THE HANDBOOK OF LARGE GROUP METHODS

Creating Systemic Change in Organizations and Communities

Barbara Benedict Bunker
Billie T. Alban

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For
Douglas R. Bunker
and for
Lynn Alban Shea and Margarita Alban

PREFACE

We believe in using stories to communicate and to enhance remembering. In our first book on the topic of Large Group Methods—*Large Group Interventions* (Bunker and Alban, 1997)—we frequently used stories from our own and others' experiences to enhance our explanations of the twelve Large Group Methods we were presenting for the first time. Many readers told us how much they enjoyed and were helped by these descriptions of real situations in search of a solution.

In this book—*The Handbook of Large Group Methods*—we answer the following questions:

- What has happened since we first created a framework for these methods?
- For what and how are they being used now?
- Have new methods emerged?
- Are the methods being changed or adapted?

We have organized this book around six challenges that organizations and communities are confronting as we move through the first decade of the 21st century. Each challenge is unique and makes special demands on the organization or community that experiences it. In each chapter, we have gathered cases that show how the challenge was responded to in a particular situation using Large Group Methods. These cases really are great stories, and we hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have enjoyed working with these authors and finding out about their work.

Here are some examples of the important issues that are addressed in the cases:

- What can a company facing bankruptcy do to engage everyone in redressing the situation?
- How does a metropolitan region composed of many interest groups develop and agree on a plan for their future?
- Can parents and their teenage children talk about often undiscussable topics like drugs, AIDS, and sex?
- How does a worldwide NGO really involve all their employees in many countries in planning the next ten years?
- Can the FAA reduce gridlock in our airways by bringing together all the stakeholder groups affected?
- How do you merge two very competitive organizations into one productive organization?

These are a few of the challenges that the cases present—but with an added benefit. We asked each author to tell the story but to end by telling us what they have learned from this experience about using Large Group Methods. These reflections will be invaluable to business and community leaders, as well as to practitioners who need to consider what methods to use or how to adapt methods to a particular situation.

Quite a bit goes on in each case. So even though we have placed a particular case in one section and under one challenge, there may be issues of special interest in cases across the various sections. To provide an easy guide for where to look, we created the section titled "The Matrix," which follows Chapter One. There we list all the contributions in the book and tell you what topics you can expect to find in each. For example, there is an article on the use of technologies (IT) in large group events in Chapter Eight, but technology is also used in interesting ways in some of the cases. For that reason, "IT Use" is a category in The Matrix, and if you want to know all the places in the book where there may be information about their use, you would consult that column of The Matrix. The same is true for the different methods like Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry, or Open Space. Cross-cultural issues are discussed in other cases, as well as the ones in the cross-cultural chapter, so The Matrix will help you locate all the pertinent data. We hope that if you have specific needs, you will find this way of referencing topics useful.

Why We Wrote This Book

We are chroniclers of the development and spread of Large Group Methods. This book documents new developments since we first described and compared twelve Large Group Methods in 1997. By 2004, we were hearing all kinds of interesting reports on the uses of Large Group Methods in communities, as well as in business, health care, and educational organizations; reports came from North America and Europe, as well as from Africa, Asia, and Central and South America.

We wanted to know more, but our networks were finite. We proposed a special issue of *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* (JABS) on Large Group Methods (March 2005) that we agreed to edit because that meant we could send out a "call for papers" through professional associations, as well as practitioner networks. Was as much going on as our personal contacts led us to believe? We waited with interest for the response. When the deadline for submissions came, we were excited to find that we had many more articles of good quality than there was space to publish. This confirmed our intuition that a great deal of interesting work was going on. When the JABS special issue was published, we began hearing about other exciting work and asking people to write it up. As we talked with these colleagues, we began to understand that they were using Large Group Methods to engage very significant challenges in extraordinarily imaginative ways in our society!

How This Book Is Organized

We decided to organize this book around some of the important challenges that organizations and communities face in the 21st century. More and more of our own consulting work is shaped by what our clients need to do. Why not see if we could show how these methods are being used to meet particular challenges? In each of the following chapters, we describe a challenge, then several innovative solutions that involve the use of Large Group Methods.

Chapter Two: To involve all employees in important decisions in large global organizations

Chapter Three: To enlist everyone in meeting an organizational crisis

Chapter Four: To find areas of agreement in highly conflicted and polarized situations

Chapter Five: To bring together diverse interest groups in the community to work toward a common goal

Chapter Six: To work cross-culturally in organizations and communities

Chapter Seven: To embed new and more effective ways of working in organizations and communities

In each chapter, we set the scene from our own perspective, highlighting the contributions of the cases that follow but also adding our own understanding and insight.

How to Use This Book

We suggest some specific ways to use the book in the sections that follow.

Part One: Setting the Stage

Part One provides an introduction and orientation to the book and includes Chapter One. The Matrix appears at the end of that chapter.

Chapter One: That Was Then, but This Is Now: The Past, Present, and Future of Large Group Methods. If Large Group Methods are new to you, you should probably start with Chapter One, which gives both a historical and a theoretical perspective and describes each method briefly. If you know and use these methods already, you may want to skim the first part of Chapter One and focus on the second half of the chapter, where we give a general overview of what is happening currently in this area of practice. Three methods that have been developed since our first book—Appreciative Inquiry, The World Café, and America*Speaks*—are also described in this section of the chapter.

The Matrix. At the end of Chapter One is a section titled "The Matrix," mentioned earlier, which will help you decide how you want to read the rest of the book. If you are interested in one of the six broad challenges, you will simply want to read our opening essay on the topic and the cases in that chapter. However, if you have more particular interests, you may want to find all the cases in educational or business settings. Or you may want to review all the cases using Future Search or Open Space. Some of you may want to locate all the cases that include cross-cultural issues (they are not all in the cross-cultural section); others may want to see how graphic facilitation and interactive technology ("IT Use") are incorporated in Large Group Methods. Consulting The Matrix will allow you to search the book for all the relevant information on a topic of particular interest.

Part Two: Six Challenges for the 21st Century

Each chapter begins with a description of a challenge, as well as our views on the issues the challenges create. We then show, through case examples, how Large Group Methods can be used to address each challenge. We also provide ideas about what is unique and interesting in each case. We suggest that these cases could be used with clients to give them an example of how Large Group Methods can help them with issues they are facing.

Chapter Two: Widely Dispersed Organizations and the Problem of Involvement. How do global organizations engage their employees effectively? How do you hold work meetings with a subset of the organization or community and still involve the people who cannot be present in a meaningful way?

The Cases

1. "Innovation at the BBC: Engaging an Entire Organization," by Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge and Edward H. Powley
2. "Whole System Engagement Through Collaborative Technology at World Vision," by Soren Kaplan and Ronald Fry

Chapter Three: Organizations in Crisis. Bad things can happen through negligence, but events like hurricanes, 9/11, and other catastrophic events can also hit an organization or community. How can leadership enlist, challenge, and involve employees and citizens in turnaround strategies?

The Cases

1. “Back from the Brink at American Airlines,” by Beth Ganslen
2. “From Fragmentation to Coherence: An Intervention in an Academic Setting,” by Rosemarie Barbeau and Nancy Aronson
3. “Creating a World-Class Manufacturer in Record Time,” by Richard Lent, James Van Patten, and Tom Phair
4. “Planning Strategically for an Uncertain Future: The Boston University Dental School,” by Gilbert Steil Jr. and Michele Gibbons-Carr

Chapter Four: Working in Polarized and Politicized Environments. Organizations and communities have interest groups and coalitions that intend to have their own way. Large Group Methods take a different approach to working with conflict. How does the search for common ground address conflict differently than conflict resolution methods? What do Large Group Methods bring to the very conflicted organizational issue or community debate?

The Cases

1. “Trust and Transformation: Integrating Two Florida Education Unions,” by Sylvia L. James, Jack Carbone, Albert B. Blixt, and James McNeil
2. “Bringing Multiple Competing National Health Service Organizations Together,” by Julie Beedon and Sophia Christie
3. “Clearing the Air: The FAA’s Historic Growth Without Gridlock Conference,” by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff
4. “Working with Corporate Community Tensions on Environmental Issues,” by John D. Adams and Ann L. Clancy

Chapter Five: Working in Communities with Diverse Interest Groups. A growing need across the world is for people to come together and make decisions about what they want for their communities without becoming polarized and paralyzed. How do we get community groups to “sit down and reason together”? (Isaiah, Chapter 1, verse 18).

The Cases

1. “SpeakUp!: Bringing Youth, Educators, and Parents Together for Critical Conversations,” by Marie T. McCormick

2. "Building Coalitions to Create a Community Planning Tool in Israel," by Tova Averbuch
3. "Taking Democracy to a Regional Scale in Hamilton County," by Steven Brigham

Chapter Six: Working Cross-Culturally. Large Group Methods are being used around the world. What adaptations need to be made when they are used in Asian, Latino, or African cultures? Since the methods are very democratic and participative, are there places where they should *not* be used? Are there rules of thumb for working with them cross-culturally?

The Cases

1. "Whole Systems Change in Mexican Organizations," by Michael R. Manning and José DelaCerda
2. "From Strategic Planning to Open Space in East Africa," by Theo Groot
3. "Training Indonesian Facilitators to Lead Community Planning for Women and Children," by Kim Martens, Rita Schweitz, and Kenoli Oleari
4. "World Religions Engage Critical Global Issues," by Ray Gordezky, Susan Dupre, and Helen Spector

Chapter Seven: Embedding New Patterns of Working. How do we sustain and implement change within our organizations? How do we embed more productive ways of working across organizational boundaries with both internal and external stakeholders?

The Cases

1. "Work Out: From Courtship to Marriage at General Electric," by Annmarie Sorrow
2. "Embedding the Core Principles at Boeing," by Richard H. Axelrod and Emily M. Axelrod
3. "Moving to the Next Level at the Canadian Institute for Health Information," by Larry E. Peterson and Rebecca Peterson
4. "After the Dance," by Glenda H. Eoyang and Kristine Quade

Part Three: Resources for Large Group Methods

The final chapter in this book (Chapter Eight) includes a variety of useful resources. Three articles are included: one about the transitions in the process of planning and implementing a large group event and strategies for running meetings, another about the use of graphic facilitation in large group events, and the final one about using interactive technology as part of the large group process:

1. "Tools for Effective Transitions Using Large Group Processes," by Thomas N. Gilmore and Deborah Bing
2. "Graphic Facilitation and Large Group Methods," by Carlotta Tyler, Lynne Valek, and Regina Rowland
3. "Using Interactive Meeting Technologies: Overcoming the Challenges of Time, Commitment, and Geographic Dispersion," by Lenny Lind, Karl Danskin, and Todd Erickson

Following these chapters, "The Reading List" suggests books that give an overview of this field, describe particular methods, or provoke deeper thinking. There is also information about each of the authors.

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We hope you will find within these pages good reading and many new and interesting experiences and ideas. We believe that there is always more to learn, and we hope to contribute to the ideas that help all of us work together to create better communities and organizations.

Acknowledgements

Some forty-nine people have collaborated to write the twenty-four cases and articles that enrich this book. Their work is a window on the world of Large Group Methods. Their willingness to work with us and cheerfulness even when writing multiple drafts for sometimes difficult deadlines has made bringing this book to life incredibly stimulating and fun for us. Although there is a brief bio for each author at the end of this book, their writing says much more about who they are.

We have been privileged to work with Byron Schneider and Mary Garrett for a second time as our editors from Jossey-Bass. Kathe Sweeney's editorial guidance completes this fine team. As on the first occasion, it would be hard to imagine a better experience.

Finally, our colleagueship seems not only to survive, but to be enriched by these forays into what others are thinking and doing as we frame the current environment of Large Group Methods. We both take a great deal of pleasure from doing this work together.

April 2006

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THE HANDBOOK OF LARGE GROUP METHODS

PART ONE

SETTING THE STAGE

CHAPTER ONE

THAT WAS THEN, BUT THIS IS NOW

The Past, Present, and Future of Large Group Methods

We opened the local paper to read in the headlines that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had announced a decision to limit the number of planes using the Ft. Lauderdale Airport because of the high airport congestion and resulting delays in landings and takeoffs. This decision also involved using two secondary runways that, up to that time, had been mostly quiet. The mayor of the county was quoted as saying that the move came as a complete surprise and that the noise implications for several neighborhoods had not been considered. Activists and neighborhood spokespersons also commented negatively. In short, the FAA treated the airport and airline companies as though *they were the system,* without taking into consideration all the people whom the decision affected: neighbors and property owners, county officials, citizens concerned about ecology, and others who might be affected by the decision and thus were stakeholders.

This handbook is about methods for involving stakeholders in decisions about any system change. Certainly, had the FAA used one of the methods presented in this book and involved key stakeholders in the decision-making process, it might have taken a bit longer to present a new plan for the Ft. Lauderdale Airport. But we believe they would have been far more effective in implementing the changes they wanted to make.

The idea that change must involve the whole system has been growing in currency over the last forty years. The practice of family therapy, for example, developed as therapists got clear that treating only the child was much less effective than dealing with the whole system that participates in the illness. In the same way, organizations have often focused on individuals or groups as "the problem" when, in fact, the problem was system-created.

Not surprisingly, systems theory has been around longer than good practice. Katz and Kahn (1966) published the first edition of their seminal book on organizations as systems—*The Social Psychology of Organizations*—in 1966. To be sure, some change practitioners, particularly those whose practice is based in Gestalt theory or the Tavistock organizations-as-systems (Miller and Rice, 1967) work, have always worked with the whole system. The ability to implement these ideas, however, was limited by the lack of methods to bring all the stakeholders together to do the work of change. Until the 1980s, most problem-oriented consulting focused on individuals, interpersonal issues, group functioning (team effectiveness), and inter-unit productivity. At the same time, change processes led by top management that affected the direction of the whole organization usually occurred as a waterfall process: the plan or strategy began at the top and slowly cascaded down the organization hierarchy. By the time it reached the floor of the organization, a rather watered-down version usually remained, and much time had elapsed.

One of the most interesting breakthroughs in organizational development (OD) history occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. OD practitioners, working with systemic problems in organizations, developed methods for bringing together "the system"—all the concerned parties or "stakeholders"—in one place to make decisions about the issues facing them (Weisbord, 1987). The idea that when we are working with a systemic issue we need to draw the boundaries of the system *to include affected stakeholders* is more recent than notions of simply working with the whole system to bring about effective and sustainable change. We believe that this expansion of our understanding of how to decide what, exactly, constitutes the system developed (in consulting) simultaneously with the development of the Large Group Methods that make doing this kind of work possible.

The history of the development of these methods can be understood in three periods: (1) invention and early development (1980s to 1993), (2) adoption of the new methods (1993 to 1997), and (3) diffusion, experimentation, and the embedding of these methods (1997 to the present).

Invention and Early Development of Large Group Methods

Three precursors made the invention of Large Group Methods possible in the mid-1980s. The precursors were theory and practice developments in understanding organizational change that began in the 1950s. Large Group Methods could not have developed without these three strands, which we discuss in the next sections.

Change in Systems

The first strand was the emphasis on systems in the organizational work of Eric Trist and Fred Emery in the 1950s that developed from their study of new technology that was introduced into the British coal-mining industry. Their theory of sociotechnical systems showed how changes in technology can disrupt system functioning, even when what is being introduced is a more efficient technology. In their study, the new technology disrupted established and valued social relationships at work. The dissatisfaction caused by this disruption resulted in a loss of productivity. They proposed a theory that requires attention to the fit of the technological and the social system for the best productivity (Emery and Trist, 1960). Their work helped practitioners understand that change in one part of the system (technology improvements) can affect the rest of the system (who people work with), and this leads to unanticipated effects. Thus sustainable change requires attention to the whole system and systemic intervention.

The work of Trist and Emery in Britain was followed a decade later in the United States by the work of Katz and Kahn (1978), which we mentioned earlier. Katz and Kahn's work had a big impact on the field of organizational behavior, where their book became a standard text. Because this was a period in history when many consultants were also university professors in organizational and social psychology, the ideas were available in the practice of consulting.

Focus on the Future

The second precursor was a shift from focusing on solving organizational problems that are rooted in the past to focusing on the future and its potential. This occurred in both North America and Great Britain. In the United States, Herb

Shepard—a creative early OD practitioner—began working with individuals in the late 1960s in "life planning," that is, doing experiential exercises in which people created their own desired futures. He found that "futuring" created positive energy for change at the individual level.

About the same time, Ronald Lippitt, at the University of Michigan, noticed in his problem-solving work with organizational clients that dealing with problems drains energy. In contrast, he discovered that when you ask people to invent a future they would prefer and enjoy, energy is created in the people doing the planning. Lippitt began consulting with many cities in Michigan that were being devastated by the closing of automobile plants. He brought city stakeholders together in large group meetings—up to three thousand in one town—to create and plan their new future. The effects of this work of focusing on the future are reported in *Choosing the Future You Prefer* (Lippitt, 1980). It is interesting that this work, which, we see in retrospect, was clearly groundbreaking, was viewed by many practitioners at the time as a kind of curiosity. Those were the days of the growth of team-building and problem-solving methods, and many practitioners had practices in which this was their major business.

In the United Kingdom, emphasis on the future developed when Eric Trist ran a conference with Fred Emery, working with the merger of two aerospace engineering organizations in the early 1960s. They asked the two merging companies to consider what kind of company they wanted to become in the future. This process of searching for a desired future eventually became the Search Conference—a method that Fred and Merrelyn Emery would go on to develop further. Merrelyn Emery devoted more than thirty years of her practice in Australia to working with this method in organizations and communities, as well as at the national level (Emery and Purser, 1996).

Many Small Groups = One Large System

The third precursor was the work done by the National Training Laboratory (NTL) Institute in the 1960s in large summer laboratories at Bethel, Maine. In the community workshop and the college workshop, trainers learned to work with large groups by creating small groups within a larger framework. This created a model for working with larger groups of people, which only fully developed during the 1980s.

These early strands of work came together in the mid-1980s when, almost simultaneously, the importance of working with the whole system became focal