

# 7

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## Achieving robust processes

*in which I draw together the characteristics of robust processes previously identified, and in some instances extend them further*

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The identified characteristics of robust processes are conceptualised as a number of dimensions, each of which has opposing poles. For each dimension, effectiveness and robustness can be improved if the polarities can be resolved or integrated. The dimensions are:

- adversarial and consensual processes, for which dialectic processes are the resolution
- challenge and support
- guidance and choice
- rigour and relevance.

Before I proceed, let me review where we've been on our journey together through earlier chapters.

After a brief introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 gave a thumbnail sketch of the experience and theoretical background I bring to this work. Chapter 3 provided some epistemological and ontological context and introduced a small number of papers I've written.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 described and commented on the bulk of the accompanying documents. The focus was learning processes in chapter 4, change processes in chapter 5, and action research in chapter 6. Towards the end of each chapter some conclusions about process effectiveness and robustness were drawn.

In this chapter I reconfigure the material on robustness as a set of tensions or dialectics to be resolved in process design and facilitation.

## **Dimensions of robustness**

In designing and facilitating processes it often seems that there are tradeoffs to be made between competing demands. In group facilitation, for instance, attention can be given to "task" — the immediate purpose of the group — or to "maintenance", the actions which keep the group functioning well in the longer term. These two dimensions are commonly mentioned in the group facilitation literature (see for instance Hare, Blumberg, Davies and Kent, 1996). Roger

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Schwarz (1994) suggests that where there are two co-facilitators, one may pay attention to task and the other to maintenance.

A similar concept can be found in the leadership literature. The dimensions are more often labelled “concern for task” and “concern for people”. Several writers including Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1977) and Robert Blake and Anne McCauley (1991) also recognise that both require attention. Only then is leadership effective, in their view.

In *Gestalt* and other therapies there is a concept of *integration of polarities*.<sup>1</sup> It is relevant here. Task and maintenance can be regarded as polarities which are artificially separated in a person’s mind. When a person recognises that they are indivisible part of the same package, so to speak, they can become integrated. The intention is not compromise, but a full resolution.

I can illustrate this integration with a process from *Helping groups to be effective*.<sup>2</sup> The process “Option 1.5”<sup>3</sup> seeks out a resolution of two polarised positions in a group or between two people. The two groups or people first define the two options they are supporting. Next, working together, they identify the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Finally, working together cooperatively, they devise a third option which combines the advantages of both previous options. Figure 7.1 summarises the resolution graphically.

In the previous chapters a number of tensions can be identified. They can be treated as polarities and integration sought. If this can be achieved an effective (and usually robust) process can result. As I’ve mentioned above the polarities are adversarial~consensual, challenge~support, guidance~choice, and

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1. This is a concept for which I haven’t been able to identify a source. I suspect I learned it at a *Gestalt* workshop during the 1970s.
  2. Attached.
  3. Pronounced “option one and a half”.
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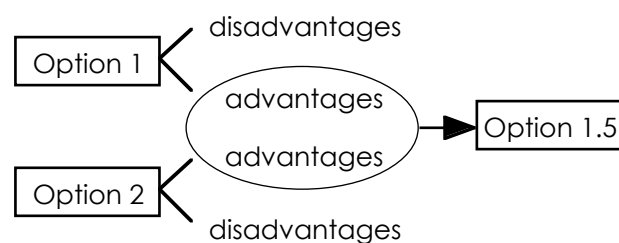


Fig. 7.1 Option 1.5

rigour~relevance (using Scott Kelso's 2005 convention of indicating a dialectic by joining the two terms with a tilde, "~").

However, participants may be so locked into their own view of the world that they may find it difficult to consider alternatives. It is sometimes necessary to help them reframe their experience so that other options can be considered. Strategic concepts are one way of assisting the reframing.

## Strategic concepts

Some strategic concepts have been mentioned in this explication. Others are to be found in some of the documents which accompany the explication. Some examples follow.

- The very notion of dialectic is a strategic concept (throughout the thesis)
- "The map is not the territory". This enables participants to recognise that different theories may equally apply to a situation (chapter 2)
- Freedom can be substantial within clear limits (chapter 4)
- We are a small-tribe species. We function best in small cohesive groups, not in large bureaucracies (paper 20, chapter 5)
- Bureaucracy is dying, but without an adequate replacement. In all but small organisations our current organisations are hybrids which poorly

accommodate team structures within a bureaucratic hierarchy (papers 20 and 21, chapter 5)

- Theories can be expressed as theories of action. This allows them to be expressed more contingently, for instance by taking the situation into account (chapter 5)

When participants are ready to step back from their position and consider it in a wider context, the polarities can be examined. To this I now turn. I'll begin with adversarial and consensual processes, already briefly discussed. You'll recall that the resolution (or in *Gestalt* terminology, the integration) is a dialectical process.

### **Adversarial~consensual**

Although within an adversarial process people are likely to provide selective information, they are also likely to be direct about it. Consensual processes, on the other hand, can provide easy agreement. The potential cost of the agreement is that people may bury their differences. A dialectical process can achieve the same directness as an adversarial process. In addition there isn't the same motivation to be selective to support a particular option. The aim is to reach a consensus which isn't a compromise.

Here is how the three processes can be summarised:

- adversarial processes are characterised by disagreement about the choice of one or other options
- consensual processes are characterised by agreement, often obtained by ignoring disagreements
- dialectical processes craft agreement out of disagreement.

Within adversarial processes there may be more information made available than in consensual processes. That information is more likely to be selective or

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biased, however. Meredith Belbin (1981) embarked on his study of problem solving in management teams because of his observation that “alpha teams” usually don’t work well. The highly intelligent or highly creative members chosen in such teams use their intelligence or creativity to undermine each others’ contributions. Choose between creativity and conformity and you may achieve neither.

How might dialectical processes be used in practice? I’ve discussed this question previously in the description of delphi (chapter 5, and paper 24). Participants pool the different information they have, so becoming better informed. They are then able to make better decisions because of the extra information. Option 1.5 (above, this chapter) is also a dialectical process.

For a more extended example I’ll use my modification of a process from Viviane Robinson (1993) as an illustration. The process was based on the interventions of Chris Argyris (e.g. 1985). Here (1993:140) is Robinson’s description of what she terms “critical dialogue”.

- 1 Say what you think
- 2 Say why you think it
- 3 Check with others.

I was attracted by the clarity and simplicity of this formulation. However, my experience of this procedure was that it often required coaching or facilitation if it was to work effectively. Noting that it leaves out some of the features of Argyris’s approach, I wanted to reinsert them. At the same time I was mindful that Robinson deliberately simplified Argyris’s approach because her clients found it too complex. My goal was to extend the model again without increasing its apparent complexity.

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I expanded the process, tiering the information so that it was more easily remembered. I also separated it out into a number of steps which could be done one at a time. I asked participants to prepare what they wished to say before saying it. My variation takes the form shown below (in this instance as applied to a problem situation participants wish to resolve):

- 1 Participants individually prepare the following information. They devise information which fits the three categories and which they will be able to say with genuineness:
  - 1.1 My assumptions about the situation I wish to remedy
    - offered tentatively
    - labelled as assumptions
    - without blame, criticism or demand.
  - 1.2 The evidence which supports my assumptions about the situation
    - specific and concrete
    - preferably verifiable by the other person
    - again without blame, criticism or demand.
  - 1.3 Encouragement to the other person
    - to join me in a cooperative venture to meet both our needs, and
    - to be willing to challenge my assumptions or evidence, if wrong.
- 2 Taking the situation and the person into account, participants decide on the best order in which to present the three sets of information. If in doubt, they begin with 1.3.
- 3 Participants come together to exchange the information.

I usually precede this process by an exercise which helps participants to distinguish between assumptions (“interpretations”) and evidence (“facts”).<sup>4</sup>

There are several points to be made about this expansion of Robinson’s process:

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- It's a framework in which people can insert their own words. I often present it as a worksheet with three boxes for people to fill in (see Appendix 06).
- Because participants are given time to prepare what they want to say they don't have to think on their feet.
- The whole process is tiered in such a way that there are only three steps, only three categories of information, and no more than three criteria within each category. My experience is that with a little practice people learn it quite easily.
- I recommend to participants that on their first trial of the process they choose a trivial issue. The content of the issue is therefore less likely to distract them from paying attention to (and therefore learning) the process.

Most participants find that they can make immediate use of this process. As it results in more constructive interactions and outcomes they become motivated to continue to use it in practice.

The description I've given may seem complex. In practice the process is not difficult to use (I've helped a variety of audiences learn it). The worksheet is almost as simple as Robinson's description, and serves the purpose well.

Participants who use the worksheet a few times find that they internalise the process. When they become more practised they no longer require prior preparation. In any event, my purpose was to provide a specific example of a style of interaction which is dialectical.

The second polarity is challenge and support.

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4. I ask people to close their eyes and describe silently to themselves the noises that they hear, without interpretation. I then close a door, saying "For instance you are not to describe that sound as a door closing. That's interpretation." The participants discover that the task is almost impossible. Consciously, they *hear* a door closing, for instance. The lesson they draw is that we almost always deal in interpretations, which we then treat as facts.
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## Challenge~support

You'll recall that achieving a balance of challenge and support was a central emphasis in the social consultancy course I described in chapter 4. The intention there was to achieve arousal without anxiety. I think that's a useful goal in change and research processes too. When people are fearful it is difficult for them to be honest in speech or genuine in behaviour.

There is evidence beyond the learning literature of the importance of challenge and support. Philip Podsakoff and his colleagues (1996) include these two characteristics as two of their six behavioural dimensions of transformational leadership. A recent study by William Bommer and his colleagues (2005) is also relevant. The study found that these same leadership behaviours improved organisational change and reduced employee cynicism.

In the social consultancy course, challenge was provided in a number of ways. Participants were invited to work towards a self managing class. They were given decisions to make which had real consequences for them. If I had done nothing else I believe the challenge would have been seen as too demanding by many class members. In the earlier stages of my career as an academic, merely inviting class members to help decide course content triggered immediate anxiety.

To reduce the anxiety in the social consultancy course I devoted the early weeks of class to creating a supportive culture. I facilitated activities to build good relationships and a sense of community, and to agree on goals and ways of working together. The challenges were then seen as manageable.

I now adopt a similar approach in many process activities I engage in. As an example, I often start up an action learning set or a work group to manage a change program as follows. The learning set project or change program provides

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the challenge. The emphasis of the early meetings is then on being clear about the project or program, and building support.

- I facilitate the first meeting. Collaboratively we define the purpose of the group and build relationships. We agree on how we will work together, usually by developing a small number of process guidelines.
- A volunteer from the group facilitates the second meeting. I attend as coach, intervening often to help the facilitator and group improve their way of operating.
- I attend the third meeting. I intervene seldom, and only when essential.
- By then the group is usually self managing. I attend later meetings only when invited.
- At the end of each meeting the group reviews both the guidelines and their way of operating together. Group members amend either or both of these as desirable.

Earlier in this chapter I referred to the dimensions of leadership behaviour sometimes called *concern for task* and *concern for people*. These two dimensions are related to challenge and support respectively. It is easier for a group to maintain a supportive environment if regular time is set aside to examine how it operates. In the social consultancy class mentioned above, time was spent near the end of each class to review the class. In addition, half sessions were scheduled for more in-depth review every so often in the class timetable.

I suspect that there was also another source of the anxiety which resulted from my early attempts at classroom democracy.<sup>5</sup> Some comments from class members suggested that they expected me to make the decision. They didn't expect to be offered choice.

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5. I realise that "democracy" is a concept which is loosely defined. It ranges from empowerment through to our parliamentary democracy which (it could be argued) is scarcely democracy at all. Here I use it to mean at least involvement of those affected by decisions in the decision making.

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## Guidance~choice

This polarity can take several different forms:

- As *expert help~process facilitation* it is relevant to the relationship between a researcher or facilitator and clients, or between an educator and class members.
- In written documentation a decision has to be made about the amount of detail to be provided. Without special effort, however, the detail can constrain the choices of the reader. The polarity might also be termed *detail~flexibility*.
- In organisational settings it relates to the distinction between autocratic and democratic leadership styles. It might be termed *command~freedom*.

In all three forms it is easy to treat each pair as involving a trade-off, though in reality a best-of-both-worlds integration can often be crafted. In all three forms it relates to the issue of “*resistance*”.

**Expert help~process facilitation.** In much consulting and facilitation work a client often initially expects that I will use my expertise to help them solve problems they face or achieve changes they desire. Edgar Schein (1999) calls such a consultant-client relationship the “doctor-patient model”. The client presents a problem. The consultant solves it or (more usually) explains how it can be solved.

My own preference is also to enhance clients’ ability to solve their own problems and manage their own changes. However, if I refrain entirely from offering suggestions, clients may not initially have the knowledge or skills to solve the problem. My approach and Schein’s is to guide them through a process that enables them to solve the problem. I do this in such a way that they also learn the process well enough to use it in the future without my help.

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In Schein's terminology the approach is "process consultation". As I explain in *Helping groups to be effective* a more accurate label is "metaprocess consultation":

The content is the problem or issue being addressed — for instance heavy workload

The process is the method or approach used to address the content — for instance a problem solving process to analyse why workload is heavy

The metaprocess is the process used to address the process — for instance, the coaching I provide to a volunteer facilitator from the problem solving team.

In other words the clients and I share responsibility for managing the process. Often they find this difficult. To help them I also adopt a role of managing an umbrella process which involves them in the process. Nick White (2004) uses action learning in a similar way as a metaprocess.

In the *Change manual* (paper 17) metaprocess is prominent in all three phases of the change process. The role I adopt is of helping clients learn the process so that they can use it for themselves. Figure 7.2 will serve as a reminder of the three phases.

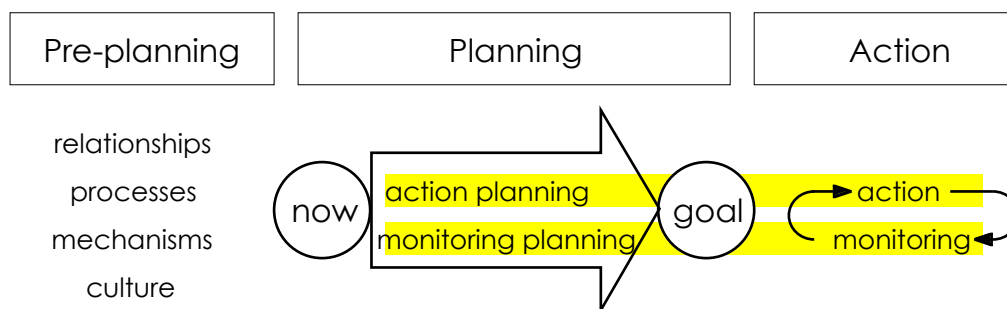


Fig. 7.2 The three phases of a change model

**Detail~flexibility.** The polarity of detail and flexibility is most relevant to the preparation of documents which describe processes. Skills learned through experience are often tacit — “we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966: 4). Consultants describing their practice are likely to omit much of what they would actually do in practice. As the field of knowledge management is discovering (Snowden, 2000) it is not easy to capture the knowledge of experts. They cannot always explain what they do.

To make the elements of the polarity clearer, consider two examples which represent different extremes:

Action research can be described as a cyclic process which alternates between action and critical reflection. Experienced action researchers can fill in the gaps from their own experience. However, they don't need the model. They know what action research is and how to do it. A novice on the other hand would require much more detail for the cycle to be useful.

Documents like the *Change manual* (paper 17) or *Helping groups to be effective*<sup>6</sup> contain detailed descriptions of processes. A novice could now follow the process step by step. With only a detailed description, however, there might be no way of knowing what to do if the procedure failed. In addition, the process is too full of information to be easily memorised.

It is possible to include both. In the two documents mentioned in the previous paragraph I've tried to do so through the use of “tiered information” as described in earlier chapters. There are very broad-brush descriptions of processes and there are detailed descriptions. Often there are mid-range descriptions as well.

To further enhance the usefulness I can include a rationale for the processes described. For instance, much of the earlier chapters of *Helping groups to be effective* make use of Anton Zijderveldt's (1972) concept of homo duplex — that

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6. An attached book.

we are all both individuals and social beings. In *Helping groups* I attribute competition and conformity respectively to these two aspects of human existence. I then explain how certain processes allow both competition and conformity to be constructive. The delphi process (see paper 24) also illustrates how competition and conformity together can be very effective within a process that makes good use of them.

The discussion in chapter 5 on the *Change manual* (paper 17) provides further examples of ways of resolving the competition~conformity polarity.

**Command~freedom.** The recognition of this form of the polarity is not new. In a much-cited study Kurt Lewin and his colleagues (Lewin, Lippitt and White, 1939) related it to group behaviour. They set up groups which were led in a manner that was either autocratic, laissez-faire or democratic and observed the behaviour. (I note in passing that democratic leadership could be regarded as an integration of the best of autocracy and the freedom of laissez-faire.)

This form of the polarity has even more currency now that bureaucracy has begun to collapse (see paper 21; and Belbin, 1998). As I argue in paper 20, the autocratic pattern of obedience upward and command downward is still well entrenched in many of our organisations. Those same organisations strive to adopt less bureaucratic structures because the limitations of autocracy are beginning to be felt.

In facilitating, if I offer no leadership I might as well not facilitate. Yet if I try to overcontrol the process I may deprive the participants of ownership. They may become passive or they may revolt. When they are obedient I am not helping them to develop the skills to manage the process themselves eventually. I therefore provide whatever structured process I think is appropriate. As they

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take on more responsibility for the process I assume more of a metaprocess role. In this way I achieve a resolution of the command~freedom polarity.

In chapter 4 I mentioned the freedom-within-limits model which guided much of my classroom work (and my parenting, when I had a young family). It isn't that all power has to be centralised (command, autocracy) or decentralised (freedom, democracy). There are some decisions which are better taken centrally and others which work better when they are devolved.

**“Resistance”.** As I mentioned earlier, for a facilitator or consultant the word “resistance” implies that the problem is with the participants. They don't do what the facilitator or consultant wishes them to do. Phrased in this way it is akin to the medical notion of “compliance”. As a 2003 Boston Consulting Group survey of over 9000 respondents described the issue, a “vast majority of ... patients are actively choosing to disregard their doctors' orders” (Flanagan, Gartenmann, Lovich and Lubkeman, 2003: 1). Notice the language: “disregard their doctors' orders”.

The same report later offers some strategies that medical professionals can use to obtain more compliance. This at least acknowledges that the matter doesn't rest entirely with the client.

The next polarity, rigour~relevance, also subsumes a number of dimensions.

## **Rigour~relevance**

The apparent tension between rigour and relevance may reveal itself as

- attention mostly to either *theory* or *practice*, but not both
  - a tendency towards *reflection* without *action*, or *action* without *reflection*
  - a focus on either *rigour* or *relevance*, to the neglect of the other.
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Part of the reason is probably to be found in the division of roles in developed societies. Within universities there are reflective academics who theorise and worry about rigour. Outside there are action-oriented practitioners who are interested in practical relevance. As Davydd Greenwood (2002) lamented, those who strive to combine theory and practice within academia risk marginalisation.

Even within action research there may or may not be equal attention given to the action and the research. There are particular studies in which the action or change is primary. Many practitioners for example research their own practice without publishing. In other studies the research is the emphasis. Elsewhere I've labelled these two forms "action research" and "action research" (AREOL, paper 38, session 1, Applications).

**Theory~practice.** Because of the division of roles between academics and practitioners, theory and practice are sometimes assumed to be different phenomena, the responsibility of different people. Academics and practitioners tend to read different literatures. At least in psychology many practitioners (as Hayes, Barlow and Nelson-Gray, 1999, report) don't read much at all.

There are exceptions, of course. The postgraduate psychology program at Griffith University mentioned in chapter 2 was designed to integrate theory and practice. To achieve this it appointed staff who in some cases were both academics and practitioners, myself included. The university where I have an adjunct appointment has employed practitioners as academics. Warren Bennis and James O'Toole (2005: 104) however don't think this is common, even of business schools. In a statement that recognises that the polarity can be resolved they write:

The problem is not that business schools have embraced scientific rigor but that they have forsaken other forms of knowledge. It isn't a case of either-or.

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**Reflection~action.** Peter Jarvis (1999) makes a similar argument for practitioners generally. He urges practitioners to include more reflection in their practical activities. Other writers who recognise the contribution of reflection to learning from experience include Don Schön (1983, 1987) and David Boud, especially Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985).

Most of these writers acknowledge a debt to David Kolb (1974).<sup>7</sup> Two of Kolb's four dimensions are reflective observation and active experimentation. Kolb's learning cycle integrates them within a cycle: concrete experience → reflective observation → abstract conceptualisation → active experimentation. It will be noted how similar this is to some forms of the action research cycle. This is not surprising: Kolb built upon the work of Kurt Lewin, sometimes credited as the developer of action research.

**Research oriented~action oriented.** The distinction between “action research” and “action research” (above) can be regarded as resulting from an emphasis either on rigour or relevance. Provided there is some attention to the other aspect of the rigour~relevance polarity I think that there can be justification for choosing one over the other. Action research theses and dissertations, for example, must pay attention to rigour (paper 51 is relevant here). Relevance is less obligatory. Practitioners using an informal style of action research, on the other hand, may not have the time or interest in making their theories explicit.

I would argue, however, that integrating rigour and relevance is of benefit for both thesis candidates and practitioners. Relevance enhances the value of a thesis. Rigour improves the quality of understanding that a practitioner brings to practice.

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7. There have been criticisms of Kolb's theories, some of them summarised by Mark Smith (2005). These criticisms are more specifically of his theorising about learning styles than about the experiential learning cycle.

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It need not be difficult to achieve both rigour and relevance. The cyclic process of action research can intergrate them within each cycle. When there are nested cycles over different time frames the integration is enhanced.

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The foregoing discussion has made evident that action research can integrate the two poles of the rigour~relevance polarity. It is also evident, I think, that this is also true for processes for learning or change. Keithia Wilson and Jane Fowler (2005) recently found that learning is deeper within a university course using action learning principles compared to a lecture format. In like manner Maaja Vadi (2004) has summarised relevant contributions to collaborative research for organisational change.

### **In partial summary ...**

In this chapter I have brought together the conclusions on effective and robust processes from earlier chapters. I've summarised them as a number of apparent polarities — seeming tensions which good process design and facilitation can integrate:

- adversarial~consensual processes
- challenge~support
- guidance~choice
- rigour~relevance.

I have argued that whether the processes are for learning, change or action research it can be valuable to achieve the integration.

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