Consultation Process

[This paper, motivated by experience on the Lincoln consultation ‘Change and Responsibility’, outlines practical procedures to foster higher levels of creative work and participation in consultations, conferences, workshops and similar events.]

The level of creative work in a consultation depends to a large extent upon the levels of trust and risk-taking that can be built up within the very limited time available. It therefore helps if particular attention can be paid to the building of small, high-trust-level working teams very early on in the proceedings.

High levels of work and creative participation also require the lowering of the levels of dependency within the group and the placing of responsibility for creative contribution firmly into the membership right from the start. This probably means that we have to resist the temptation to collude with the pressure to protect membership from the anxiety of decision-making in the early stages of the consultation and also to resist the pressure to provide some kind of top-down management structure in which the theme content is seen to flow from consultation management to membership.

In the light of these considerations it might be wise to fashion the opening session, keynote address, groupwork and plenaries along some such lines as follows :

1 After the initial pre-meal melee and the establishing of first tentative social relationships, the consultation could be convened in the round without tables. The chairman's introductory remarks and welcome could be kept to an absolute minimum, ending with the introduction of a consultation facilitator, whose task would be described as enabling members to get to grips with the subject as deeply and quickly as possible.

2 The facilitator gives a brief outline of the process of group formation to be employed. The task is to enable each member to select working colleagues from the rest of the membership of the consultation, to get to know them in some depth and together to identify key points of agenda which they feel should form the core of the conference working programme.

3 A fairly effective way of achieving this is to ask each member to introduce him/herself briefly around the room. This enables everyone to identify names, roles and faces. While this process of introduction was going on, people would be asked to be looking for two other members with whom they would like to work. When everyone had introduced themselves, the next instruction would be "would each member now please find two other people with whom they would most like to work". Then as the threes form they take their chairs and distribute the working triads using all the space available in the room.

4 Once in the triads, the next task could be for two members to interview the third member for five minutes. They should find out as much about their background as they could, identifying any particular points of stress or concern that the person was bringing in to the conference that they needed to share and talk about before being able to give their attention fully to the conference business itself. That done, the person could be encouraged to put into words what they hoped the consultation would achieve, what they personally hoped to get out of it and what were the key issues they felt should be tackled. After five minutes roles would exchange within the triad and the second person becomes the interviewee. After another five minutes have elapsed, the third person is interviewed. That means that every person has had the opportunity of articulating their concerns, of formulating some kind of hope for the consultation, with the stimulus of being carefully listened to and questioned by two other people.

5 The next stage depends on the number of people on the consultation and the size of working groups required. The short-life consult probably works best with groups of not more than 6 or 7 people, so the facilitator's next instruction could be "would each triad next select one other triad with which they feel they would like to work closely on the conference theme. Once you have selected that partner triad form your chairs into a tight-knit six and then each pair introduce the person you have just interviewed to the new triad, taking no more than three minutes each.' If you allow 20 minutes for the exercise it will give just about enough time for the decision making, chair re-arrangement and introductions.

6 By this time most people will have relaxed and be talking quite freely Each person will have got to know 5 other people at some depth and initial anxieties will have decreased to the point at which the working agenda of the consultation can begin to take the floor. The next instruction of the facilitator could therefore be "would each group now take 10 minutes, brainstorming the issues which members feel need to be raised at this particular consultation on this subject". Encourage everybody to make notes of everybody else's ideas within the group. The facilitator will need to stress that this is not the time to start discussing the issues themselves but is the point at which everybody should be encouraged to name the full range of issues which they would like the consultation to address.

7 At the end of this period, the instruction could be given, "would each group now reflect on that list of issues and select the top three in order of priority. In other words if you could only tackle one issue for the rest of this consultation, which would be the one that you felt above all must be raised and dealt with and then, provided that issue was dealt with, what would be the next one on your agenda, and so on, to number three". Perhaps 5 minutes could be given for that exercise and then the facilitator with the assistance of a scribe could call in the first priority issue from one group, ask if the same issue was scored at top priority in any other group, and if it was then the number of groups scoring it at number 1 is recorded, number of groups scoring it at number 2 is recorded, number of groups scoring it at number 3 is recorded, number of groups mentioning the same issue but not giving it priority is recorded. Then the priority issue from another group not already mentioned is called in and recorded and the same procedure of scoring is gone through. The process continues until all number 1 priorities are called in, then attention shifts to number 2 priorities not already scored,

followed by number 3 priorities not already scored, followed by other issues mentioned but not scored at all.

8 That completes the first public session, with the comment from the facilitator that the priority-weighted agenda drawn up by the consultation will be available before the next working session the following morning. People may now want to go on talking in their groups a little, or drift off to the bar or whatever, but that is the end of the formal business for the evening.

9 At this point the facilitator and scribe have to put in some overtime! The first task is to apportion scores to the issues as follows. The first priority scores 4 points, second priority 3, third priority 2, and a listing without priority 1 point. The number of points scored by the consultation against each issue can then be totalled up and the issues rearranged in order of priority rating. Often two or three particular points will emerge with high scores virtually neck and neck, while other issues tail off quickly to much lower levels of scoring. Next there are various ways in which the material can be prepared for presentation. The list of issues and scores, in order, can be written up on acetate for overhead projection, or printed up boldly on newsprint and stuck round the walls, or typed up and duplicated or photocopied. It also helps people to gain some visual perception of the relative priorities given to different issues if the scores are represented by a bar chart. The typed list with bar chart, photocopied so that every member has their own paper is probably the most effective way of distributing information. The overhead projector tends to reintroduce a note of dependency and unless it is left on all the time, only displays the information temporarily. Newsprint on the wall is better, but again externalises dependency from the group focus onto the boundaries of the consultation, whereas the personalised, individual sheets of information means that each person is responsible for working on the material, which they themselves own, can scribble on etc.

10 At the first session the next morning the group reconvenes in the groups of six, with the task of reviewing the priority working agenda thrown up by the consultation and in the light of that, together with their own group concerns to decide what topic they wish to tackle first, what other topics within the agenda they also wish to deal with, taking into account their own levels of expertise and the time available. That exercise could take perhaps 10 minutes or a quarter of an hour. Each group should then report in the subjects they are going to work at, so that everybody knows roughly what everybody else is doing. Groups should then disperse to allocated study areas, where they will not interrupt each other, with the brief to get on with their work for the next, whatever it is, two or three sessions. It should be noted that no formal leadership structure has been appointed, either by consultation management or membership. Peer groups with six members should be able to manage this kind of working agenda without formalising the leadership structure, though obviously informal leader roles will emerge within the groups.

11 Inter-group. It is important to cross-fertilise work between the different groups. A delegate process is one way of doing this, but it is a fairly ineffective way of communicating information. It makes distinctions between active emissaries and passive receivers in which only a small proportion of the consultation membership have the responsibility for putting into their own words the kind of work that has already

been done within their group. Perhaps a more effective way of going about it is to reconvene the total membership of the consultation, then supposing there have been six working groups with six members in each, the facilitator gives the instruction would one person from each group meet up with one person from each other group. This generates six new groupings in which there is one representative from each of the original working groups. These new 6s are then encouraged to spend half an hour sharing what has been going on in the working groups. That gives each member about 5 minutes to report and summarise their own group's formation, concerns, questions, and achievement to date. The process achieves maximum cross-fertilisation within the consultation without setting up imbalanced roles. At the end of the exercise the original working groups are encouraged to reconvene and return to their study areas to continue for the rest of that session and probably the next working session as well. Each working group has access to six different perceptions of the work being done in every other working group, giving the best possible information matrix for further work, in the light of which they should be able to pursue their own working agenda on their current and next priority issues.

12 The last half hour of the final group working session should probably be given over to the task of identifying issues, comments, questions, contributions which that group would like to raise in the closing plenary.

13 The final plenary (which should probably not be the final event of the consultation) is convened with the working groups sitting tightly together, preserving their group identity within plenary space. The facilitator and chairman can work together in this session, indicating that the task is to give an opportunity to the working groups to surface their questions, comments, contributions to the various issues which have been identified by the consultation as fundamental to the consultation theme. It is then probably best to let the groups surf ace in whatever order they want to, rather than try to regiment the exercise, selecting one group to report first or something like that. A simple question "Which group wants to begin" followed by the toleration of a few moments silence will probably kick the process off quite well. A few minutes at the start of this plenary can be used to enable the working groups to review the contribution they want to make. Rather than appoint a single spokesperson for each group any member should be encouraged to speak on behalf of their group or on their own behalf during the plenary session.

14 If it is envisaged that the consultation should lead to specific decisions, and/or actions, then a brainstorming and priority selection exercise can be carried out along similar lines to the process used in sections 6 and 7 above. Groups could be asked to list decisions to be taken in the light of the consultation and arrange them in priority order. After reporting in they could then be asked what actions should be taken, when, and by whom in order to implement the priority decisions.

15 Closing a consultation without burying the work that has been done is an important but difficult process to which very little attention is normally given. It is as vital as building the working teams at the beginning of the consultation. One useful way of achieving this end is to spend the final 30 minutes in the initial triads, which can be given four questions to work at: a) what have you found most frustrating and disappointing about the consultation; b) what have you found most

valuable/interesting/stimulating about the consultation; c) what personal action do you need to take in the light of the consultation; d) what issues do you need to work on further as a result of this consultation and how do you propose to go about that task. The same kind of process can be used as in the original joining, namely that two members of the triad interview the third member along those lines and then change roles until each person has had time to reflect on the consultation and on their future working agenda, supported by a listening pair.

16 At this point the working structure of the consultation has served its task and the triads dissolve leaving people free to make their own departure as individuals, having arrived, joined, developed a working structure, identified an agenda, worked on the agenda, reviewed the work both positively and negatively and identified issues still outstanding for future work and action beyond the boundary of the consultation.

17 The leaving process itself is then the responsibility of individual members within the melee of drinks, meal, packing and departure.

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