

The Café

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF LARGE SCALE TRANSFORMATION

Change processes in large scale, that is in situations where no single person or institution can have a one-to-one influence on all the parts of the system under change, is often understood by extrapolating experiences from small scale changes or by assuming a mechanistic view of the system that enables control over it.

There is a need to understand large scale change processes better and suggest that The Café might offer such an understanding – or be used as a brainstorming process.

Quoting Margaret Mead: »Never doubt, that small groups of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has! «, a cafe should be seen as a place “where magic happens” as the unit of change force in any system or organization of people.

In order to acquire enough change-force or potential for transformation the units of change-forces must be connected - that is what The Café does.

Four conditions

Something special can happen whenever and where ever a small group of people meet and start discussing things. If the term "magic" for that special thing, then that magic happens if the following 4 conditions are met (Juanita Brown):

- 1. A question that matters.
- 2. A be safe space.
- 3. Mutual listening.
- 4. A spirit of inquiry.

1. For a question to matter it needs to relate in some way or another to each person in the group. What is of importance, what has passion for the individual? The question must be relevant with possible answers having some implication directly on the participants' situation, feelings and doings. Urgency often establishes the relationship of "mattering".

Why should it be a question? Because questions opens up, whereas statements, policy declarations etc. might close thinking and narrow the scope within which the participants move.

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2. The space should be safe for the participants. Safety is relative to the needs of the participants. If the question is about the future of one's workplace and the boss is there, safety can mean that it is genuinely allowed to give voice to what one thinks without fear of being punished for it later. But safety could also mean being in safe distance from incoming calls and visits, in order to be able to keep focus on the question. Safety is about participants feeling secure in the group to allow themselves to surrender to the magic.

"Space" means that somehow there are distinct limitations, that determines who participates in the dialogue and who do not. The dialogue is within a space. It could be a room – a physical space, or it could be an electronic conference. No matter how the space is defined, it is a space for talking and discussing and you should have the opportunity either to "be in the space" or to make a choice of stepping "out of the space". In this way your being "in the space" is a consequence of a responsible choice.

3. The condition of mutual listening emphasises the importance of listening – more than talking. "Mutual" means that everyone is in the position of listening to the others. No one has a special role of speaking or presenting material. Of course if everyone just listens, not much dialogue will happen. However when someone speaks it is giving voice to something that wants to be said, so in a sense you are listening, even when speaking.

The attention that comes from every one listening creates a state of collective mind of the group in which knowledge, understandings and insights, that would not be accessible by any of the individual participants, can be accessed.

4. As there is no program or pre-planned outcome of a good talk amongst a group of people on a question that matters to them, there is a need to be open-minded during the dialogue in order for knowledge and insights to emerge on a deeper level, you will need to accept the idea that you can learn - no matter how experienced you might be on the topic in focus. That is why the fourth condition is "spirit of inquiry". Everyone automatically brings it along as an attitude. And the surroundings, the room, the opening etc. should be designed to call on the spirit of inquiry.

The very human tendency to hold on to what is known will work against the desire for new or deeper knowledge to emerge. A curiosity for what is not known needs to be greater than resistance to think new.

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What is "The Magic"

The claim is, that when the four conditions are met, something magical will happen. The conversation takes on its own unpredictable life. It becomes centred on what is at the core of the question that matters. Just as some people can sense a certain quality of energy with and around other people, so it is experienced, that the life of the conversation has an energy attached to it - an energy that enlivens the participants rather than exhaust them in this way of meeting-activities.

In a more abstract description, a field of collective mind or consciousness emerges out of the individual consciousness-state that every participant starts out with. This new collective mind has other capacities for thinking, remembering, combining and expressing than any individual mind has.

The individual participant has the experience of being part of something bigger than him or her self. When someone is giving voice to the collective mind it is of course given with the individuals' natural tongue and style and yet the experience will be that of allowing something to come up through you. You may even have the experience of being a witness to your own speaking or acting, that is, as you are speaking, you may also on another level be listening to what is said.

The individual experience can be one of an elevated state of consciousness, where one is closer to "knowing what is not known", feeling connected with an inner source of wisdom and understanding, tapping into a field of knowledge that seemingly has been there all the time, but now is accessible to you. A suggestive metaphor for this is to be "life net connected": Similar to the way you can be connected to the Internet with a computer and thereby have access to the information and communication paths which are there whether or not you connect to it, you can be connected to "life net" with your mind, heart and body and thereby have access to deeper layers of knowledge, which is there whether you connect to them or not.

"The magic" can also be experienced under other circumstances, like when musicians improvise together, or in team sports - whenever a small group of people interact and the 4 conditions are met.

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Say that we call it "a cafe" whenever "the magic" happens. Then "The Café" is a metaphor, which suggests, that all the cafe's in which magic happens are connected.

It is an implicit assumption, that a field of collective consciousness does exist and that this field is accessible. What connects the individual cafes to a larger whole is "the life net". Each cafe is drawing on and adding to the pool of knowledge and understanding that is accessible in the life net. This way of connecting does not exclude the purposefulness of more traditional ways of connecting conversations, like sharing writings, pass on learning, talking with people in other cafe's, faxing, e-mailing, phoning etc.

The suggestion is that one simple condition is enough to ensure the connectedness of any single conversation where magic happens in The Café. That sole condition is, that at least one person in the conversation should know about The Café.

"Knowing" in this context means being aware that when a conversation takes on its own life and new insights are gained, then those insights are not only gained for the few people in the conversation, but for all other conversations with similar intentions as well. Using a little more poetic knowledge means having the courage to stay connected and challenging the magic in the local cafe for the larger perspective.

A process for large scale transformation

The idea of The Café applies both for specific organizations and institutions, like business corporations, and for societies, even the world society. For instance, a lot of good initiatives and efforts is intended on creating positive images of our common future, initiatives to connect businesses with social change. The question of sustainability is "a question that matters" in many settings all over the world. In one sense all these efforts are all ready connected, as they are drawing similar intentions of nourishing life for future generations. But each of the initiatives might benefit from holding the perspective, that in fact they could be seen as part of one large changing process, say The Café on Sustainability.

It is like building a house. It helps a lot, if you know, that you're not going to do it all by your self. Just knowing, that somewhere somebody else is building on the same house, gives that huge task more relevance.

Coming to an understanding of The Cafe, making it known, enhances its transformative ability, and creates a new level of collective intelligence.

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The transformative nature of a dialogue "with magic" might be understood by applying the assumption: The whole is represented in every small part. This means that what happens in a dialogue between people is a representation of something happening in the wholeness which these people are a part of. What happens in here happens out there. What happens in the individual cafe happens in The Café - what happens in The Café happens in the world.

Process design issues

It is suggested that heavy attention is given to

- Questions - what questions can centre a dialogue, what are the questions that would matter to people in a given organization, what "technical qualities" are required (for instance open-closed, concrete-abstract, personal-general)?
- Safety - what need for safety do members of the organization have in order to be able to participate in dialogues in which magic can appear?
- Space - how is the individual cafe separated, in time and in space, from other activities of the organization?
- Listening - what kind of practise, training, attitudes and conditions enables mutual listening, that is needed to support a change of behaviour from "giving answers" to "asking questions"?
- Openness of mind - what supports learning, wanting to know more etc.?

These design issues are attending to the conditions required to enable magic to appear. The metaphor of the cafe should be taken literally whenever possible. It seems to be an experience, that the metaphor itself supports the four conditions. For practical purposes it means: Make it look like a cafe! Use candles, flowers, tablecloths etc. Somehow we have engrained in our bodies the knowledge and memory of good conversations in teahouses, cafe's, salons, and when we recreate the environment, the behaviour is evoked.

"The magic" itself is a design issue. During a process, being in a conversation, the design question should always be held: Does this have energy, is there e nerve to this conversation, is it connected?

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And lastly connectedness of the individual cafe is a design issue. On one level the issue is about sharing information, questions and achievements of the individual cafe, creating pathways for people, information and knowledge to relate and combine. On another level this design issue is about having enough people who "know" about the possibility of connectedness of all the cafes in the process and who has personal experience how magic can occur.

To support "knowingness" one could think about what stories, metaphors, icons, sounds etc. would embody the vision of connectedness and the vision of The Café?

The Café understood as a self organizing system

According to Wheatly and Kelner-Rogers (*A Simpler Way*), we can support coherent self organizing behaviour of a living system towards more complexity by attending to identity, information and relations in and of the system.

The idea of "The Café" as a process for large scale changes in this light. We are giving identity to many individual efforts of creating positive images of the future by seeing them as connected in The Café. Information is seen as the question of achieving access to knowledge and understanding held at a collective level of intelligence. Relations is maybe taken to its most radical understanding by the metaphor of life net connection, leaving room for a complexity of relations that no other "set-up" of relations is capable of.

So after all, maybe we are just becoming aware of and giving name to a self organizing process in which humanity creates a new level of collective intelligence.

What if The World Wide Web came into existence in order to serve as a metaphor for an even wider web - the life net? What if that computer network, which so often is used as an illustration of organizing principles, "just" is there for us to be able to understand organizing principles on a higher level? Wouldn't that be a beautiful mechanism in a self organizing process of consciousness becoming more and more aware of it self?

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Workshop: Café-seminar

A café-seminar is a work form, which actively involves all participants in a conference, a workshop or a meeting, whether it be 16 or 1600 people.

The café-form is especially useful when you want to create significant and coordinated activities for the participants.

The process in café-seminars is based on dialog in small groups in a café-like environment.

All ideas and results are shared with other groups through visits, and the result is a quilt of ideas woven together by all participants and containing a mix of data.

After a visit a participant returns to his/her own group and shares the new views and ideas with the other members. This way everybody hears everything and must take everyone into account.

A café-seminar gives you the tools to:

- gather information, data and ideas
- register and preserve information, data and ideas
- achieve insight
- group and sort data and ideas

This seminar form illustrates the difference between you working alone as an ant or working in a team together in an anthill.

In this workshop focus will be on the skills needed to organize a café-seminar and the ways in which to get the best results. To achieve this we will work together in an actual café-seminar, and as an additional bonus we will experience this work-form first hand. The relevant schemes and directions for this café-seminar will be handed out before the workshop commences.

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Café-seminar (guidelines)

In general:

- Café-environment
- Small tables 4-7 people

Phase 1: The Café

- Introduce subject
- Choose a “table-host”, who is both chairman and secretary
- Decide a name for Café
- Scheme (A3-format) must be completed and done together
- Scheme (A4-format) to all participants

Change table:

- The “table-host” stays behind
- Everybody else moves to a new table
- If possible everybody moves to different tables – so completely new groups are formed

Phase 2: The Visit

- The “table-host” welcomes all and gives a short introduction to topic of the table and the previous results.
- The visitors contribute with positive suggestions and further improvements
- The “table-host” includes these comments on the reference-sheet
- If there is time, the guests may talk about the subjects from their original tables

Return home:

- Everybody gathers at the original tables

Phase 3: The Discussion

- The returning participants tell their group about his/her most important experience in each of the visited groups.
- The “table-host” informs about the most important inputs from his/her guests.
- The returned members contributes to the table discussion with new input and ideas

Result:

- The tables are cleaned but the A3-reference-sheet is left behind
- This is afterwards retyped

Time:

- The facilitator decides when its time to change to the next phase

Café-seminar

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Subject:	
Table-host:	Table:
Participants:	
Facts (what is, how often, how much, how many,):	
My feelings about the subject:	
Why is this a relevant subject:	
Which troubles and barriers:	
How can this subject be handled better:	
Who does what now:	

More comments on the back.

The Café

Café-scheme

Task/activity: _____

Date: _____

Guide to evaluation:	
<p>The first participant's evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write spontaneous and clearly • 2-4 most important points 	<p>The other participants evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep count of the statements underneath
Things, I liked - and think should be kept and elaborated on	Agree
+	
+	
+	
+	
+	
Things, I wish were better - and think should be improved	Agree
-	
-	
-	
-	
-	

More comments on the back.