at the front of the room, and grouped into *Clusters* of related items. The clusters then catalyze a conversation about what to *Name* each of them that provides an agreed-upon answer to the workshop question. When all the clusters have been named, the facilitator leads the group in

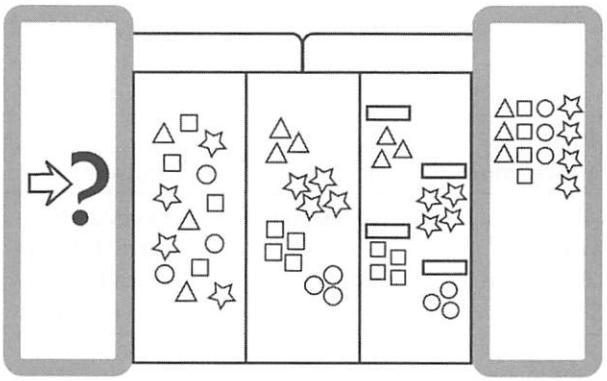

Figure 2. The Five-Step Process of Consensus Workshop

a conversation that confirms its *Resolve* through reflecting together on the experience of reaching this common ground, its significance, and the appropriate next steps.

Participatory Strategic Planning

Participatory Strategic Planning (figure 3) helps organizations undertake longer-range strategic initiatives, and its companion, the *Action Planning Method*, provides a process for shorter-term project, event, and campaign planning The method begins by creating a shared, positive vision of the group's hopes and desired outcomes (Practical Vision), then looks at the obstacles to the realization of that vision (Underlying Contradictions), identifies a range of possible actions to deal with these obstacles (Strategic Directions), and concludes with a calendar of accomplishments, assignments, and specific next steps for implementing the plans (Focused Implementation). The method also incorporates forms of the Consensus Workshop and Focused Conversation in its process.

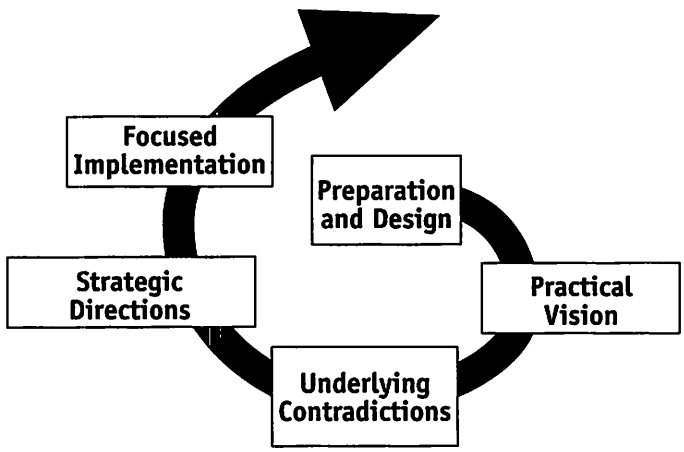

Figure 3. The Participatory Strategic Planning Method

Table of Uses

ToP Method	Typical Setting	Brief Description	Length of Time	Key Events	Number of Participants
Focused Conversation	Team evaluating its past quarter	Sharing data, experiences, insights, and learnings	20–60 minutes	Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional questions	Typically 5–25

ToP Method	Typical Setting	Brief Description	Length of Time	Key Events	Number of Participants
Consensus Workshop	Department meeting to decide major sections of an employee handbook	Organize information into agreed-upon categories	1–2 hours	Brainstorming, relational grouping, reaching a consensus on sections	Single group of up to 25; multiple groups
Action Planning	Community meeting to plan annual summer festival	Elicit ideas and develop a plan that has whole group's support	3–4 hours	Vision of Success, Strengths, Weaknesses, Benefits and Dangers, Consensus Workshop, Calendar of accomplishments and assignments	Typically 8–30
Participatory Strategic Planning	Management team needs creative strategies for changing markets, products, customers	Build an agreed-upon road map for future directions that deals with all the realities in the situation	2–3 days	Form a common vision, identify major blocks, innovative actions, new strategies, and an implementation plan	Single group of up to 25; multiple groups up to several hundred participants

What Makes ToP Tick?

The beginning point of the work with any organization or community will often be a Design Conference with a representative leadership or core group from the organization. The intent of the design conference is to create shared understanding of the intention of the program as well as increased buy-in and commitment to the planning effort and follow-through on the actions.

Especially when this is seen as a first step of a longer change process, it is helpful to explore what has happened in the past to bring people to this point. One purpose of the Design Conference is to briefly review the group's history and guiding documents. Are there existing mission, vision, or values statements that provide focus and direction or set parameters for its operations? Has any recent research been done regarding clients, constituents, or market trends?

The Design Conference is in part a discovery process. It helps paint a picture of where the group has been, is now, and hopes to go. Based on this, the leadership and ToP facilitation team can begin to propose and design some next steps in its journey.

Any group process must have as part of its design a carefully thought out purpose or intention—and ToP methods actually call for two of these. The Rational Aim is the focus of a conversation or the practical outcome of a workshop or planning session. It answers people's questions, "Why are

we here?" and "What can we expect to have at the end of this session?" An example of a Rational Aim for a Consensus Workshop would be "to establish an agreed-upon set of guidelines for overtime pay."

The second intent is the Experiential Aim, which takes into account the existing mood of the group and the desired impact that the process might have upon it. Formulating this intent helps the facilitator set an appropriate context, modify his or her personal style accordingly, and choose relevant stories, as well as exercises and generally fine-tunes the process. An illustration of an Experiential Aim for the example above might be, "to cut through the suspicions surrounding this issue, so people leave feeling we have a system that is fair to everyone."

At this point, it is time to select the process or processes to be used. It is likely that all the methods described above will be used in a long-term change process, and most events will use a combination of two or three ToP methods. The intended outcome helps give clarity to the choice of methods. Often, Focused Conversation is used when the need is for *shared awareness*, the Consensus Workshop method is used for *shared decision making*, Action Planning is used for *shared action*, and Participatory Strategic Planning is the method of choice when the organization is intending *a fundamental change or innovation.*

The ToP approach is to seek not for some ideal "best" solution or direction, but instead for what a group is actually prepared to say yes to—what in reality it will commit to do. It assumes that what may appear to one person (even the facilitator!) to be a perfect solution is indeed no solution at all if the group as a whole is unwilling to own or act upon it. Any proposed solution must stand up to critical scrutiny and analysis, after which the one that the group will get behind and implement becomes in reality the "best" solution.

George Brewster of Allied Solutions reports:

> Without ToP approaches we could not have gotten through this huge merger process as efficiently or as effectively as we did. Fifteen people in legacy positions came to the table—senior management, middle management, program managers—with real concerns about our capacity to continue to service clients in this new identity. Their work was to help us structure the best business model for the 100 people that work in the field and for our over 2,600 clients. The ToP approaches provided space for the conversations in a structured way that was invaluable.

In starting a change process, the leadership should recognize that the introduction of ToP methods may itself impact the journey of the organization. As people become familiar with these participatory tools and find them effective, they often find themselves wanting to integrate them in various ways into their daily operations. This can require building some new capacities within the organization, and equipping people with participation skills that they can use and adapt in their work. It can even set in motion a gradual change in the organizational culture itself.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

A few important guidelines or conditions that need to be present for the success of any group considering the use of these methods are:

- The group has the authority or authorization to make substantive recommendations, decisions, or plans at some level about the topics or arenas in question.
- Key stakeholders will be engaged in various ways in the planning or decision-making process, including those whose subsequent support may be essential to its success and those who are expected to implement conclusions or plans arrived at by the group.
- Participants in the process see the need for others' contributions and are willing to make an effort to work together on the matter at hand.
- Leadership is prepared to commit the time and resources required to deal responsibly with the topic—in helping to codesign the process to be used, in sponsoring and enabling the event itself, and afterward in following through with support for the outcomes of the event.

The style of the facilitator is another one of the key factors in establishing a participatory environment. Style goes far deeper than appearance, charisma, charm, and grace. There are very real values, practices, and techniques that enable people to participate in designing their own future. An effective and well-trained ToP facilitator is a living embodiment of the inherent values and principles of participation—a transparent presence that empowers the participants and enables them to get results.

Mutual respect is one of the keys to genuine dialogue. Believing that all the participants have the inherent capacity to understand and respond creatively to their own situation enables a facilitator to encourage authentic self-determination and self-reliance. It also assumes that the group holds the content wisdom, and the facilitator's role is to remain content-neutral and provide the process to aid the group in coming up with its own best solution.

The ToP methods of open inquiry lead to the assumption of individual and collective responsibility. Facilitators assume that everyone is a source of ideas, skills, and wisdom, and every bit is needed. The facilitator receives all ideas as genuine contributions to the process. Respectful questions reveal deeper thinking and enable people to discover their real wisdom.[1]

Conditions for Success

The Institute of Cultural Affairs identifies five foundational values that underlie the ToP methods and are keys to its success in any situation:

1. *Inclusive Participation.* The methods are designed to invite and sustain the participation of all members of a group. We understand that each person holds a piece of the puzzle, and each person's insights help to create a whole picture.
2. *Teamwork and Collaboration.* The Technology of Participation is based on the belief that teamwork and collaboration are essential to get a task done in the most effective, efficient and economical way—and that methods for working together should foster a genuine sense of collegiality among members of the group.

3. *Individual and Group Creativity.* The methods intend to elicit the best of each person's rational and intuitive capacities. By encouraging a dialogue between head and heart, people experience the magic of the whole group's creativity breaking loose.
4. *Action and Ownership.* The group processes have to position a group to fully own the decisions it makes and to take action based on them.
5. *Reflection and Learning.* Time is built into every process for depth reflection and sharing. This confirms both the individual and group resolve and allows for transformation as well as a fuller appreciation of the importance of consensus and collective action.

In addition to these foundational values, there are other keys or conditions for success of the ToP methods:

- ToP methods focus on surfacing things that can unify a group rather than dealing with things that may divide it. Instead of seeking to identify and directly address arenas of disagreement, the methods disclose where a group shares common hopes, perspectives, and objectives.
- ToP methods build on gestalt theory in helping groups identify perceived relationships between data and then decide on the meaning of those relationships. In the Consensus Workshop, all contributions are received and treated with respect. Ideas are not evaluated, nor is the group asked if it agrees or disagrees with any one of them. Instead, the question is where the group sees relationships between different ideas. Once clusters or gestalts of related data have been formed, the group discusses each cluster and determines where it points to an arena of agreement on the issue under discussion.
- In Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP), one thing that helps make the process succeed is identifying the Underlying Contradictions directly following the group's creation of its Practical Vision. Here, people are asked not to think yet of possible steps they might take to realize their vision but instead to identify those things that are blocking this vision from coming into being. Clustering the group's data here and naming the clusters helps people see more clearly what it is that their strategies and actions will need to focus on changing, if their vision is indeed ever to become a reality. An example of a Contradiction might be, "Haphazard fund-raising strategies inhibit program expansion." Once the Contradictions have been named, they become the focus of the group's next brainstorm of possible actions to address them. A group's Contradictions thus become not something "bad," but in effect the very stepping-stones or pathway to the future it seeks.
- A final key to the success of the Technology of Participation is its emphasis on caring for the human spirit of the participants in any process. The natural flow of the methods themselves is designed to honor that spirit. Bringing color, liveliness, warmth, and even some lightness and fun to the serious work that calls people to gather is not simply a nice addition to the process—it is a critical aspect of it. The ways in which ToP facilitators do this are

as distinctive and diverse as they themselves, but the understanding of its importance is common to all of them.

Obviously, ToP methods are inappropriate for situations in which leadership has no desire for people to have a real voice in decision making. They are not intended for situations in which people are so locked into preexisting positions that they would prefer no resolution at all to one that would call for them to modify those positions. In situations where people feel that leaders or processes have manipulated them in the past, it may take time and firsthand experience for them to come to trust ToP methods and the facilitators who use them.

The Tap Roots of ToP

The Technology of Participation methods have been cocreated from the beginning. Their initial forms were developed through action research in the fields of community and organizational development. Since the 1960s and the beginning of the Ecumenical Institute, the forerunner of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), group processes were carefully crafted to achieve certain objectives. The concern was to bring methods and spirit to a wide public. These processes were referred to as "the methods," and at the heart of the methods were phenomenology and existentialist philosophy. The methods emerged out of the practical demands of hands-on efforts at community building and an intense community study and dialogue with the writings of people like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Bonhoeffer, Camus, and Ortega. . . . The methods have always served to immerse people in the reality of their own situation and their own depths at the same time.

As the methods developed, they also benefited from the work of other authors: Alex Osborn's work on brainstorming, Olaf Helmer and Norman Dalkey's Delphi Process, and Piaget's writings on Gestalt psychology, for example, have all influenced the Consensus Workshop method.[2]

During the 1970s and 1980s, the ICA and these methods moved around the globe and into many different cultural settings. The methods catalyzed community development efforts, impacted government agencies, and introduced transnational organizations to participatory change processes.

Thousands of ordinary citizens were taught basic consensus formation methods in the 1970s, first around the U.S. Town Meeting campaign and then with the Global Community Youth and Women's Forums. Thousands of Village leaders across the world were taught participatory planning methods as part of the ICA's Human Development Projects and the 55-nation International Exposition of Rural Development. Again, more men and women in corporations and government agencies learned the methods through strategic planning workshops and leadership training seminars in the 1980s. Each of these opportunities provided occasions for refinement and reflection on the methods. In 1989, with the publication of Laura Spencer's *Winning Through Participation*, the methods became known as the Technology of Participation (ToP).

This process of reflection and reevaluation continues to this day. There are 140 active ToP

trainers in the United States, with courses offered in 24 cities on a regular basis. They meet annually, stay in touch via e-mail and a Web site, and combine their training of others with their own direct engagement as facilitators. This effort of interchange takes place in many situations for ToP users both locally and nationally as well, and has proven to be a very effective tool for discerning new applications of the methods and sharing effective practices in the established uses.

There are active training systems in ToP methods today in the United States, Canada, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Egypt, Australia, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, and Tajikistan. Course materials are available in English, Spanish, Croatian, French, German, Arabic, Russian, Dutch, Chinese, Portuguese, and Vietnamese.

ICA and ToP methods played a key role during the late 1980s and 1990s in the development of the profession of the facilitator. Much of this was done through helping to bring into being the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) in 1994. The IAF, which now provides a mechanism for the professional certification of facilitators worldwide, continues to offer a vital forum for professional development and the interchange of a wide variety of effective methods in the field of facilitation.

Sustaining the Results

In any planning process, one of the key concerns is how the implementation of the plans will be sustained over time. The excitement generated by the planning event itself can quickly dissipate when people are back in their routine work environments or when conditions change and the plans no longer seem quite to fit the new realities. ToP has built in several components to help groups prepare for success in implementing their plans.

The first component is concluding the planning process with a clear understanding and agreement on the part of the group as to what accomplishments are scheduled for completion during what time frame and which teams are responsible for insuring that each of these happen. In addition, for the initial launch period, usually approximately 90 days, each team will have worked through the very specific steps necessary for each of its accomplishments, with responsible names and dates clearly indicated for each step. The whole group will decide the vital coordination and communication systems for keeping everyone abreast of progress and able to provide support for one another when necessary. When people leave the planning session, they will have a common picture of what is going to happen when, and who is responsible for the different components. This gives everyone confidence that their plans will indeed bear fruit.

This ensuring of successful implementation begins with the Design Conference, where the leadership of the sponsor organization and the facilitation team collaboratively design the proposed planning event. This session deals with many things, one of which is preparing for the implementation of the anticipated plans. It is critical that the leadership understands the implementation will be a journey, and that it will have stages along the way that both the leadership and the larger group need to anticipate and prepare for in advance. ToP helps sponsors consider some guidelines for successfully launching the implementation of a plan, supporting and sustaining its momentum over time, dealing with both normal and unexpected turns of events, and

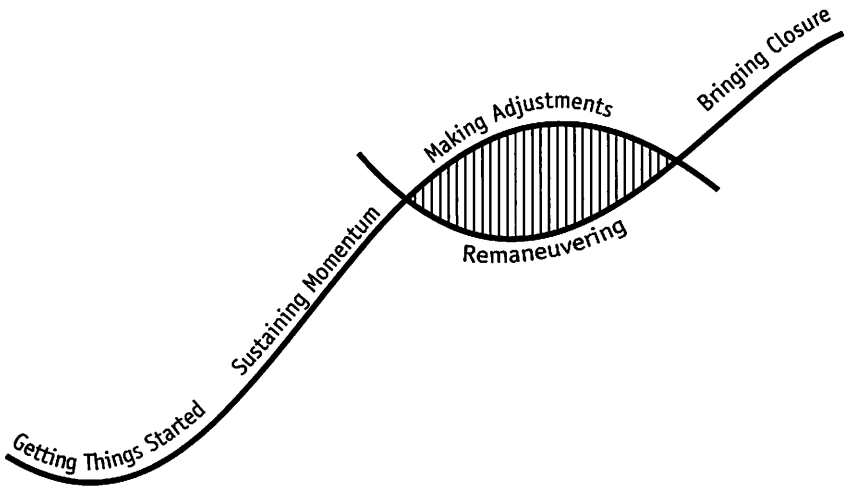

Figure 4. The Implementation Journey

finally bringing unmistakable closure to it (figure 4). Bringing new people onto the implementation teams, acknowledging successes small and large, and building new leadership capabilities make a big difference in a plan's sustainability. Especially important is that the leadership takes seriously the quarterly and annual plan rollover points where teams formulate detailed implementation steps to achieve comparatively short-term milestones.

Frequently, a group's plans call for some new ways of operating and making decisions together. Organizations that use ToP methods for a major planning event often continue to do so as part of the follow-up process. Rather than continually bringing in outside facilitators to lead this ongoing planning, they choose to make facilitative leadership training part of their corporate culture. This results in a shift toward a more participatory mode of operating that can spread throughout the organization.

Burning Question

Can an individual be a content-neutral facilitator of ToP methods within his or her own group, and if so, how? If someone is a member of the group, rather than an outsider brought in for the occasion, isn't he or she personally invested in the group and its decisions and therefore likely to experience a conflict in roles while facilitating a process?

One way to approach this question is to recognize how we all now play multiple roles as a new style of facilitative leadership emerges within modern organizations. Doing so, however, requires that we be clear ourselves and upfront with the group as to the particular role we are playing at any one time. To issue directives or simply tell a group how to resolve an issue may seem an appropriate managerial role—but not for that of a facilitator. As facilitators, we need to bring to the situation ways to engage the wisdom, insights, and commitment of the whole group.

This can call for the facilitator to spell out a set of boundaries and have the ability to articulate the kind of decision that the group needs to make for itself. It may be that this group is being asked to provide input for a decision that the manager will make later. It may be asked for its advice or ideas only, or it may be that it has full authority and responsibility to make decisions here. Groups are most successful when the boundaries within which they are operating are very clear.

There are some practical things we can do when we find ourselves in situations where we play a leadership role or have vital information to share. When possible, it is wise to ask someone else not so invested in the topic to facilitate this particular meeting, so that we can fully and actively participate. When that isn't possible, and we are the source of critical information that the group will need in order to deal responsibly with a topic, it may be appropriate to distribute this to everyone in advance of the meeting or prepare someone else in the group to be the source of this material during the meeting.

What is called for today is a deepening understanding of how leadership and group participation skills work together to ensure that people commit to action. ToP methods seek to contribute to the emergence of new styles of facilitative leadership in almost every arena of human endeavor.

Some Final Comments

We've described above how so much of the development of ToP methods depends upon action research—innovation and refinements coming more from experience in the field than from theory. The Technology of Participation has been fortunate in being able to benefit over the past 40 years from extensive field testing. As ICA expanded its work and the use of these methods around the world in widely diverse social settings, the methods evolved accordingly. The conversational, consensus formation, and planning processes were forced to become equally effective in remote rural villages of India and the corporate offices of Fortune 500 companies. They had to work for people rooted in a Confucian tradition of reserve, respect for authority, and nonconfrontation as much as in one that valued the challenging of authority and freewheeling democratic individualism. The methods had to work with men and women, youth and elders, the illiterate and the highly educated—and they had to be communicable and transferable in many languages.

Thousands of people have had a hand in the development of ToP methods. They have affirmed and helped polish what worked well and suggested ways to improve weaker points in a process. Innovations and adaptations have been shared among the networks of ICA staff and ToP trainers around the world and by legions of individual end users of the methods. As these large or small changes in process occurred, the methods gained greater clarity of focus and the appearance of what some have termed "elegant simplicity." ToP methods deal with the complex realities of our human condition, and increasingly they do so with a process that can be understood and appropriated by people everywhere.

About the Authors

Marilyn Oyler (moyler@ica-usa.org) has coordinated the collaborative development of the nationally recognized Technology of Participation (ToP) facilitation curriculum and national training system offering (ToP) training through a network of 140 trainers to more than 20,000 people all across the United States. She brings more than 25 years of experience in facilitating participatory strategic planning retreats and other organizational change efforts in seven nations with more than 100 organizations covering the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

Gordon Harper (gharper@ica-usa.org) is an Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) senior process consultant and Technology of Participation mentor trainer with more than 30 years experience in facilitating organizational and community development. He has been responsible for the design, curriculum development, facilitation, and training of group processes and leadership formation programs for local communities, government agencies, transnational corporations, and nonprofit organizations in 11 countries.

Where to Go for More Information

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Organizations

The Institute of Cultural Affairs—www.ica-usa.org

International Association of Facilitators—www.iaf-world.org

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1. See Wayne Nelson's *Facilitator Style* on www.ica-associates.ca.

2. See Brian Stanfield, "Some Background," *The Workshop Book* (Toronto: New Society Publishers, 2002), 14–20.