

Crafting Social Labs

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From Shared Vision to Shared Challenges

Epiphany came when contemplating what social labs are - ReosPartners (2018): *They are intensive, experimental interventions. They bring together people from across the system to seek root causes behind their problems and then collaborate on devising and testing solutions aimed at key leverage points.* Suddenly our basic assumption that a shared vision is a prerequisite for changing the world shattered with profound consequences.

Let us explain:

In the early stage of organizational consulting - during the 1960s - focus was on problem solving and fixing deficits in organizational functioning. As the story goes - see Barbara Bunker and Billie Alban (1996) - one of the pioneers, Ronald Lippitt, while listening to problem-solving groups at work realized that their discussion caused him to lose energy and feel drained and tired. Because of this experience, he experimented with asking people to think about the future rather than about what problems exist and how to fix them. Thus emerged the process called “preferred future”. What Lippitt invented became a mainstream activity in organizations over the next decades. Creating visions, missions, objectives, and goals entered strategic management, policy design, organizational development, large group interventions and the like. However, Lippitt’s intention to design a process that would engage people in problem solving without the experience of energy drain has not been pursued any further so that Peter Senge (2006) identified a shared vision as core discipline primarily because it *creates a sense of commonality that pervades the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities.* Visioning distanced itself from problem solving and became a way of community building - Peter Block (2008): *The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear, and retribution.*

Unnoticed by the visioning community of practice Brian Arthur was interviewed by Joe Jaworski and Otto Scharmer in 1999 - an interview that as it turned out was the beginning of a paradigm shift away from strategic and policy planning eventually leading to the U process and to social labs. The cognitive dissonance between the belief in the power of a shared goal and the perception of its nonattainment has become too discomfoting.

What Brian Arthur said was:

- (a) *Suppose I was parachuted into some situation in Silicon Valley. It’s not a problem, it’s just a situation that is complicated and changing and unfolding. I’m trying to figure things out. I would observe and observe and observe and then just retreat. If I’m lucky, I would get in touch with some deep inner place and then allow that knowing to emerge.*
- (b) *Small events can lead the economy to quite different structures.*
- (c) *There is no correct solution. You allow the world to unfold and you act appropriately.*

This statement (a) brought back the notion that change is neither about a shared vision nor about community building but about a shared situation which may pose a shared challenge.

From Forecasting to Acting

Arthur’s statement (b) suggests that long-term prediction is impossible - including forecasting the results of strategic measures - and that a small change now can result in

large differences later. This questions the very notion of planning. According to Wikipedia, a plan is a list of actions with details of timing and resources through which one expects to achieve a goal. However, how can people of an organization, an institution, a society possibly agree on a goal out of a situation that is complicated, changing, and unfolding? Moreover, even if they share a goal how can they agree on a list of actions when it is unpredictable if the goal is achievable through these actions. Like it or not, any plan is (implicitly) based on forecasting the effects of some actions on achieving a certain goal. Zaid Hassan (2014) argues:

I started seeing planning as a zombie idea. The planning paradigm, despite being killed many times over, for example, with the death of the Soviet Union, still walks among us. Planning was - and remains - a means of centralized control of resources, labor, and outputs by a small number of technocrats. It's the favored means of responding to complexity. Yet it's badly suited to the challenges we now face.

So what is the alternative? Simply said, the only way to find out if a forecast on results of actions is correct is to act.

Prior to Brian Arthur already Ernst Schumacher pointed out in 1973 the myth of predictability:

It is the intrusion of human freedom and responsibility that makes economics metaphysically different from physics and makes human affairs largely unpredictable. We obtain predictability, of course, when we or others are acting according to a plan. But this is so precisely because a plan is the result of an exercise in the freedom of choice. The choice has been made. All alternatives have been eliminated. If people stick to their plan, their behavior is predictable simply because they have chosen to surrender their freedom to act otherwise than prescribed in the plan.

Yet Joe Jaworski and Otto Scharmer were the first to realize the relevance of Brian Arthur's contribution to complexity theory for change processes and to base their U process on that insight: *observe, observe, observe; retreat and reflect; act in an instant.* Social labs, however, go one step further still.

From the One to the Many

We very much share Zaid Hassan's observation:

What strikes me is the lack of realism that all too often accompanies intentions and desires. Many people are working as individuals, even as they work within massive institutions, on problems that affect many thousands, or even millions, of people. They do not seem to be very effective. Reports recommending action seem to be drowning out action. It's as if we believe that writing a report is 90 percent of the work.

On the other hand, entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs tell us that *the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.* Clearly, not everyone who wants to address a challenge does succeed. Thus, the notion of participation emerged early on with some form of grassroots democracy built into change processes. Concepts like distributed management, wisdom of the crowd, and collaborative intelligence made participatory processes fashionable. But in one way or other, they hold one basic assumption in common that Peter Senge formulated: *If a group of people do not function as a whole, if they are not operating as an aligned team then energy is wasted. By contrast, when a group of people becomes more aligned, a commonality of directions emerges, and individual' energies harmonize - a resonance of synergy develops.*

To our knowledge social labs are the first process that reject the importance of alignment because as Brian Arthur stated, there is no correct solution and one cannot know in advance which actions will be successful in tackling a challenge. With all wisdom of the crowd,

there still is no optimal solution. For that reason, Zaid Hassan notes that social labs are platforms rather than processes to devise and test solutions. On such a platform, people need not align their actions, as it is impossible to agree on the list of actions that best address the challenge. Nevertheless, they can learn from each other, from their successes and failures, and they can share their intentions and desires regarding the challenge. What Ronald Lippitt experienced as discussions that caused him to lose energy and feel drained and tired is at least partly the result of people's attempt to convince each other of the best solution to an existing problem.

Moving from "I know the solution and let's all agree on it" to "we share the same challenge but we need not agree on our actions" is the way to proceed.

The Case of Responsible Research and Innovation

The purpose of the 'Science with and for Society' funding programme of the European Commission is to encourage the development of harmonious relationships between science and society and the opening-up of innovation in Europe as a result of an informed dialogue between researchers, industrialists, political decision makers and citizens for science to better meet needs of society.

Out of the programme emerged the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) approach to ensure that societal actors work together during the whole research and innovation process to better align both the process and outcomes of R&I, with the values, needs and expectations of European society - see European Commission (2018).

To foster RRI, the European Commission launched a call for the support action "Moving from constraints to openings, from red lines to new frames" - see European Commission (2017). Required impact was to develop 'narratives' such that RRI becomes an integral part of the Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. The Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna won the bid with the following approach - see Institute for Advanced Studies (2017):

The Project "Excellence in science and innovation for Europe by adopting the concept of Responsible Research and Innovation (NewHoRRizon)" will establish altogether 18 Social Labs. Together with a wide-ranging group of R&I stakeholders, in these Social Labs, NewHoRRizon will co-create tailor-made pilot actions that will stimulate an increased use and acceptance of RRI. The pilot actions to be developed and tested in the Social Labs will contribute to R&I projects that fully recognize the significance of RRI.

Each social lab was to address a specific funding programme, e.g. excellent science, industrial leadership, and societal challenges to name the largest of the 18 programmes within the Eighth Framework Programme - in total a funding budget of EUR 11.2 billion per annum.

Our task was to craft and facilitate social labs that deliver the required impact.

The Core Disciplines of Facilitating Social Labs

Peter Senge introduced the concept of "discipline." By "discipline", he means a body of theory and technique that can be studied, mastered and put into practice. From our experience with the social labs of NewHoRRizon the following core disciplines are essential.

Dialogue

David Bohm as quoted by Mandl (2013) gives the best description of the role of dialogue in triggering action:

Some time ago, there was an anthropologist who lived for a long while with a North American tribe. The hunter-gatherers have typically lived in groups of twenty to forty. Now, from time to time that tribe met in a circle. They just talked and talked, apparently to no purpose. They made no decisions. There was no leader. ... The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. Then they could get together in small groups and do something.

The purpose of dialogue in social labs is pretty much the same as in this tribe. However, a group of people that has never worked together in a social lab will not all by themselves develop a dialogic mode of conversation. It is the task of the facilitator to guide the group away from reporting, monologues, and defensive routines towards dialogic conversations.

Powerful Questions

A social lab is not about teaching or preaching solutions. After all, if a solution existed the challenge would not exist anymore. Thus, the way to support people in a social lab are not presentations but questions. Powerful questions trigger thinking and conversations while presentations trigger defensive routines or boredom. Yet coming up with good questions is a nontrivial task for the facilitator. Albert Einstein once said:

If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.

In their inspiring article on “The Art of Powerful Questions”, Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs argue: a powerful question generates curiosity in the listener, stimulates reflective conversation, is thought-provoking, surfaces underlying assumptions, invites creativity and new possibilities, generates energy and forward movement, channels attention and focuses inquiry, stays with participants, touches a deep meaning, and evokes more questions.

Reflecting Team

The task of a reflecting team as invented by the systemic therapist Tom Andersen - see Mandl (2013) - is to comment and analyze presented information in such an appreciative manner that the habitual reaction of defense or justification does not occur. A reflecting team talks about presented information in order to analyze, add thoughts and meanings, logical implications or reveal assumptions and possible interpretations.

This discipline begins with a report. The reflecting team is listening and might want to ask questions for clarification at the end. The facilitator has to intervene if these questions lead to discussion. There should be no room for defensive routines or automatic reactions from the reporting group. Then the reflecting team exchanges their thoughts, questions and interpretations. Their conversation is not about evaluation or judgment; rather it is about possible interpretations, about arising questions and conceivable consequences. The reporting group is listening and taking notes. By listening, they have the chance to see their issue from another perspective. Eventually insights emerge and awareness about why the reflecting team might interpret information in ways that were intended differently. When the reflecting team is finished, the reporting group shares, which comments and ideas they found interesting, helpful or even crucial for their future work.

Open Space Technology

When Harrison Owen first described his process in 1992, it was a major step in enabling large groups to self-organize for a specific, important task. It did away with two basic assumptions about large groups: a) self-organizing does not work with large groups and b) in order to be effective a group needs to reach a consensus about what to do. Owen based his process on a rather simple framework: Voluntary self-selection is the absolute sine qua

non for participation. Open Space Technology runs on passion bounded by responsibility. The facilitator cannot make choices for people, but must give them the opportunity to choose. What really counts is that people truly listen to people truly speaking. Being out of control and loving it is the facilitator's challenge.

Space of Possibility

The most difficult discipline is what Arthur describes as retreat, get in touch with some deep inner place and then allow that knowing to emerge. There is no magic bullet for facilitating such a group process. We have experimented with different processes, most notably "deep dive" by David Kelley and "presencing" by Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Adam Kahane. While learning much from these experiences we developed our own process, which we call "space of possibility", referring to Robert Musil's "sense of possibility":

To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle ... is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility. Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.

Arthur's "observe and observe and observe" is a mandatory prerequisite for all social lab members to enter the space of possibility. Without that, illusions rather than knowing might emerge. Then their task is to think about the challenge, their observations, and possible actions. People may go for a walk or just sit in silence without talking to each other. After 30 to 60 minutes, they will get buy-in concerning possible actions from at least two other people by walking around in the room and asking other people if they want to support their action. Those who get buy-in from at least two people describe their action on a flipchart and how this will address the challenge. This process is what David Kelley (2013) calls "focused chaos."

Space of Reality

To collaborate on testing actions is the "free program" of a social lab. Testing actions takes place not during a social lab meeting but out in the world in any form people have devised in the space of possibility. There is no frame limiting the actions. Nevertheless, there needs to be a limit on time. Many of today's societal challenges have in common that time is running out. The longer one continues with BAU - business as usual - the graver the challenge becomes and the more efforts are needed to cope. "Act in an instant," is the name of the game - see Scharmer (1999) - and David Kelley: "if you don't work under time constraints you could never get anything done."

The Meta-process of Crafting Social Labs

By definition, complex social challenges do not disappear within a few days no matter how appropriate the actions are. Thus, a social lab is not a onetime event but lasts for months, even years and nowadays - even decades. However, to keep the passion alive it is mandatory to meet regularly - to have from time to time the whole system in one room together. Therefore, two levels of crafting are necessary: The macro level dealing with the social lab on a time line in months and the micro level dealing with the design of the meetings on a time line in minutes. In NewHoRRizon each of the 18 social labs last for two years with a two day meeting once a year.

For each of the three meetings we use the six core disciplines but, of course, the sequence differs, as do the powerful questions. The guiding principle in designing each meeting is that it has to be a “metalogue” - see Gregory Bateson (2000):

A metalogue is a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject.

For example, a conference about participation where keynote speakers present their views and the participants just listen is not a metalogue.

Getting Started

Someone has to take the initiative and start a social lab. In case of NewHoRRIZon it was the consortium of 18 institutions. Already Harrison Owen (1992) addressed the question who should come, and how one gets them there. His answer was, *whoever cares*, and the fact of their caring will be sufficient to insure their attendance. That is what we do.

Truly important however, is the invitation. A natural temptation is to explain everything that will or has to happen during the social lab. Yet, providing the agenda in the invitation is first not necessary, and moreover impossible. Rather, the objective is to stimulate the interest of the invitees to the point that they perceive the pertinence and attractiveness of the issue. A parsimonious approach may seem strange; however, when one gives out all possible information, there is no room for ingenuity. The art lies in saying just enough to catch attention, while leaving sufficient space for the resourcefulness to run wild.

Roles and Responsibilities

In NewHoRRIZon each social lab has three distinct roles: participants, one facilitator, and one manager. As a social lab is a temporary organization, lasting for a couple of months or years with a clear expiry date, the manager’s role is primarily the role of a host, a steward and in rare occasions a teacher, elucidating the what - the challenge and its background. The role of the facilitator is the design of the process - the how - and its realization. It is clearly not part of a facilitator’s or a manager’s role to devise and/or test solutions or to reflect/report on participants actions. Zaid Hassan (2014) gives a vivid account what may happen if a manager steps out of his role:

As part of my secretariat duties, I produced a report on our visit to Narmada Nager. In it was buried a comment that was interpreted as accusing the government participants of sleeping on the job. With the discovery that I was the author of the offending comment, I was persona non grata for a week, to the point where my ability to perform my role was being compromised.

Facilitating Open Space Technology is the best way to learn how to facilitate effectively without interfering destructively in the self-organization of a group. “The ultimate facilitator will do nothing and remain totally invisible,” explains Harrison Owen.

Conditions for Success

As long-term prediction is impossible, it is also impossible to say in advance which of the devised solutions will be successful. In addition, complex social challenges are what Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973) called wicked problems. One of the characteristics of a wicked problem is that there is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem. Thus, the only criterion for success is the gradual disappearance or diminution of the problem. The best condition for success is the emergence of many divergent actions realized under time constraints with passion bounded by responsibility.

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