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Abstract

Introduction

This book outlines a process that gives voice to the people in complex social situations. It describes the 30 years of development and practice that has produced a highly structured and disciplined process of dialogue process that engages stakeholders in participative democracy.

The book is an excellent contribution for those interested in learning about the art and science of dialogue. A key strength is that it is simultaneously a theory text and a practice manual – the theory is highly relevant and the practice eminently useful.

The structured design process (SDP) has been developed for use in situation that are highly complex, and in which many stakeholders have an interest. In these situations participants are engaged in creating meaning and determining action through communication and collaboration. The authors contend that dialogue is difficult in such circumstances, and that the only way to overcome the difficulty is through an adequate methodology.

Early in the book (chapter 2) the author’s contextualize their work in participative democracy. We all want to be heard. We all need to be heard. In healthy families and high-performance work teams each member’s autonomy
is honoured and their contribution is heard. Participative democracy is necessary if a personal and organizational health. SDP enables people to participate in finding solutions to complex problems affecting the quality of their lives independent of the discipline, experience, or educational backgrounds.

The process has numerous stages, and step and requires an ongoing, disciplined commitment from participants to make possible effective participation. On first reading the book is dense in definitions and concepts and rule and guidelines. Superficially it could be dismissed as being too highly structured and unnecessarily prescriptive. That, however, is the nature of the topic. The authors present a compelling argument for the necessity of discipline to enable meaningful dialogue. And without meaningful dialogue collective wisdom cannot be surfaced and harnessed to construct the future.

The book is organized in five parts, starting with a discussion of the abolition of dialogue as a basis of democracy.

Part II of How People Harness Their Collective Wisdom and Power to Construct the Future in Co-Laboratories of Democracy details in seven chapters the architecture of SDP — the definitions and methods and concepts and rules that make it work – all outlined in a clear and accessible manner. Readers will be richly rewarded in wading through them, and reflecting on their application.

The third part of the book gives worked examples (co-laboratories) of SDP in action, and is a highlight of the book. A criticism of this component could be that the case studies are too brief. Nonetheless, they do provide very useful information to aid the readers understanding of the topic. Each case study illustrates the application of the four stages of SDP, namely (1) Definition (what should we do?); (2) Design alternatives (how can we do what we should do?); (3) Decision (what are the preferred option is and why?); and (4) Action planning (when will we do what we can do and who will do it?). The particular strength of this section is a combined use of text diagrams, influence trees and leverage maps to explain the case studies.

Part IV provides an explanation of the science that underlies the STP process and offers metrics useful in measuring the complexity of situations and the diversity of participants. This section again outlines key definitions of laws.

The final part of the book looks to the future and describes the type of transformational leadership that enables the construction of future initiatives, and proposes a framework of developing the necessary leadership. Appendices provide further information to assist in the understanding of the process, and introductions to Root Cause Mapping Software useful in the application of SDP.

How People Harness Their Collective Wisdom and Power to Construct the Future in Co-Laboratories of Democracy describes a process to allow emergence to operate effectively in complex social setting. Some of the techniques and software tools appear to be particularly useful in simplifying decision-making within highly complex situations, and allowing participants to overcome what the authors have called the “burdens of dialogue” (see Chapters 3 and 10). The software keeps track of a manageable number of relationships and ideas on which the participants can focus attention.

The strength of this contribution lies in the juxtaposition of theory and practice. Rather than just providing a toolbox to assist people in managing complex problems and situations the authors provide a significant theoretical relevance to their work. This is not only necessary to assist the reader to understand the need to large number of ‘rules’ and ‘principles’; it also provides the logical framework to support the need to commit to the highly structured model that SDP represents. It is extremely useful to take the reader through the formal review of the 30 years of evolving testing and practice by the principal author Alexander Christakis that has that is behind SDP.

How People Harness Their Collective Wisdom and Power to Construct the Future in Co-Laboratories of Democracy

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is not an ‘easy’ read, and is unlikely to be digested in a single sitting. Readers not directly involved in managing, or making sense of complex situations may be bewildered by the level of detail provided. For the rest, Christakis and Bausch provide an extremely valuable contribution: well worth wading through, worthy of reflection and then a thorough re-read.