CO-LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRACY

FOREWORD

By Dr. Enrique G. Herrscher

Few books present an idea that might change the world. This is one of the few.

The emphasis here is on the word "might". Two things are **always** needed to change the world, or an organization, or oneself, or anything: **intent and procedure.** That is: a serious desire to change, and an adequate methodology. Alexander (Aleco) Christakis' book presents one such methodology. It is   called **dialogue.**

Not a "natural" dialogue, not any kind of human interaction, not even – important as it is – the recommendation to "put oneself in someone else's shoes", certainly not "just talking". But a highly structured dialogue, said (with   exciting examples) to have been applied successfully for over thirty years. In fact, the   whole book is based on the thesis (in my simplified version, not in Aleco's words) that **(a) dialogue is important; (b) dialogue is difficult; and (c) the only way   to overcome the difficulties is through an adequate methodology**, such methodology being basically the contents of the book.

But methodology alone does not produce change, and Aleco's book fully acknowledges the difficulties, constraints and pathologic situations to be overcome. Therefore, the book is not only about methodology. In my view (and I am not   following the book's structure but my own), **its gist is fourfold: (a) an attitude; (b) a philosophy; (c) a call for action; and (d) a methodology.** Let me explain what I mean by these interrelated parts, expressed in my own words, surely less rigorous than Christakis'.

An attitude

A collaborative spirit, **a true regard for "the collective wisdom of the group"**, the power of "mutual persuasion and respect", permeate Christakis' book. This goes beyond participative democracy within the hierarchical model, that often gets stuck mid-road because power or bureaucracy (structure) work in the   shadows.

You will read the book and find more about both the ethical and practical roots and their far reaching effects in an increasingly complex web-world, but let me add two personal notes.

When I first met Aleco Christakis, at the 49th. annual meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS) at Crete in 2003, his all-embracing personality did more to show me how a group consciousness through dialogue is generated, than the axioms and laws you will read here. Particularly strong was the message delivered at the last plenary by representatives of native tribes. While most of us selected one or two spokespersons to present conclusions in the name of the group, in their case the whole group came forward, and each person expressed his or her thoughts and experiences.

When I read (chapter 20) the wonderful Winnebago tribe chairman's account of the essence of the pipe ceremonial, I was reminded of a similar tradition we had as young boys and girls at the local YMCA camp site in Argentina. At the last campfire, a half burned stick was passed around, and each one holding it "opened his/her heart" and expressed their feelings towards the camp experience and their interaction with others. A beautiful forerunner of what is said in this book.

A philosophy

By this perhaps presumptuous term, I refer to what Christakis calls "Science of Dialogue Design" or "People Science", based on the "Wisdom of the People" ("Demosophia") paradigm, a Weltanschauung from which above "attitude" derives. It resembles what I once termed "Science of Dialogue", characterizing that way the essence of systemics (in my incoming presidential speech at the 2004 ISSS annual meeting).

I won't reproduce the axioms, definitions, laws and measurements that, as with any science, characterize this one, because you will find them, well worded and orderly, in the text. But I do consider it a valid contribution to state here what I consider the ten major assumptions of this science, because they are the building blocks of the proposed methodology that follows:
- That the self-organizing model is spreading in all kinds of organizations in the post-industrial world;
- That in a world where influence increasingly replaces control, dialogue and teamwork will be more and more the preferred methods;
- That commitment, shared responsibility and real change can only be achieved by democratic participation;
- That mutual purpose and a collective leadership are necessary to link the group's work with the organization and its external environment;
- That practices based on the hierarchical model have only limited effectiveness because they generate negative feedback;
- That without a proper process, individuals do not learn from each other (they often use the debate to persuade others, stick to a zero – sum mode or simply voice their beliefs);
- That while the generation of ideas is comparatively easy, relating them to each other is complex;
- That stakeholders possess the requisite knowledge for defining and resolving systemic problems;
- That stakeholders are however generally programmed to see situations in terms of the mechanistic paradigm;
- That computers lessen the cognitive demands on designing participants, and therefore are an essential aid for easing consensus.

An action plan

The dialogue proposed here is not a case of neutral collection of observer-independent data, but rather a proposal to **"enable people from all walks of life to experience participative democracy in national, international, organizational and inter-organizational settings".**

To translate above attitude and philosophy into action in the real world is no easy task. Reading the book makes it clear – at least for me – that this is an instance of "necessary but not sufficient". I have my doubts – and believe Aleco would share this view – whether this kind of dialogue would succeed in the face of strong negative forces arising from power relations or vested interests. But the point I want to make is that often the situation is not so bad. However, **even in a favorable setting , a positive outcome can only be assured if the right tools are applied**.

In other words, numerous opportunities are lost not because those who oppose change are too powerful but because those who are in favor fail to make it happen. The story of President Clinton and the failure of the Northwest Forest Conference (1993) illustrates the point. A project sponsored by a US President should not be weak, but lack of an adequate procedure makes it so.

Rather than commenting on the action plan itself, it may be of interest to extract the 20 major problems the action is supposed to solve, and how:

- To achieve, through a preliminary "White Paper", a common understanding of the problem situation;
- To generate, by disciplined discussion, a common language;
- To open the door, thanks to such common ground, to true teamwork;
- To bring together key stakeholders who identify barriers, provide a hierarchy of issues and develop a plan of action;
- To give a voice to those who are rarely heard, by "patient honoring of stakeholder autonomy;"
- To empower "those who do the job;"
- To equalize power relations among the stakeholders;
- To integrate, through interaction, diverse viewpoints;
- To " elicit ideas and points of view from all stakeholders;"
- To have stakeholders "to think clearly and outside their preconceived mental boxes;"
- To avoid "premature closing", jumping too early at conclusions;
- To severely restrict "power-grabbing activities" by stakeholders trying to monopolize attention or exercising the role of experts;
- To view problems/solutions without a winner –loser perspective;
- To heighten the "appreciation for the scope of responsibilities that each person has;"
- To establish "salient priorities for design;"
- To uncover unexpected solutions;
- To lessen, by use of interactive software, the cognitive demands on designing stakeholders;
- To reverse, by participation and dialogue, "the dismal trends of decline and discontent prevalent in most societies and organizations today;"
- To create " an atmosphere of serenity, equity, authenticity and empathy;"
- To "learn to have fun together as a community.

The reader will find (and enjoy) the practical ways to achieve these goals through the diverse examples furnished in the book.

A methodology

There is no need, in a Foreword, to go into the steps of the process which is, as said at the beginning, the gist of the book. Suffice to mention here the one salient characteristic, in my view, of the methodology: **a clear distinction between process and content,** between the rules of the meeting, the voting methods   and the consensus reaching procedures on the one hand, **managed exclusively by the facilitator team,** and   the actual opinions, discussions, conclusions and proposals on the other hand, that remain within **the exclusive power of the stakeholders.**

I had the privilege to witness this separation twice: years ago, at an ISSS conference, with John Warfield, and recently (2005), at the ISSS annual meeting in Mexico, with Allenna Leonard, and consider that it is the most powerful feature of the methodology. It not only saves a lot of trouble and time: it provides the procedural discipline that in many cases marks the difference between success and failure.

The Latin American case

Let me finish with a "contextual" note (nothing in systemic thinking is context-free!). I once said that there are two regions where the systems approach is bound to grow significantly in the next decades: the Eastern European countries and the Latin American ones. When writing these lines for these two wonderful systemic thinkers Aleco Christakis and Ken Bausch, I venture to state that the one region that would and should benefit most from the contents of this book is Latin America.

Due to historical, sociological, cultural and economic reasons too complex to describe here, the problems of reaching consensus in a truly democratic way in most (or all) Latin American countries, as well as in many (or most) of their public, social and private organizations, are enormous.

Asking for   forgiveness for possibly unjust generalizations, here are a few items that appear in the book as exceptions, but that in Latin American countries are usual:
- The self organizing model is still a minority;
- Hierarchy and privileges are prevalent;
- There is very little disposition to learn from each other;
- The suspicions about what management really wants is typical both at the corporate and public level;
- Valuable proposals often trigger concerted opposition from entrenched power structures.

These negative traits, notable exceptions and improvement efforts notwithstanding, conform the extremely low "social capital" that is the object of extensive research   and awareness action by   Inter American Bank expert Bernardo Kliksberg.

In addition, the present inevitable world-wide globalization process means, for a number of reasons beyond the scope of this Foreword, more disadvantages than advantages for the peoples of this region. The increasing tension between the need to be "part of the world", and the   equally important need to preserve local identities, creates dilemmas impossible to solve without a credible end equitable procedure for reaching consensus on public issues.

In a similar way, organizations both in the corporate arena and in the entrepreneurial context face post-industrial changes and challenges impossible to cope with if not by dialogue practice suited to web world requirements and participative management modes.

Thus, the "structure of dialogic design" put forward in this book, would be a most urgently needed tool, its enormous difficulties notwithstanding.

Dr. Enrique G. Herrscher
University of Buenos Aires
Past president of International Society for the Systems Sciences
www.ISSS.org

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