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More engaging meetings – But how do you measure success?
The role of social network analysis
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Abstract:

When a Director of a large scientific organization invited me to facilitate a three day strategic planning retreat, she requested for it to be something different, something that wasn't just all matrices and flip charts and something that really engaged her staff. Taking only a moment to think I offered the suggestion of a meeting methodology known as Open Space Technology (OST) - a meeting which runs on the passion and responsibility of its participants. The Director was skeptical of the approach but agreed – so long as I could 'prove it'. Walking away from the meeting I struggled with how I could measure such an intangible - the success of a meeting.

Whoever comes are the right people

Open Space Technology was serendipitously discovered by Harrison Owen in the early 1980's. Ironically, despite its age some view Open Space Technology as only suitable to the most advanced and leading edge organizations.

Open Space Technology is a self-organising large group process which has become known for its four principles and one law. The four principles are:
- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it's over, it's over
- Whatever happens is the only thing that did (or could have)

The one law, the law of mobility (often called the law of two feet) says that if you find yourself neither learning nor contributing then use your two feet and move to a place where you can.

Open Space Technology has been described as a great process/method for addressing organizational problems where there is a real issue of concern, a diversity of players, complexity of elements, presence of passion (conflict is a form of passion) and when the decision time is now. Maybe most importantly, Open Space Technology really is all about stories. The sharing of stories by the participants as they engage around the topics which matter for them and the creation of new stories as they do this.

In this case study, Open Space Technology was used to provide a large Australian scientific organization a method of engaging in strategic planning in a way which might be more fruitful and productive than other techniques tried in the past. It was during the lead-up to the event when Louise, the director of a division of this organization, asked me to provide her proof and evidence that this 'new' approach might work.

Questions are an intervention

Thinking through the difficulties of providing 'proof' I decided to take advantage of an opportunity which initially presented itself as a mis-communication.

One of the key ingredients to Open Space Technology is the 'theme' which is at the heart of the invitation for participants to engage with and provides the sense of purpose for why they are there and is the container which all the topics and conversations. In consultation with Louise and another senior leader of the organization, we co-constructed the theme of "How can we do our science and business development with even greater impact: The issues and opportunities".

A week or so later, when the communication was e-mailed out across the organisation, there was a mistake in the wording of the theme. The invitation stated the theme as "How *we can* do our science and business development with even greater impact: The Issues and Opportunities". The invitation now was a

statement of how it could be done, not a question for people to engage with and explore what answers they might come up with!

Taking this "mis-communication" as an opportunity, I decided to send out a survey inviting people to list 4 people who they felt or thought would be passionate about the theme: ""How *can we* do our science and business development with even greater impact: The Issues and Opportunities". I concluded this same initiative a week after the retreat by sending out the same invitation to the same people, again asking them to list those people who they felt were passionate about the theme.

The map is not the territory – but . . .

Social Network Analysis is a technique of mapping the relationships in a system and results in network maps like those shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 illustrates the 'passion network' before the meeting. The arrows show who nominated who as being passionate regarding the theme. By counting the number of arrows into a node (person) we are able to get a measure, the In-Degree, which indicates the degree to which that person is considered passionate. We used a simple colour scaling to represent the grading of scores for the In-Degree. The highest score is represented as a red on the colour spectrum, ■■■■■ , and the lowest score is represented as a violet, at the other end of the colour spectrum.

Several key features stand out within this social network. Firstly, the social network generally is quite spread out and sparse with several clear cliques/groupings apparent. In general, the social network indicates a relatively low awareness of the level of passion with many nodes being coloured blue or purple (low scoring). More interesting however is that the social network in Figure 1 actually reflects the traditional corporate/organisational hierarchy quite accurately.

Figure 1: Pre-Open Space passion network
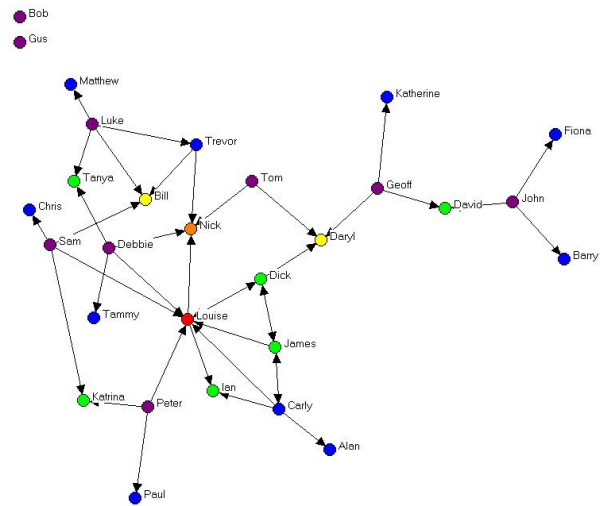
The person nominated as the most passionate for the theme was Louise, who was the high level executive leader and sponsor for the meeting (coloured red). The next most nominated person (coloured orange) was Nick who was a high level science director. The two yellow coloured nodes (Bill and Daryl) are team leaders within the division. There appears a clear clustering of team members around each of these team leaders, Bill and Daryl. That is, team members when asked to list those who were passionate, simply looked up (the hierarchy) and nominated their own team leaders.

Figure 2 illustrates the social networks which emerged from the results of the post- meeting survey.

Figure 2: Post Open Space passion network
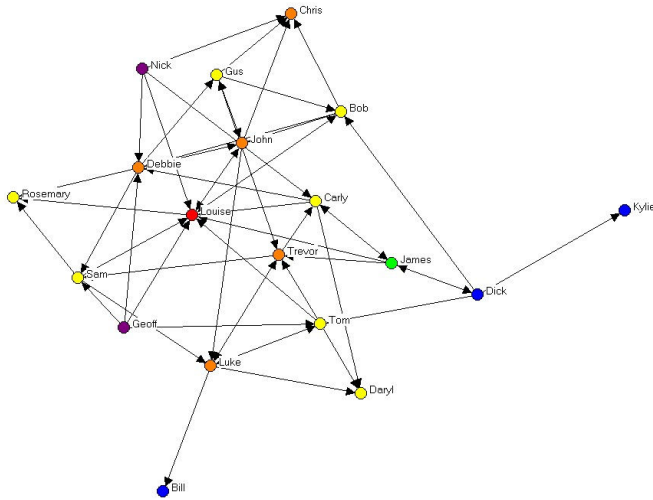
There are three important features to observe in the change in the social networks from Figure 1 to Figure 2.

Firstly there is a clear change in the structure of the network. The social network of Figure 2 now demonstrates a much more connected and integrated network with no clear cliques apparent. The participants appear to have developed a greater awareness of those colleagues who they perceive as passionate about the theme.

In Figure 1 there were two isolated people who were totally disconnected from the social networks mapped. Surprisingly however both these people, Bob and Gus, emerge as being recognized as keenly passionate regarding the theme

There is a real flattening of the hierarchies between Figures 1 and 2. Even though Louise, the high level executive leader, is still voted as the most passionate person within the network, all the traditional hierarchies in terms of directors and team leaders have all but disappeared. In fact, three of the four orange coloured nodes (the people that are perceived as 2nd most passionate) were not team leaders or directors, rather people at the grass roots of the organization.

Interestingly, some of those people within the organization who emerged as being considered keenly passionate by their colleagues were participants who neither raised topics in the initial agenda setting phase of the meeting, nor championed any action sessions. It appears that it was the power of sharing their individual stories throughout the discussion sessions which, for the listeners, made a significant impression on who they considered were passionate in the workplace

Leadership and Success

If you were a member of the organization and shown Figure 1 and asked what it meant for Louise to be a hub, there might be some negative sentiment shared about Louise being a controlling leader. A leader who was fearful to leave any semblances of the safety of control, someone who needed and wanted to enforce structure. Ironically, it was in Open Space, the process that to many is the anti-thesis of command and control, where many people were asking themselves where the Louise they knew had gone, as they watched a relaxed and 'go with the flow' Louise engage in many conversations and interactions during the retreat. Figure 2 shows Louise still as a hub, but the sentiments behind it are very different.

The visualization and mapping of the change through social networks had an interesting outcome. When Louise, the Director sat down to review the network maps a new story started to emerge for her. A story of how there appeared to be "grass roots" support for the change she was working towards. The social network maps appeared to be the 'proof' Louise was looking for regarding the outcomes, advances and success of the retreat.

Further Reading

Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Harrison Owen, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2nd ed. edition, January 1, 1997
The Hidden Power of Social Networks: Understanding How Work Really Gets Done in Organizations, Robert L. Cross and Andrew Parker, Harvard Business School Press, June 2, 2004

About the Author

Since completing his PhD in mathematics and community ecology at the University of Queensland in June 1999, Andrew Rixon has had international experience working with organisations within Australia, USA, the Netherlands and the UK. Andrew is Director of Babel Fish Group, a boutique Australian based group of management consultants specializing in the application of facilitative processes to help organizations and individuals transform.

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