

The Open System: Learning about and using the L₂₂

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Here we see that the L₂₂ is not just an esoteric construct but a highly practical idea which enables people of all descriptions to get a handle on what is happening around the world, how it is affecting their lives and how it is likely to affect their future. Without the L₂₂, people are in the dark about many of the forces impacting their lives, are unable to grapple with them with full consciousness and ability to manipulate their effects. Strategic planning is the best known application of the L₂₂ but everyone can benefit from realizing how this extended social field is a power in their lives that they can work with to improve lives and prospects.

It will be noted in the discussion below that this exploration of the L₂₂ also draws upon other bodies of theory such as the conditions for effective communication and the set of ideals. We will deal with these at a later date and cross reference to here.

We will take our discussion of how to use the L₂₂ from the most comprehensive usage which is found in the Search Conference (SC) but it is readily modified for use in other settings.

Exploration of the L₂₂ begins in the first formal session of the SC as it is here that all of the major conceptual frameworks come into play, setting the scene for the establishment of an adaptive strategic relation between system and environment by an active learning planning community.

This session provides data about change in the cultural field and by taking the individuals out of their own narrow worlds, it begins to create a shared world. "Freedom appears, socially, when men...learn the necessities of their own nature and of external reality, and thus share a goal in common. Then the common goal and the nature of reality uniquely determine the only possible action without compulsion" (Caudwell 1949: 114).

To achieve a mature community confident in its identity which will subsequently support community learning it is necessary to create a non threatening situation where members can identify a framework of shared perceptions and ideals, one which is sufficiently broad to encompass any areas of probable disagreement. This process allows individuals to give notice of their presence as individual persons. The importance of the ground rules is thus to show it is possible to work without group assumptions and without subjugating individuality to group purpose. There are many ways of bringing about such a group identity but few of these generate diffusive learning.

This work is divided into two phases. The first is **data collection** in community (plenary). A manager draws up a rough open systems diagram and explains without jargon the importance of knowing the world around us (the L₂₂). They then explain the necessity of collecting data about its nature and changes and then analysing and synthesizing it into forms that are useful for the planning. The nature and duration of the introduction will vary according to the previous experience and briefing of the participants, but like everything else about the conduct of a Search, it should be simple and clear. It is possible to do a perfectly adequate briefing in about three minutes. For example, it makes sense to people that if their planning is to be effective, they will have to know which way the rest of the world is moving. for example, there is no point in spending millions of dollars developing a product that nobody will buy because it contravenes their value systems. This does not mean that adaptation as practised in the SC is a passive process, quite the contrary. But it means that any one given system needs to know the changing reality against which it is doing its planning.

Everyone is invited to contribute the events or changes they have noticed in the last few years in the form of a brainstorm where the basic ground rule is **that all perceptions are valid**. Note, we are talking about perceptions, not opinions or beliefs. These latter are certainly not all valid and furthermore, are irrelevant in a hard data collection.

Participants are invited to contribute anything that they have seen happen that has struck them as novel or significant in the last five to seven years. It is important that managers choose the right words here as for example, use of the word 'trends' has already moved a step away from the data and in doing so, has opened the door to participants interpolating their own individual blinkers through interpretations of the data. Managers do no more than record these perceptions and if necessary, prompt with such questions as 'What have you seen happen in the world of work, the family, the Southern hemisphere, etc'? if such major areas appear to be lacking.

When managers simply introduce, explain in everyday language and then record perceptions, they demonstrate their role. A high powered or long theoretical introduction would convey a message entirely incompatible with the required lack of social and status distance between participants and managers. Data collection will continue until it becomes clear that perceptions are exhausted. It is important to state that if a contributor thinks her/his perception has been inaccurately recorded, then s/he must speak up and ask that it be changed to the form in which it was intended.

Please note, there is no forced participation and those with less self confidence may not contribute for a while until they are convinced it is safe for them to do so. There will be plenty of opportunities for their perceptions to be added later when they are ready to be a more participative member of the community.

As the data collection slows, the managers will call a halt for a perusal of the lists of perceptions of changes that have happened. If it is clear that a particular area such as geopolitical or economic change has not been adequately covered, the managers will request that this area be given some additional thought. Because of the peculiar nature of their work, SC managers have a responsibility to keep up with changes in the L₂₂. They also know that forces arising from the environment can make or break any system plan and must therefore ensure that the final profile is comprehensive and adequate to support the work of future sessions.

The brainstorm reinforced by the ground rule brings into play direct perception, ecological learning and gives credence and value to it. An additional value adheres in the process of assuring the less confident and articulate that the SC environment is participatively democratic as it was avowed to be. It, therefore, contributes to openness and begins the process of building trust. If a person has perceived something contrary to an observation already made, that perception too is simply recorded. Thus the final list will mirror reality with all its opposing trends and values. I tell them they can argue as much as they like about these in the small group work to follow. This is the only way we have found of creating that sort of cultural vacuum whereby people may legitimately begin to express their individual experience and increase their confidence in it. It creates a hiatus, a pause in monochronic time, for reassessment.

The time frame of 5 to 7 years for relevant perceptions elicits 'the embryos of social change', those emergent systems which may indicate value shifts and develop into major social movements. As the data base grows with participants building on each others' perceptions, they become aware that they are all living in the same world.

The mass of data produced is hung on the walls where it stays for the duration of the SC as a reminder that the L₂₂ is still out there shaping their future and their plans continuously. (In the latter stages of the Search, it is easy for participants to become so immersed in the detail of their own operations that they forget the role of the L₂₂). It is also useful to tell the

community that, as sometimes happens, should anybody after their group work see that an important piece of data is missing from their collection, they may add it on the condition that they inform the community about this. Explain to them that it is important that everybody shares all the information all of the time because we are all involved in the building of this community.

A mistake in failing to emphasise the very real importance of this task of learning about the L₂₂ can have serious consequences. Managers who emphasise the session's properties as a community building task to the detriment of its central role in long term adaptive planning may well find the next morning that the feeling is "well, that was good fun last night, now let's get on with the real work". Any understanding has flown out the window and management's suggestions that last night's work be reviewed before moving on may meet with fight/flight. Even worse, management's failure to intervene to make more adequate and accurate an assessment of the L₂₂ can result in misleading scenarios, far short of reality. Conducting the first, and as many sessions as possible, as a total community carries sufficiently the message that the SC is a **community building** event.

The second part is **analysis and synthesis of the data collected**. (Group and community) Here the community comes to grips with the meaning of the L₂₂ data, the significance of the changes they have perceived. Ideally, everybody should do both the Most Desirable Future and the Most Probable Future of the world. But a random selection of participants into about four groups, at least two to work on the Most Desirable Future and two to work on the Most Probable Future of the World by the end of the planning time frame, is adequate and serves several purposes. The **first** is that in the course of the group work, the community really has to analyse the dynamics of the L₂₂ and weigh up the importance and interdependencies of the many changes they have identified. They have to choose between opposing changes and trends. In doing this they are, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, using systems dynamics and analysis as explicated in Emery F (1967). The **second** is that in specifying their Most Desirable World in year X, these participants are, without using the words, expressing their ideals. While these snapshots of the Most Desirable World in year X are not analysed at the time, it is usual to find that each contains all of the four ideals. It is during this phase that major **perceptual reconstruction** often occurs.

The Most Probable World in year X, that scenario which will come to pass if we do nothing to change what is happening at the moment, is therefore, the most probable set of interdependent directive correlations given the direction of value movements expressed through system change today. It is a linear projection from the most powerful recent and current values as they express themselves through the events and changes. The Most Desirable World in year X is also constructed from the data but the task permits the participants to assume that people will continue attempting to improve the world.

Both tasks and the nature of the products must be specified precisely, e.g. bring back no more than one piece of butchers' paper on which there are not more than six points describing either the Most Probable or Most Desirable World in year X. While there can be much argument and paper used during the group working phase, the size and shape of the product has an important bearing on the success of the next phase which is to integrate the group reports into two **community owned** products, a Most Probable World and a Most Desirable World. Should a group bring back an endless list of points on many sheets of paper, it would indicate that little of the difficult work of analysis had been done. It would also make the task of integration logistically difficult.

(Moreover, such a long list is unnecessary. Limiting each group to six means that come integration, there will probably be a list of around 8 -10 or so as there is usually a high degree of commonality between the groups and this number is sufficient for a comprehensive scenario.)

It helps to give a handy hint to the groups **not** to begin by specifying a set of Aristotelian categories such as 'political', 'social', 'economic' etc. The critical interdependencies shaping the future of the world cut across this Aristotelian framework. The work may bog down or the interdependencies get lost as participants struggle to fit the new world into old and inappropriate categories. It also helps to tell groups that they are to describe these scenarios as if they were taking a global snapshot at that point in time. Their points should be expressed in the present tense, this is what exists in year X. It is also critical that these snapshots are concrete and specific. Simply repeating a trend statement such as 'there is an increasing gap between the haves and have nots' or saying 'the education system is improved' is inadequate for the planning task. The first example indicates that the group has not done sufficient work exploring the implications of increasing the gap long term. The second indicates that the group has done insufficient work sorting out exactly what is going in education, what values are dominating and what the outcome of that is most probably going to be.

The community then proceeds to rationalize any disagreements and integrate the group lists into an agreed community list. This process is described below.

References

- Caudwell, Christopher. 1949. *Further studies in a dying culture*. Bodley Head.
- Emery, F. (1967a). The next thirty years. *Human Relations*, 20, 199–237. Reprinted with postscript in *Human Relations* (1997), 50(8), 885–935