

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS: THE CASE OF SEAFLOW

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ABSTRACT: *Running successful meetings is an essential skill of Dragon Dreaming. How to make your meetings really successful. The Seaflow method shows how one group has managed to organise exemplary meetings in the USA.*

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INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT

Running successful meetings is an essential skill for any community activist. So many times people walk out of a meeting more exhausted and less motivated than they were when they walked in. In such meetings they get robbed of enthusiasm and vitality. In such meetings, they are completely dysfunctional and the joke below about meetings is possibly appropriate.

A cartoon I once saw said “Are you needing to feel self important, wanting to shirk responsibility, wanting to waste time, needing to poke your nose into other people’s business – then organise a meeting. A meeting is a great way of wasting time, inflating your importance, blaming others whilst avoiding responsibility yourself, and slowing down the decision making process by making decisions collectively, whilst leaving individuals with the responsibility of doing all the work”. If you are attending such meetings I strongly encourage you to stop immediately.

In the period from March 2006 to March 2007 I had the chance to travel around the world on a teaching-learning tour of the planet, gathering information and ideas that could be taken back to my home in Perth Western Australia, and shared with the WA community of social, political and environmental activists working in association with the Gaia Foundation (Western Australia) to build a truly sustainable community here.

During this time, at the invitation of Hallie Austen Iglehart, an activist friend and acquaintance of Joanna Macy, living just north of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, I had the chance to meet briefly with members of the **Seaflow** Organisation. **Seaflow** was a growing educational nonprofit community-based organisation of concerned citizens who are dedicated to protecting the living oceans of our planet. It works locally in the San Francisco Bay area, nationally within the USA and also internationally, to raise awareness and promote public participation, campaigning particularly against active sonar and "airgun" blasting that can maim and kill with underwater noises that are millions of times more intense than whales, fish or human divers can withstand. Building powerful strategic alliances with a range of other organisations, it has been most effective in public education projects, media outreach, lobbying efforts and coalition building. It actively participates in more than eighty events annually and is effective in drawing media attention with interviews on CNN and other TV outlets, and in a multitude of newspapers and magazines. Their lobbying efforts are “state of the art” and seem to be extremely efficient, and they also seem very effective in gaining grants and donations.

I had worked briefly with Hallie, having previously met her in at Joanna Macy’s when I was running an introduction to the Participatory Strategic Planning “Dragon Dreaming” Approach, and she asked me to come as a guest speaker to address one of their regular meetings.

Meetings for organisations are often called out of a tradition of having meetings and are frequently seen to be wastes of time, non-productive, confrontational, inefficient, and repetitive. Some often feel that when your colleagues, volunteers and co-workers are in meetings, they are generally not

productive and that nothing is ever produced until after the meeting is over and people “get back to work”.

But meetings can have important social effects, bringing about improvements in group morale, sharing decision making, and building team commitment. But how many times have you attended a meeting to feel more exhausted at the conclusion of the meeting than you were before it started? In such cases, it is stupidity to attend such a dysfunctional meeting at all!

The **Seaflow** headquarters is in an attractively reconditioned ex-military barracks, at “Fort Cronkhite”, Sausalito, California, in the Marin National Park. We arrived at the centre some time before the meeting, as Hallie explained, there was a logistics team of people who came together to make the venue impeccable before the meeting commenced. I went for a walk along the beach, watching the setting sun, and returned to find the venue had become a joy to behold. Posters and fact-sheets adorned the walls, giving a great deal of information to new-comers like myself. Flowers added to the beauty of the setting, and comfortable seating arranged in a horseshoe fashion lent an easy informality to the setting. Choegyal Rinpoche in his book “The Way of Shambhala” speaks about Dhrala, a Tibetan concept of organising space that leads to an automatic shift of awareness by those who arrive to share such a space. and guests were introduced by the people who invited them. sighs of contentment and appreciation as people arrived for the gathering.

As people arrived, they shared food and drink, creating a generally celebratory atmosphere. With the beginning of formal proceedings it opened with a minute or two of silence, and a dedication – possibly some inspiring poem or piece of text. From a Dragon Dreaming perspective it could be a Pinakarri process. In Australia nowadays we invite an Aboriginal “Welcome to Country” recognising the first owners who loved and cared for this land. The Convenor of the Meeting is introduced.

Visitors to the meeting, first timers are introduced and welcomed and guests were introduced by the people who invited them. The guest speakers myself and a local poet, were introduced. A “Check-in process then occurred in which each person identified an animal, plant or natural element of the environment with which they could identify, and whose perspective they would consider during the making of decisions during the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting and the agenda of the evening’s gathering were then explained. The results of the last meeting were briefly touched upon, and the results of actions underway and developments since the last meeting were reported. Forthcoming events were then presented. A number of key urgent actions that were required and decisions were presented, proposals were called for and approved.

With guest speakers about half of the time I was allocated was spent was given to a question and answer session, allowing participants to explore the issues I raised in depth and relate it to their own experience. One thing I noticed was the care and attention the **Seaflow** organisation gave to publicly acknowledging and recognising the contributions made by its volunteers and members on its behalf.

The costs of the gathering were presented and a “Dana” bowl was circulated for donations to cover the costs of the meeting, with half of the money going as a contribution to the guest speakers and the surplus going to support the work of the organisation generally.

Volunteers were then called upon to help clean the venue after the end of the gathering, and create the logistics team for the next gathering. Envelopes and letter writing materials were circulated and each person present was encouraged to create a letter, to a specific person in authority or the media, in support of the issues around which the sea-flow organisation was campaigning.

The end of the meeting occurred with each person tanking the animal plant or element that were present in their perspective, and sharing what they learned. Potential improvements of the meeting were discussed. And the group finished by sharing the Elm Dance, then departing.

WHAT WAS OBSERVED

So what did *Seaflow* do to make its meeting truly effective and its outcome itself productive? They seem to have implicitly or explicitly addressed all of the following:

- 1. They ensured that the meeting has purpose. If the meeting has no clear purpose, don't have it:** It's amazing how many meetings are held because they've always been held. The biggest culprits are those "same day, same time" sessions that people have carved into their calendars. For every meeting, *Seaflow* seemed to try to come up with a compelling statement that describes the purpose of their gathering, and to identify at least one intended outcome. If nothing worthwhile seems to surface prior to a meeting, the same will happen during the session.
- 2. *Seaflow* had a previously understood established easy to understand agenda format. They take the agenda seriously, but not too seriously:**
There are times when digressions are worthwhile and when certain issues should move up in priority. It's a judgment call every time, but sometimes that buttoned-up agenda has to go out the window. One way to streamline meeting procedures is to adopt the use of a consent/consensus agenda. Not all items require discussion or deliberation. Furthermore, some items may have been discussed and explained previously, and additional discussion will be repetitive and unnecessary. *Seaflow* made use of a variety of media to keep members informed, and did not waste time at the meeting sharing information that could be easily obtained elsewhere in a different way. A consent/consensus agenda guarded against unnecessary discussion, thus saving time for the more important issues.

3. **They didn't use meetings to rubber-stamp decisions:** Let's face it, some committees bring people together and try to feign a group decision when they've already "pre-decided" the outcome. People come equipped with powerful BS indicators, so this kind of group manipulation rarely works. If you simply want to communicate information, save everyone's time and opt for internal mail or e-mail or other forms of communication.

4. **The agenda seemed to be limited to three discussion points:** In a meeting we need to ask ourselves, "What are the three most important things we need to cover in the meeting?" and then limit the agenda to these three points for detailed discussion. Usually the rest of the things you wanted to cover anyway, by definition, weren't really that important, so why waste everyone's time? *Seaflow's* agenda was not cluttered, and proceeded rapidly to cover those issues that were both "urgent" and "important". Urgent but unimportant things were delegated to others for actioning, whilst important but non-urgent matters were tabled and referred to a future date at a time after which all participants present could inform themselves on the issues.

5. **A time limit was set:** The time frame was effectively followed, but it was not restrictive. I would suggest setting the time limit for the meeting to be no longer than 30-45 minutes. In future meetings, shorten the time by five minutes until the time limit on any one issue is 10-15-minutes or less. The leader of the meeting will become much more efficient, and the participants will become much more focused as well. When the time limit is up, end the meeting. You may not get to cover every single thing that you wanted to the first couple of time you try this, but within a short time, you will find that the major information points are being discussed and decisions are being made very efficiently. Include in the time-frame overall timeframe sufficient time to effectively welcome and introduce new members, address any personal issues through a brief "clearing-house" session, and include time at the end of the meeting for people to comment on what went well for them, and make suggestions about what could be improved.

6. **At all times *Seaflow* strived for meaningful dialogue:** When , a group of people are gathered, the collective wisdom of the group, vastly exceeds the abilities of any one member, yet so many groups function as if they have a learning difficulty. How does one activate this collective wisdom of the group? Meetings should aim always at a synergy of energy and efforts, so that the whole vastly exceeds the sum of the parts. For example, when six people are around a meeting table, it's like having six supercomputers at the ready. In fact, people are far better than supercomputers because they also have hearts. Instead of "leading" the meeting, *Seaflow* facilitated the session, acting as an enabler that empowered others, rather than a tyrannical controller. Instead of making statements, organisers asked

questions. Instead of raising objections, they encouraged everyone to ask more questions. At the same time they stopped off track discussions immediately – giving no wiggle room for the local pontificator.

- 7. The meeting encouraged participation from everyone, but didn't force them:** After someone answers, people were encouraged to contribute with a statement something like, "Good, let's hear from someone else." People in your meeting who rarely spoke, instead of calling on them directly, the convenor said something like, "I value the opinion of each of you, does anyone else have something to add." Then, it is often then enough to just by looking at the person you want to hear from, to encourage them to contribute. This seemed to be done naturally and spontaneously at the meeting. If the quiet person has something to say, he or she will say it if encouraged in this way. If he or she doesn't, then you haven't embarrassed the person.
- 8. The meeting was its own constructive critic:** At the end of the meeting people in the organising team debriefed, gathering all the information on both outcomes and the process of the meeting together while it was still fresh in their minds. Such debriefing sessions are useful in considering, for example, are you talking too much? (With five people at a meeting, it takes a darn good reason to talk more than 20 percent of the time.) Are you holding back? (If so, don't whine if your ideas never get a fair hearing.) Are you listening to understand, or are you simply gathering enough information to frame your counterpoint? What would others say about you if you were sitting across the table from yourself? If you can't be objective or honest with these questions, ask a friend who attends the same meetings to give the feedback.
- 9. *Seaflow* wrapped up each meeting with a group evaluation:** With everyone weighing in, whilst everyone was still fresh, everyone considered what they appreciated most about the evening, what went right during the session, what could've gone better, and what should be done differently the next time around. These ideas were gathered and consciously incorporated into assisting the convenors of the next planned gathering. In this way *Seaflow* committed to one or two practical improvements after each meeting. One thing that impressed me enormously about the *Seaflow* meeting, was their use of "fact sheets" on issues relating to their campaigns. There were pens and writing paper for everyone there, together with envelopes and stamps, and people, informed by the information on a particular fact sheet, were encouraged to write a brief letter, there and then, to a particular Senator, Congressman or government committee or media outlet on a particular issue. Each meeting thus generated about 50-60 letters to be mailed out immediately as an additional outcome of the gathering.

10. They sought to cut down on those meeting minutes: Whoever invented the name “Minutes” should have been sued for misleading advertising. Generally minutes, don’t take *minutes* to either prepare, read or consider, and most get “filed” in the circular waste paper filing cabinet (the rubbish bin) immediately after a meeting. **Seaflow** encouraged everyone to take responsibility for noting down those matters that concerned them personally, including the tasks that each person volunteered to undertake. In this way any hour-long meeting should yield up a page or two of notes at the most, and these were to be circulated no more than two days after the meeting. These notes were used mainly to keep track of major discussion points, decisions, and assignments. Rather than “reading the minutes” (a huge time waster at any meeting, where most people are already literate), the group was interested in learning other ways of recording meeting outcomes, including the “Dragon Dreaming” Karabirrdt that I discussed in my presentation,

CONCLUSION: WHAT WAS LEARNED

Meetings are particularly important in circumstances when problems and decisions involve very uncertain, complex, and important situations and when the potential for conflict is high. They can also result in group pressure which smothers individual creativity, or lead to a group being dominated by one or two members, Then the rest withdraw, are coopted or may passively acquiesce, exploiting, stressing, and frustrating their members. These meetings can be a big waste of time and energy; enforcing norms of low productivity and making notoriously bad decisions.

Illustrating this point, there is a joke about four people named *Everybody*, *Somebody*, *Anybody*, and *Nobody*. There was an important job to be done and *Everybody* was sure that *Somebody* would do it. *Anybody* could have done it, but *Nobody* did it. *Somebody* got angry about that because it was *Everybody's* job. *Everybody* thought that *Anybody* could do it, but *Nobody* realized that *Everybody* wouldn't do it. It ended up that *Everybody* blamed *Somebody* when *Nobody* did what *Anybody* could have done.

All too often these are the result of conventional and traditional meeting procedures. **Seaflow** seemed to be deliberately conscious of and avoided these traps. Their meetings were effective because they were working with issues where

- the problem is relatively uncertain, complex, and had potential for conflict
- the problem required intergroup cooperation and coordination
- the problem and its solution had important personal and organizational consequences
- there were significant but not immediate deadline pressures

- widespread acceptance and commitment were critical to successful implementation

The meetings at **Seaflow** seem to be designed specifically to flourish in such an environment. In particular old and new participants seemed to be able to

- learn new skills from older more established team members and take some risks in getting personally involved in new ways;
- take some chances; people are not perfect and there was a recognition that people were free to make mistakes here, learning in a guided and supported fashion;
- make sure that they got feedback from more experienced team members and were able to find out in the interim what were their strengths are and weaknesses.

All in all **Seaflow** seemed to me to be an organisation designed to PERFORM. It's meetings clearly addressed the important issues of

Purpose;

Empowerment;

Relationships and Communication;

Flexibility;

Optimal Productivity;

Recognition; and

Morale.

As the organisation's Vision Statement itself states: "**Seaflow** envisions a future where the world's oceans are alive and healthy. Within the next ten years, we hope to inspire and activate a critical number of people to ensure that there will be international standards on man-made noise levels in the ocean and a governing body effectively monitoring those standards. We hope to contribute to creating a world where there is a deep and heartfelt appreciation of the magic and majesty of the web of life, in all its many expressions and permutations. We envision a world where human beings recognize our interdependence and protect the many species within the web of life.

In its work in the Seven Seas, the organisation works on its guiding principles of the Seven C's of **Seaflow**:

1. Community
2. Collaboration
3. inClusion
4. Creativity
5. Concordance
6. Compassion
7. Celebration

And... Honesty. Self-responsibility. Non-violence. Courage, Commitment, Right action and Right timing”

From what I observed of its meetings the organisation would seem to be going the right way to achieving its goals.

How effective is **Seaflow**? It was interesting to read, for example, in Australia’s West Australian Newspaper, that a US Federal Judge had just upheld a ruling that had been earlier vetoed by President George W. Bush, that military establishments were bound by the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act, in regards to Sonar and marine life. Clearly **Seaflow** is being very effective.

Seaflow's Great Turning Exercise

Wheel of the Great Turning

(30 - 90 minutes)

Purpose:

This group process helps us to see the larger context of our lives, and to notice and appreciate the many forms of positive change in our time. Undertaken in the gratitude phase of the work, it represents a shift from personal to collective thankfulness. It also provides invaluable information in a lively fashion.

As framework for spontaneous reporting, we take the concept of the Great Turning--the transition from an unsustainable, growth-based political economy to a life-sustaining society, which is the essential revolution of our time. The three key dimensions of the Great Turning (see ch. 1, page 3 ff.) are here symbolized by material objects placed within a circular space. These objects serve as props, as participants inform one another about developments they know about from observation or direct experience.

Description:

Be sure that the group is already familiar with the concept of the Great Turning. Clear a circular space, 6 to 10 feet in diameter, around which people sit closely together. Proximity is important, so if numerous, they can crowd in behind each other. Have the group imagine the Wheel divided into three sections. In each section, place an object to symbolize one of the three dimensions of the Great Turning. For the "holding actions" in defense of life, some first-aid material, like rolls of bandaging, works well. For alternative structures, use something organic and alive, like a small branch from a growing plant. For the shift in consciousness, a crystal or a crystal cluster is an evocative symbol, and so is a pair of eyeglasses.

With the guide going first to model, people enter the Wheel of the Great Turning one at a time. Entering one or more sections in any order, they pick up the object there and report to the others, as if letting the object speak. For example, taking the crystal or eyeglasses, they may speak of a vision quest or a study group that has opened new horizons. Holding the roll of gauze bandaging, they might tell of volunteering at a soup kitchen or protesting the corporate global economy. With the fresh budding leaves, they might describe the farmers' market or cooperative child care starting in a neighborhood.

This exercise generates high spirits and is best kept at a lively pace. To accomplish this, and avoid long lecture-like pronouncements, treat it as a ritual. Brief verbal formulae help establish a ritual spirit, while maintaining an energetic tempo. For example, as people enter the Wheel, they may say:

"My friends, let me give you an example of the Great Turning." And when they finish, the group may respond: "So it is in the Great Turning."

It's worth noting that the wheel has abundant symbolic and even archetypal significance. The ritual can be enhanced by evoking some of these connections, be they Ezekiel's vision of the wheel within the wheel, the Gandhian spinning wheel which became both national flag and emblem of nonviolence, or the sacred hoop of Native American teachings. When the Buddha taught, he is said to have turned the Wheel of the Dharma, or the Dharma Chakra. His very words set it in motion. In the same fashion, our naming examples and telling stories of this present revolution serves to make it more real to us.

Seaflow's Milling Exercise

(approximately 90 minutes)

Concepts, Milling, Group Presentations

Purpose: We want to create an active, movement-oriented exercise for the conceptual material of the Model of the Great Turning. We have used this activity twice now in our Seaflow transformational workshop and found that it provokes great dialogue and a lot of laughs.

1. Brief intro-- ten minutes; The Model of the Great Turning

What each of the roles in the Great Turning is. How we are all participating in the Great Turning already. (Alternative structures; change in consciousness; holding actions); how each of the three roles in the great turning is important,

2. Milling-- twenty minutes

Description: Milling is a common movement exercise, described by Joanna in "Coming Back to Life." It has a particular value if people are asked to notice what happens inside their own bodies as they move from place to place, or take on different characters. (Dr. Katie Hendricks has been Geo's great mentor in this work.)

The Model of the Great Turning is a perfect conceptual framework for this form of milling, since the three roles in the Great Turning all are quite distinct from each other. We use different parts of our own body/mind/soul in each role. Guided movement through space can help participants notice how they have to change or adapt in order to move from Holding Actions to Changes in Consciousness to Alternative Structures.

Instructions:

A. movement/exercise: create three areas in the room which are some distance apart. (One for each role) Our workshop has three facilitators, so each one has stood in a different part of the room with a sign indicating which role/position they are taking.

B. participants move slowly through the three different spaces:

Alternative structures; change in consciousness; holding actions

C. Leaders asks: "What do you experience, how do you change, as you move through the different spaces in the room

D. Leaders say, "Choose one of the three spaces and settle into it." Three small groups naturally form.

E. Leader asks question to people in each of the three groups: what are you doing in this group? How did you get here? what do you want to know about this group?

3. Creative Group task: 35 minutes

A. Each group creates a commercial/presentation: fifteen minutes

Presentation answers question: "how would you recruit people into your group? Why is your role in the Great Turning the best and most effective?"

(Can be tv commercial, songs, mime, play, etc.)

B. Each group Presents to group twenty minutes (lots of laughing)

4. Group Council: What did you learn about your role in the Great Turning as a result of this activity. 10-20 minutes.

(Developed by trainers from Seaflow, protect our living oceans. Geo Taylor, Hallie Iglehart Austin, Vivienne Verdon Roe, and Barry Flicker. www.seaflow.org)

<http://www.Seaflow.org/>

<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/>

<http://web.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/teams/ovrvw2.htm>