

John Burbidge

## THE TECHNOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION: The Group Facilitation Methods of the Institute of Cultural Affairs

Sixty kilometers south of Pune, secluded in the dusty, parched hills of India's Western Ghats, lies the village of Jawale. Home to just over a thousand people, Jawale is the site of one of ICA's Human Development Projects. Under the shade of a sprawling banyan tree, Jawale Chairman Sudashiv Bhosale is addressing a group of visitors from another village who have come to see what Jawale had done to develop itself and to decide if they want to follow suit.

Bhosale has just begun his introductory remarks when one of his visitors interrupts him in rapid-fire Marathi accent: "You talk about having developed leaders in your village. Just how have you done this?"

The Jawale chairman looks him straight in the eye: "When ICA first came to our village, we had many factions fighting one another. We could never agree on anything. One of the things ICA taught us was how to plan together."

The visitor comes back with: "What do you mean by planning?"

"In our village," says Bhosale, "we always started from the top and ignored the bottom. A few people made all the decisions. ICA taught us to start from the bottom and go to the top. They showed us how to think things through, to anticipate obstacles and to work from there to reach our goals."

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Change of scene. You are now in the oak-paneled boardroom of an international bank outside of London, England, observing top-level managers deciding their company's future.

ICA facilitator Sherwood Shankland turns to the participants seated around the table and says: "Imagine it's five years in the future. You are reading an article on the achievements of your organization. What

does the piece highlight about your achievements? How does it indicate this bank is unique in its field? What does it say about how you've changed in the past five years?"

Shankland is leading the first of five sessions in a three-day strategic planning process. He has done more than 40 such programs over the last three years with company executives in Europe, Africa and the United States. Much of what he is doing with these managers Shankland learned in working with corporations, public officials, voluntary organizations and village leaders in Southeast Asia, the United States and the Caribbean.

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These two cameos could be repeated a thousand times over, in myriad settings. They are part of the legacy of 30 years' work by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), an organization which has pioneered participatory approaches to community and organizational development across the world. ICA's "clients" come from all walks of life, all sectors of society and from a variety of cultural traditions. The hallmark of ICA's approach is "helping people find the will and the resources to do it for themselves." To do this, ICA has developed a highly sophisticated, yet elegantly simple, series of methods called The Technology of Participation (ToP).

### EVOLUTION OF ICA'S APPROACH

ICA's methodology has its roots in a small black ghetto on the west side of Chicago in the early 1960s. The typical approach to urban renewal at the time was to bulldoze horizontal slums and erect vertical ones in their place. Very little changed and people had no sense of participation in or responsibility for the life of their community. Living and working shoulder to shoul-



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der with local residents, ICA staff asked themselves: "What can be done in this derelict neighborhood to transform it into a vital human community?"

The need was stark; the challenge, overwhelming. Yet, there was that alluring sense of "if it can be done here, it can be done anywhere." Indeed, it was this understanding of being a demonstration that gave rise to the Fifth City Community Reformulation Project. Within 20 years, the basic approach to neighborhood development hammered out in this project had been replicated and refined in countless rural and urban communities around the world.

Several guiding principles emerged from this early work. Almost as a litany, they became the basis of ICA's comprehensive, human development approach. They were: deal with all the people, tackle all the problems, work in a delimited geographical area, discern the underlying contradictions and remember that symbols are key.

Trite? Simplistic? Perhaps. But these rudimentary principles were the foundation of much of ICA's later work. Fifth City showed that unlocking the commitment and creativity within people who live and work in a situation is key to transforming that situation.

Within 10 years, the results spoke for themselves. A community-run preschool and health clinic, rehabilitated housing units, a thriving seniors' center, locally operated businesses and much more had emerged. A number of ICA supporters and advisors who

worked in the corporate world became intrigued. Why wouldn't the same basic approach work in a company setting as well? After all, companies needed much the same skills as ICA had developed for grassroots development - consensus building, teamwork, planning with a sense of ownership, shared responsibility and the like.

Tapping the expertise of their advisers, ICA staff undertook a major research and development effort which culminated in the LENS (Leadership Effectiveness and New Strategies) seminar. LENS offered private and public sector organizations a whole new way of solving problems internally, while increasing employee motivation and commitment at the same time. Long before words like "excellence," "participation" and "quality circles" had become part of the corporate vocabulary, ICA had begun to make them realities in organizations across the world.

In the words of one company executive: "I've had many management seminars, all the way from Harvard to Stanford, but none has been as authentic and versatile as LENS. We have applied the techniques I learned in LENS to problems ranging from refinery feasibility studies to dealing with the relationship between trade imbalance and the energy crisis."

In India, where ICA has worked extensively with a number of companies at multiple organizational levels, LENS has often been the beginning of a more intensive and ongoing relationship with private-sector corporations. In the case of The Indian Hotels Company, which runs the Taj Group of hotels, ICA conducted a three-week Leadership Development Lab to accelerate the capacities of middle managers. According to V.S. Mahesh, general manager of manpower planning and development for the company: "This program had a tremendous catalytic impact. Several people have admitted that the atmosphere now seems to be more conducive to getting things done they couldn't do before."

As an action research organization, ICA has always moved back and forth between planning and implementation. A key part of its early development was annual "research

assemblies." These highly participatory gatherings brought together hundreds of people from around the world to share their experiences and work on models of human development. Technique refinement and strategy building was done on these occasions.

A major outcome of one of these assemblies was the Town Meeting Program. Drawing inspiration from early New England town meetings, these events were designed to give

## TOP Focused Conversation Method

### Objective



Getting  
The Facts

### Reflective



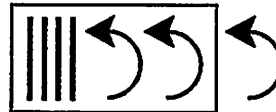
Emotions, Feelings,  
Associations

### Interpretive



Values, Meaning,  
Purpose

### Decisional



Future Resolves

local people a say in directing the future of their communities. Usually conducted in a one-day format, the Town Meeting was a rare opportunity for people to rehearse the history of their community, articulate their hopes and dreams for its future, discern the challenges they were facing and build practical proposals for action. The creation of a community song, story and symbol was often a highlight of the whole process.

In the United States, Town Meetings were held as part of the bicentennial year, 1976. At least one was held in every county across the country. When the power of this event became apparent, many other countries joined the pattern. In India, it was Gram Sabhas. In Belgium, it was Forum Communautaire and Dorpsdag. In Peru, it was Foro Comunitario.

ICA staffer David Cunningham, who worked on Town Meetings in Wales and Scotland, remembers the impact they had on facilitators and participants alike. "It was wonderful to watch people seize the initiative and decide to take charge of what was

happening in their communities," David said. "They would stop in on their way to do shopping in the morning and not leave until four in the afternoon."

Town Meetings, Human Development Projects, LENS seminars and a number of other programs ICA devised in its first 20 years were directed to different target audiences. But underneath, they all had a similar intent. They were harbingers of a new ethic in community and organization development. They made decision-making processes inclusive rather than exclusive. They looked for experts from within, rather than from without. They honored everyone's input and wove it into a common fabric. Work became fun and creativity became commitment.

## PARTICIPATION: METHOD, NOT MAGIC

Over many years of using participatory methods, ICA found certain learning had begun to seep through. People started demanding that ICA share its know-how with a much wider audience. One of the results was the book *Winning Through Participation*, produced by Laura Spencer and a team of ICA staff members (1). Although Spencer draws heavily on ICA's experience with the private sector, the insights she presents pertain equally to working in government, voluntary organizations or local communities.

In the early part of the book, Spencer lays out four basic tenets of participation embodied in ICA's approach. They are:

• Participation is an ongoing, integrated, whole-systems approach.

Introducing participatory methods is not like adding a room onto a house. In fact, it isn't an addition at all, but something that permeates and transforms the entire operations of an organization or community. It's a whole new way of dealing with people that is evident in every encounter. An example of this occurred in the California-based organization, Food For All, which makes extensive use of ICA methods. At their annual meetings, everyone from board members to new volunteers is invited to participate in planning the organization's future.

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- **Participation is an evolving, organic and dynamic process.**

Participation is not a one-shot, quick-fix formula. It takes time to introduce participatory methods and even more time to nurture them and allow them to become part of an organization's culture or a community's life. Naturally, there must be an entry point so that participation can take root and begin to grow.

In the Fifth City project in Chicago, the preschool provided a key entry point to participating in community life for many. Ruth Carter, director of the preschool since 1977, reflected: "Close to four thousand children have gone through the preschool. They often come back to visit and are still concerned about the neighborhood. And we have parents who want to help, just because their children were here."

- **Participation is a structured process involving learnable skills.**

There is a popular myth that some of us are born facilitators and the rest of us missed out on the magic. But managing participation does not come from some innate charisma; it is, truly, a skill that can be learned. Some people find "participation" and "structure" a difficult mix to swallow. One seems to contradict the other. But strange as it may seem, the opposite is the case. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter, editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and author of *When Giants Learn To Dance* and *The Change Masters* stated in her foreword to *Winning Through Participation*: "True freedom is not an absence of structure ... but rather a clear structure that allows people to work within established boundaries in an autonomous and creative way."

- **Participation requires a commitment to openness from everyone involved.**

Open-systems approaches to social change can be painful. Basic values and cherished ways of doing things are often up for grabs. Even those who pride themselves on being innovative are often challenged to "let go" in ways they hadn't quite anticipated. A term being used increasingly to describe an organization with a built-in stance of openness is "learning organization."

### THE ESSENTIALS OF TOP

ICA's Technology of Participation reflects these basic values. Referred to as

"contentless," ToP methods comprise an array of techniques for use in strategic and action planning, group communications, consensus-based decision making and team leadership. They can be combined in different ways to address particular situations and audiences.

In *Winning Through Participation*, Spencer highlights three of the foundational ToP methods - the workshop, the focused conver-

underlying concerns and insights.

- Leave your own personal "neuroses" outside the room when facilitating.

The workshop method is a key instrument in the ToP tool kit. Repeatedly, people who come across it find it an invaluable addition to their set of skills. One recent participant in an ICA methods course commented: "The workshop method has given structure to skills and techniques I tend to use intuitively. I'm now a lot more conscious of their application. As a result, I'm able to act more confidently and obtain better results."

The Focused Conversation Method is another basic ToP method. How often have you been in a group which is dominated by one or two people, disintegrates into a battle of opinions or just goes around in circles with no conclusion? All too often, is probably the truth.

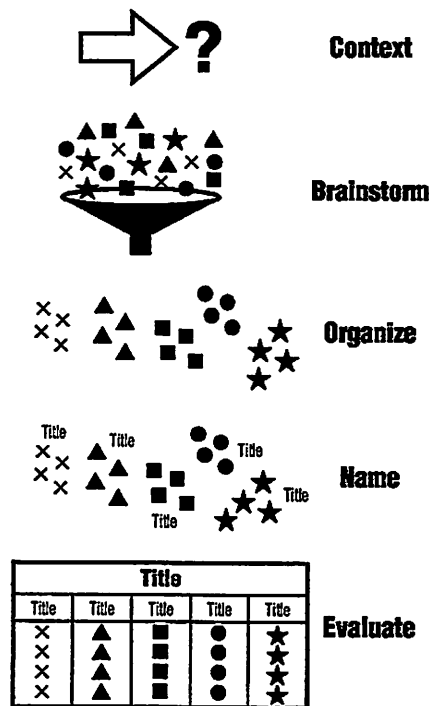
Using a carefully selected flow of questions, the ToP Focused Conversation Method allows a group to reflect on an event or shared experience and decide how to respond to it. The method provides an opportunity for everyone present to contribute to the discussion. The key success lies in the nature and sequence of questions asked - from objective to reflective to interpretive to decisional. This is the process the mind goes through when confronted with a new situation, although so quickly that we are hardly ever conscious of the different aspects of our response.

A newcomer to the method was extremely excited when she grasped the logic inherent in it. "It's a whole brain process," she exclaimed, "that proceeds from right to left in a natural sequence: experience, emotion, thought and action."

Once one becomes familiar with the Focused Conversation Method, it's difficult not to use it. Not only does it lend itself to formal group situations, it's the kind of process you use without realizing it. San Diego Councilman John Hartley, who became acquainted with the method in organizing a community meeting dealing with youth-related issues, reflected: "I took a 10-day vacation to Canada and back. I can't get over the fact that every bit of thinking I did went through the process of Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional!"

The third method focuses on orchestrat-

## TOP Workshop Method



sation, and event planning and orchestration. The Workshop Method is designed to help a group make a decision, solve a problem or create an action plan. It follows five simple steps: (1) set the context for the workshop, (2) brainstorm data and ideas, (3) organize the data into patterns, (4) name the key insight of each cluster of data, and (5) evaluate the work and discuss its implications.

But behind the simplicity of the method lie a host of presuppositions that make the workshop come to life. A number of rules of thumb guide ICA facilitators in leading workshops. They include things like:

- All responses are accepted and feed the group's creative process.
- Listen behind what's being said for

ing meetings and conducting events. A number of helpful clues are included in this category, ranging from deciding the "rational objective" and "experiential aim" of an event to details such as room arrangement and decor. Five easy-to-remember guidelines are recommended in planning any event - Space, Time, Eventfulness, Product and Style - otherwise known as STEPS.

## APPLICATIONS OF TOP METHODS

These three methods form the core of ICA's participatory processes. They can be used on their own or in various combinations. The most dramatic demonstration of their power is when they are woven together into a program that enables an organization or a community to accomplish major tasks.

ToP methods are commonly used in strategic planning, leadership development, team building, philosophy and mission retreats, customer service and organizational transformation. Of all these applications, strategic planning is probably the one most frequently undertaken by ICA in the widest range of situations, from village development programs to multinational companies.

The ToP Strategic Planning process has five basic steps:

- Mapping out the group's Practical Vision of the future.
- Analyzing the Underlying Contradictions, preventing that vision from being realized.
- Setting the Strategic Directions to deal with the contradictions.
- Deciding Specific Actions to be accomplished.
- Drawing up an Implementation Timeline - the who-what-when-where-how.

Each of these steps is a session in itself. They can be done back-to-back in two days or spread out over a period of time appropriate to the situation. When Kim Epley of ICA West was working with the San Juan South-

ern Paiute tribe in Northern Arizona, she conducted the planning over a period of months. Far from being a problem, this longer time frame proved to be an asset. "Consensus, as Native Americans know only too well, takes time to build," said Epley. "While it sometimes seems to be slowing down the decision-making process, the decisions made are usually of higher quality in terms of support, ownership and willingness to implement them."

know they know anything.

The facilitator provides an alternative to more traditional top-down styles of group leadership. All organizations need leaders who can empower and inspire those around them, while leaving their own egos aside. Community psychologist Anne Doshier describes ICA's facilitation style as a classic example of this. She refers to it as a style which is cognitively driven, in which the affect of the group overshadows the personality of facilitator, and which inspires participants to become agents of change out of images of a new future.

ICA has trained thousands of people in this new style of leadership. Shakuntala Jadhav, a young Maharashtra woman on the staff of ICA:India, spends much of her time building facilitators at the village level. She and her husband recently trained a group of 35 men and women from tribal villages to facilitate village planning meetings throughout their area. "It was amazing," said Shakuntala. "The whole 35 decided they would all attend each of the six village meetings. They dressed smartly and did a wonderful job." The

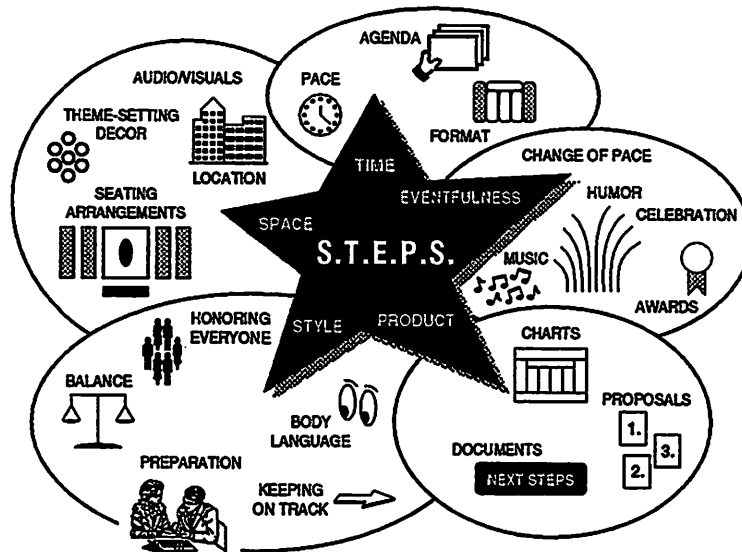
result? In doing a two-year review of their five-year plan, the villagers discovered they had already accomplished 75% of the tasks they had laid out for themselves.

Closer to home, in the western United States, a number of small ICA-trained facilitator "guilds" have begun to spring up, meeting on a regular basis to share insights from using ToP methods, to study state-of-the-art developments and to explore new avenues of applying ToP methods. These groups are also linked up to a larger pool of ToP facilitators around the world, who share their wisdom and experience at conferences, through publications and via electronic mail.

## UNIQUENESS OF ICA'S APPROACH

People sometimes comment that there's nothing terribly unusual about a lot of the components of ToP. At one level, that is true.

## Top Events



## THE ART AND SCIENCE OF FACILITATION

In applying any of the ToP methods, one factor is crucial — how they are applied. The how-factor leads to the role of the "facilitator." Like "participation," "facilitation" is often a misunderstood term. It does not refer to someone who introduces a meeting, lets people talk to their hearts' content, then says "Time's up!" Nor is a facilitator someone who has a personal agenda and, overtly or covertly, gets the group to rubber stamp it.

Rather, as Spencer points out, facilitation is both a science and an art. It is "a blend of well-practiced skill and sensitive attention to people. The facilitator displays the finesse and presence of an orchestra conductor who inspires musicians to peak individual and symphonic performance." The facilitator must be skilled in eliciting answers from others, perhaps from people who don't even



## TAKING IT FROM THE TOP: Training in the Technology of Participation

A major part of ICA's work today involves training others in the methods it has developed in its work with communities and organizations around the world. From place to place, the outward appearance of its training packages may vary, but the contents within are essentially the same.

ICA West, the arm of the institute serving the western United States, offers a series of training programs designed to produce highly skilled facilitators. Graduates of these courses not only have the skills to orchestrate meetings but the ability to release a group's creativity to find solutions to the issues it faces.

Staff and associates of ICA West are expanding and refining existing training programs to include facilitator certification. Courses offered by ICA West are:

### **WINNING THROUGH PARTICIPATION: LEVEL ONE**

Basic Group Facilitation Methods

### **WINNING THROUGH PARTICIPATION: LEVEL TWO**

Basic Strategic Planning Process

### **WINNING THROUGH PARTICIPATION: LEVEL THREE**

Philosophy of Participation

### **WINNING THROUGH PARTICIPATION: ADVANCED METHODS**

*A variety of modules covering:*

Application of ICA Methods, Creation of Quality Events, Methods for Managing Change, Self-Directed Practicums

The Level One and Two courses are two-day events that may involve representatives from various organizations or be offered as an in-house program. Fees are on a graduated scale and ICA members are entitled to a discount. ICA West also tailors its training programs to meet the needs of particular groups.

A companion to the training programs is ICA's "how-to" book *Winning Through Participation*. With a foreword by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and author of *When Giants Learn to Dance* and *The Change Masters*, this book gives detailed descriptions of ICA's key participatory processes, illustrations of actual situations in which they have been applied and a host of practical tips for facilitators. Although examples are drawn from ICA's experience in working with private corporations, the methods outlined are applicable to any group situation. Retailing at \$29.95, it is an essential tool in the kit of today's professional facilitator.

For further information on the book and the training programs, contact ICA West at its regional office:

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any undertaking. The moment you exclude pieces of the puzzle, the picture is incomplete. Reductionism sets in and a less-than-adequate response is the likely result.

Secondly, there is hidden depth in much of what ICA does. Sometimes people sniff this but can't put a name on it. Techniques of participation are not merely tricks of a trade but are doorways to deeper levels of individual and group reflection and action. They are, if you like, tools of a spirit master and need to be handled with the care of such a professional.

Many ICA programs have incorporated the use of symbols and ritual into their flow. These "cultural" elements have helped create a rich spirit-filled framework for planning and consensus building. Nowhere has this been as apparent as with Native American communities and organizations, renowned for their ability to recognize and honor the spiritual dimension of life.

In these situations, it is obvious that planning becomes more than simply an exercise in increasing effectiveness. As Epley has noted: "Participants will often ask the question: 'What is the significance of this or that

for our great-grandchildren?' or 'What would our ancestors have thought of this?'" This kind of awareness of the past and the future, an integral part of Native American culture, is something we would all do well to build into our corporate deliberations.

### **COMING OF AGE**

In a time when participation in deciding one's future has shifted from being a desirable thing to becoming a basic human right, a technology of participation would seem to be an absolute essential.

The political upheavals of the last couple of years around the world are testimony to this. People have said a loud "no" to the yoke of autocratic dictatorships, oligarchic rule and totalitarian regimes. But at the same time, they are floundering as they search for ways to rebuild from the bottom up.

For over 30 years, ICA has worked at one approach to doing this. Its Technology of Participation, which began as a vehicle for grassroots decision-making and action, has grown into something much more substantial. Its application today is endless— board retreats, cross-sector conferences, multi-

party summits, community coalitions, tribal nations, and more. The International Exposition of Rural Development and the US-Soviet Citizen's Summit are two examples.

What seems to be a "coming of age" for ToP might just be the beginning of something much more significant than any of us realizes. Along with other "open systems" frameworks, it is part of an exciting new wave of people-centered approaches to community and organization development which seem destined to become accepted practice as we move into the 21st century.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Spencer, Laura J. *Winning Through Participation: Meeting the Challenge of Corporate Change with the Technology of Participation*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1989.

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