

Chaotic Meetings

Roger Greenaway explores the positive aspects of chaos in large meetings and wonders whether some meetings are just too smooth.

a recipe for chaos

Over the last 10 years I have been participating in the annual meeting of a European network of facilitators. These meetings start with a preliminary meeting to generate a detailed programme for the three day meeting that follows. The tradition is that the whole community (of up to 100 people) works together to produce the programme. It is a recipe for chaos.

Why not make it more organised? Well - there is quite a strong resistance to making this planning meeting too organised. Participants seem to value a certain degree of chaos and 'disorganisation'. It seems that in their view, both the process and the result will benefit from a bit of chaos.

A few years ago, a different approach was tried at this annual meeting. An experienced facilitator (who was not fully tuned in to this appetite for chaos) accepted the challenge of managing this infamous planning meeting. Things started well with lines and grids and boxes and plenty of control up front. But when problems arose, the system crumbled and there was more chaos than ever before. Eventually, late at night, the job was done. Painfully. Perhaps too painfully.

Over the years this European network has been attracting more and more people. While the meeting was growing in size, there was also a growing appreciation of the need to be a bit more organised – but without going too far down that route. The pendulum shifted towards more organisation, while still retaining some 'disorganisation'. But this network has now reached a point where there is a growing chorus of people wanting the pendulum to swing back to more “chaos”. So why exactly do people

want more “chaos”?

Could there really be some value in welcoming chaos into meetings? Even into *your* meetings?

the appeal of chaos

Perhaps chaos is the one concept that defies analysis. Because if analysis reveals a pattern, then it is no longer chaos. However, no-one at these meetings was wanting *complete* chaos. It is more of a preference for a 'rocky road' and an 'uncomfortable journey' rather than being part of a 'well oiled machine'.

So what is the appeal of meetings that are a bit on the wild side? Here are some of the potential benefits of letting go the reins of power and adopting a more laissez-faire style of meeting facilitation that lets in some chaos.

People have a real say in the process

Perhaps *how* things are decided is sometimes more important than *what* is decided. If a leader controls the process too much, participants can feel that there is too much of a power difference. Yes, voting is democratic, but is voting democratic enough in communities where higher levels of participation are valued? Communities where people want their voices heard and not just their votes counted.

People feel responsible for the outcome

When a group can say “we have created this ourselves” everyone takes full ownership and responsibility (and even some pride) for what they have produced. People may well think: “We did our best, we all had to make compromises along the way and we have no-one to blame but ourselves if it doesn't work out as well as we hoped”. No special group is assigned to sort things out on behalf of others. Everyone involved is instantly available to speak and act so there is no need to speak or act on behalf of others.

Keeping the human touch

People working with people rather than people operating systems. Well-oiled machines are

efficient, but the risk with machine-like processes is that people will feel like cogs in a machine – important for what they do but not for who they are.

Avoiding 'us and them'

Rather than leaving it to 'them' to sort things out and then complain to 'them' if things go wrong, create an open process in which there is no 'us and them' – just us.

Not being organised

However inefficient the process may seem *we are the organisers*. We are doing the organising together. We are all organisers. We are the organisation. We are not being organised.

Starting from scratch

The difference between microwaving a ready-meal and cooking from the basic ingredients – and making and eating the meal with others. Or the difference between making a Lego model from scratch or adjusting a few bricks on a model that someone else made. Which is more satisfying?

A sense of experimentation and excitement

Let's try things differently (or make a fresh start) and see how it goes.

All hands on deck

People being alert to what's needed and being ready to fill in gaps or challenge what isn't working well enough. We can all contribute to the process. We are all needed. We all have a role to play – even if we have to work out for ourselves how best to contribute.

Creating a new and better order?

Maybe the order that comes out of chaos is 'better' than the order that comes out of order?

Overcoming a challenge together

Overcoming a challenge together is probably far better for community building than following a voting procedure. It can be a cathartic process in

which the degree of satisfaction at the end is related to the degree of suffering during the process.

Being open to nice surprises

If the chaos leads to creativity and new ways of doing things, it is not only satisfying, it moves things on.

Complexity theory

Maybe order is not as far from chaos as it seems. The context and situation shapes what happens as people become more fully aware of the context and the situation.

Uncertainty can feel more real – more raw, more alive

The realisation that no-one is waiting in the wings with a ready-made plan makes people appreciate “this matters”, “we must take action”, “we cannot just sit back and wait for things to happen”. Anthony Robbins has identified human needs for both certainty and uncertainty. How can we meet both of these needs in meetings?

Perhaps chaos is a faster route to innovation?

Why use last year's solution for this year's problem? In a fast changing world that is a recipe for losing. Starting from scratch means working with now.

The values that shine through the chaos

Our always-changing blend of organisation and chaos represents values of participation, ownership and community that are special to us and that we have not encountered in any other such meeting or conference.

facilitating meetings or facilitating learning

'Facilitation' of learning is sometimes presented as 'making learning easy' but I am more persuaded by the argument that facilitators should make learning difficult. It goes

something like this:

“ It is questions and curiosity that drive learning. Once learners think they have the answers, they stop asking questions and soon stop learning. As facilitators of learning we shouldn't let certainty or complacency stifle curiosity. We shouldn't provide ready-meals of learning in easily digestible chunks. Our job is to ensure that participants are fully engaged in the process of learning. The more that participants work at their learning, the more they will learn ... the more they put in, the more they get out ... no pain, no gain. Our job is to maximise learning, not to make learning easy.”
[1]

I am not confident that this argument about the facilitation of *learning* can be mapped directly onto the facilitation of *meetings*. Of course, if a meeting facilitator walks into a chaotic situation, the primary task of the facilitator will be to help people find a way through this chaos. But in other situations smooth facilitation could simply be serving to support the status quo, carrying the message 'don't rock the boat'.

What I have learned from my experiences with this European network is that we should not assume that people prefer 'smooth' meetings over more chaotic ones. Chaotic meetings may not be as disastrous as they seem.

REFERENCE

[1] Extract from the Journal of the Institute of Training and Occupational Learning Vol 3, No 1 pp47-53 ISSN 1469-977X now at: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/the.art.of.reviewing.htm>

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