

Creative Chaos: How To Feed Ideas

Descrizione

It was 2009 when, as European project manager, I attended an international meeting about the launch of a new funding programme of the European Commission. It was the first of a long series of conferences I would have joined in and, as the other participants, I was waiting to go back home and resolve the chaos in my mind in order to start up the project which my organization wanted to realise.

Around three hundred people from the European member Countries were there for the same purpose, that is, making their ideas possible in successful projects. Those who perform this job know that the most important moment in this kind of meetings is the coffee break when all the participants not only exchange their business cards, but talk about the possible ways to craft the transformation.

I agree with Harrison Owen(1) who wrote in a recent publication that the coffee breaks are the moments when “the real action takes place”. If we want to figure out why it happens, we realize that people feel free to express their own enthusiasm and excitement during a coffee break rather than the formal session which is however helpful.

Every time I work for a project, I always ask to myself what drives me to do something. What is my motivation as project manager? Personally, I like the idea to create a participatory path with people in order to share experience and create a sense of co-ownership. I mean: to be the facilitator of this process, made of objectives and activities, and manage the relationships in order to get significant outcomes in terms of a meeting of minds on decisions.

If we consider the field of culture, we have to take its contents into account: they are intangible and original. In other words, it is often very difficult to identify the objectives we would achieve and figure out the direction to take in a context plenty of creativity and difference of points of view.

I am always inspired by the 'art' of facilitation, a combination of methodologies useful for leading and orientating a complex group in job meetings or workshops, generally used in the learning organization and educational field. So, what if culture makes use of the facilitation techniques?

In 2005 Phelim McDermot, artistic director of the theatre company "Improbable", organized "Devoted and Disgruntled", a tour of events around UK which connects the communities of theatre, experts and not, in order to stimulate the change and think about the future of it. As told by McDermot, D&D came from the "frustration": everyone complained about the situation of the theatre giving a cheap shot to creativity.

After reading the Open Space Technology user's guide, written by the founder Howen, McDermot found the similarity with the improvisation method used in a theatre and the creative process that occurs in the rehearsal room. The effort was to stop the grumble and do something towards the direction of change: all the community of D&D trusted so much in it, so to date it is the biggest tour conversation about theatre that has ever happened in the UK. But, how does the Open Space Technology work?

Harrison Owen introduced the "Open Space Technology" as part of the participatory planning almost thirty years ago(2), inspired by the dynamics of a coffee break. This new approach revolutioned the world of the facilitation because it allows leading a meeting from 5 to 200 people. There is no agenda, no agreed contents and no documents to bring. To set up an Open Space we only need a facilitator and a group of people seated in a circle and interested in talking about a clearly defined topic. Intense feeling and a sense of responsibility for facing a challenge are the ingredients for a good success. Eventually, the participants should take into account only four

simple principles and one law:

- *Whoever comes is the right person.* It means, whatever happens, it depends on them. It's useless to discuss about the lacking expertise; the determination is originated by the participants;
- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.* In other words, the present counts. The situation is unique and if people, space and time were different, other things would surely occur;
- *Whenever it starts is the right time.* The OS has a beginning and an ending but not a timetable;
- *When it's over, it's over.* The creative process has its time and it ends in the appropriate time.

Finally, the most important law of "Two feet" that, as told by Owen, is "don't waste your time!". Each participant must be conscious of own freedom to move in another group or place when its learning or contribution is not productive. This is part of the responsibility which everyone in the OS must have.

After its introduction, the Open Space Technology obtained a success in different parts of the world, in most cases implemented in the learning organization. Even if it doesn't fit for all issues, it stimulates the communication skills, the co-ownership and it is fundamental to enhance the listening in a group. But, the most important thing is that the OS works better when there is a high level of diversity of people (risk of conflicts) together with the determination to get solutions and achieve objectives. Now, we don't have to make a mistake when we perceive a total lack of planning in an OS: although the outcomes are well framed and the approach is faster than the traditional methodologies of project management.

At the end of an Open Space the participants write the final report with all the contents of the experience. I enjoyed when I had a look to all reports of "Devoted and Disgruntled": they dealt with elementary topics within the theatre like "*Why do you go to the theatre?*" or "*How do we help audiences see the joy of exploration?*" up to more

specific questions like *“Thank you. Do we say it: often enough? In the right ways? to the right people?”* or *“What part does puppetry play in the future of theatre?”*.

I suggest you to download the reports on the website of “D&D” or to join next session from 25 to 27 January 2014 which will take place in London or, if you want to find an answer for your organization, experience an Open Space Technology. It is not only productive but fun!

Notes

- (1) Organizational consultant specialising in facilitating the development and/or transformation of large social systems with particular attention to the organizational culture.
- (2) It was 1985, during the “Third Annual International Symposium on Organization Transformation”, Monterey.

To learn more about Open Space and Devoted and Disgruntled visit:

www.openspaceworld.org

www.devotedanddisgruntled.com

Curiosity: There are different methodologies of facilitation. The application depends on the context and specific situations you have to face. Another odd approach is the EASW (European Awareness Scenario Workshop) born in Denmark and promoted by the European Commission for programmes such as Agenda 21, Urban, programmes for sustainable local development etc.

It helps in the development of future visions, context analysis and activities. See the website www.scuoladifacilitazione.it

Campi meta