

How to look deeper

In November 2009 Ashridge Consultants **Chris Nichols** and **Chris Seeley** brought together 20 people from business, NGOs and government, from Europe to Vietnam to Brazil, for a *Purpose and Profit* workshop: a week of shared inquiry jointly hosted by Ashridge Consulting and Schumacher College, to ask profound questions about business: what is it for, and how might it be re-envisioned?

In this article, Chris Nichols reflects on an inspiring and insightful week and shares his observations about what made possible the challenges and learning that occurred through various ways of exploring the deepest questions. He notes, once again, that learning emerges from the informal and the unintended as well as from carefully crafted contributions and processes.

An invitation to look beyond commonplace ways of seeing

The starting point for our week together was a willingness to accept an invitation. This workshop was advertised jointly by Ashridge and Schumacher as exploratory and challenging work. Simply by choosing to come on the workshop an important first step towards deep exploration was taken. The group also 'met' in an on-line forum prior to the workshop, to begin getting to know each other, sharing their perspectives on business and their reasons for coming. But beyond this step of invitation and preparation, what was it that enabled the group to work deeply and well?

My first observation is that for good exploration to come about, a 'good enough provocation' is needed. This provocation is needed to provide a purposeful challenge to everyday ways of seeing, sufficient to incite interest in exploring the topic and to provide a starting point. In this case the challenge offered by the facilitators to the group was that 'business as usual' rests on three inter-related fantasies.

These are:

- The Fantasy of Limitless Growth
- The Fantasy of Actions without Consequences
- The Fantasy of Separateness.

Each one of the common fantasies was stated and explained by the facilitators, then opened up for conversation within the group.

First, the belief that growth can be without limits and society is successful only if its economy is growing. Governments measure success by pointing to economic 'progress'. In the boardroom, it takes a brave manager to ask: "why do we need to grow?" Yet we live in a finite biosphere. Fitting infinite human economic activity into a finite biosphere is a sleight of hand that the Earth can't afford.

Secondly we have the fantasy of actions without consequences: the idea that we can act in any way and that it will not have consequences that we need to consider or be responsible for. The benefits of most business actions flow to the individual, their company and their customers. The costs are borne elsewhere and go unaccounted for. Strategic conversations rarely touch on them.

Thirdly we have the fantasy of separateness. Most of us humans engaged in corporate life (as both executives and consumers), live a life heavily insulated from the biological reality of our being. Gregory Bateson noted: "If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell." Until business starts to be framed and formed from a position of oneness with the biosphere, rather than from a position of 'separate from', the consequences of the three fantasies will continue to unfold.

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Graphics by Chris Seeley

A different framing

My second observation, one familiar to all consultants and facilitators working creatively, is that the work of looking deeper requires a different perspective, a different lens. We all see the world through familiar filters. Much of our mental processing is automatic. The familiar metaphors of business are machine words and imagery: cogs, wheels, supply chains, alignments. Once we expect to see the world that way, we see the world that way.

So how can we see the world of business with fresh eyes? For participants in the *Purpose and Profit* workshop, the re-framing took place in Martin Crawford's forest garden on the Dartington estate. Martin began his 2.5 acre garden 15 years ago, fencing a disused paddock. Now it is a flourishing food forest, growing enough to feed a family of eight. As we walked around the garden, Martin spoke about plants and forest maintenance. But he could just as easily have been speaking about the frontiers of business.

I wrote down some of Martin's observations about his garden – and Chris Seeley recorded these graphically (see illustrations above). Martin spoke about an equation for the garden: energy in and energy out. His yield per acre is lower than conventional industrial farming, but his energy input is tiny. His no dig, low maintenance approach means the food forest needs only ten days a year of maintenance and the garden produces no waste. What a profound challenge to business thinking this is. How different would your organisation be, measured on an energy

input-output scale? How different is business where all waste from one activity is an input for another?

Martin spoke about how his raspberries have migrated several metres southwards since planting. Traditional gardening would weed out the new growth, keeping the plants in their set place. But this would stress the plants and they would need feeding and replacing. The freshly migrating plants are vigorous and healthy. How much organisational effort goes into keeping the appearance of order, and what is lost as we do it? How would business be if we let the raspberries head south?

There was much more to be learned from visiting Martin's garden. Martin described his food forest as "partially managed wildness". Out of this wildness emerges a sophisticated, resilient, diversity. It struck us that much of the deep strategic issues of this century are about business learning how to work well with "partially managed wildness". Our visit to Martin's garden offered us a powerful reframing of the traditional view and helped us to envisage business.

Ways of making sense

My third observation is that we gained insight through many less familiar ways of sense-making and sharing:

Graphic facilitation: Not only is Chris Seeley a superb facilitator and group worker, but she also brings an extraordinary talent for recording conversations graphically. Her illustration of the conversation following the visit to the forest garden is included in the image above. We found

that people gathered around the artwork and new conversations flowed. New connections and insights were made that might easily have slipped away without the graphic record being with us.

Freefall writing: Sometimes it makes sense to write without thinking. We frequently paused to allow a few minutes of 'freefall writing'. Peter Reason talks about this technique as writing "without a parachute ... letting go of control and settling into ... 'wild mind'." Just writing without thinking and without stopping may seem strange, but new insights and connections spontaneously emerge. One of our participants reflected afterwards "What could I hope to gain from that? Quite a lot it would seem. I have reviewed those jottings several times and remain surprised at how eloquently my subconscious spoke to me ... prompting a round of deep reflection that would crystallise the jumble that was crashing about in my head".

Collage and sculpture: Sometimes words aren't the right medium, so we took the opportunity to play, to create. Accompanied by the spare and spacious music of Arvo Part's *Alina*, we each made collages or sculptures to explore and express whatever understanding was emerging. Once the exhibits were prepared, the group divided: half to present their work as artists, half to visit the exhibition as critics and writers. Roles were then exchanged, and once everyone had visited, everyone spent some time in freefall writing, and then in sense-making conversations. One of our participants wrote of this: "A collage made of magazine cuttings and framed by the liberal application of felt-tip pen? That particular piece of contemporary art is now taped to my office wall to remind me to find the courage to step into a more activist role".

Photography: One of our participants was Steve Marshall, photographer and doctoral student. Throughout the week, Steve worked with his camera. Once again, the richness of having another way of seeing, re-presenting and re-interpreting the work and conversations was part of the creation of new insight. As Steve reflected: "A month or so later, it is the shift of attention that is having the greatest effect. I am seeing different things. I am reacting differently to my world. The process started with the photographs that I took of our group – by trying to express relationship rather than image something changed for me ... seeing life differently feels like a significant change". As I reflect now on Steve's words, I notice the power of his "trying to express relationships rather than images". Working in this way Steve reminds us visually of the fundamental place of right relationships at the heart of creating business that stands sustainably on the Earth.

The power of the deeply simple

My final observation is about the value of the simplest things. Simply being together, talking, living in community and sharing the work of cooking, cleaning and gardening deepened our inquiry. As Steve Marshall wrote, he valued:

"... the incidental learning, the small asides, the patient and generous questioning of my fellow participants as we chatted... The daily routine of Schumacher contributes well to this kind of experience. Questions of how we should behave in business generated a greater sense of meaning when we were in conversation with colleagues as we cut apples together, which heightened our senses as well as our intellect. Our contribution to the daily chores of the college slows us down and offers space for a wider perspective".

How different would business be if we simply took the time to 'cut apples together' – sharing the menial tasks at the heart of the business, without awareness of power and status, and if we derived insights and solutions from using our senses as much as our intellect?

As for the "small asides, the patient and generous questioning", I cannot speak too highly of the importance of slow, patient and generous conversations. Hugh Pidgeon worked with the group on the practice of dialogue, creating conversations of greater depth, noticing and letting go of layer upon layer of assumption. For me, the stories of the impact of good conversations played a vital part in moving the group to work more deeply. Hugh introduced the group to the story of Brendan Dunne, the secret peacemaker who for two decades hosted in his home secret talks between military republicans and agents of the British Government. The words that stay with me today are Dunne's when speaking of a militant splinter group that still excludes itself from the peace settlement: "Don't exclude them", he said.

So much of the practice of working more deeply lies in not excluding. Not excluding the voice you most don't want to hear, not excluding the potential of the position we just don't understand. What would be different in the relationship between business and the planet if we worked in patient conversation, not excluding points of view we find difficult to hear, including the perspective of the 'other than human' world?

A closing thought: cutting apples

One participant spoke of the revelation of working in the kitchen with Wayne Schroeder. Wayne is catering manager at Schumacher College, and he has a profound impact on everyone who visits. Wayne brings reverence to his relationship to food, respecting each apple, seeing its beauty, holding the apple sacred.

I know that for some readers this will be a step beyond what is comprehensible. Wayne, in some ways represents a way of seeing that is excluded from everyday organisational life. But that is the point. We have depleted our ways of seeing to such an extent that we are bewildered, we have lost our connection to wildness and a sense of wonder. Wayne brings wonder flooding back to everyone he touches and he is, because of this, one of the greatest teachers. Simply working in the kitchen with him brings about new ways of seeing, and new ways of seeing are at the heart of the healing that needs to come about.

Coming to a place where we can allow ourselves to see the world differently is a way to experience deep learning. So is the work of finding ways, step by step to bring our new ways of seeing into practice.

Bringing together the right group with shared intent is part of our work as consultants, in enabling deep learning to be experienced. Another part of the work is to offer a challenge to conventional thinking and to provide new framings that allow alternative ways of seeing. Above all it is the social and the relational parts of the work that deepen the exploring: the sharing of insights through multiple and diverse ways of making and representing emerging sense made, and of shaping and supporting planned actions from which more learning will flow.

Above all, this work although urgent is not hurried. Reframing understanding of business requires us to hold space and time as precious, but to work at the pace that is necessary, knowing that no particular outcome can be assumed ■

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