

PUTTING A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON BUSINESS

Jonathan Priest © 2003

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Business consultants and facilitators often successfully combine showmanship or artistry with their analytical skills. Visualisation techniques are now being taken beyond the entertaining to provide decision makers with real and rapid insights into what makes their business tick, or tock, as the case may be.



The Bayeux Tapestries are an early example of a visualisation technique used to record historical events. Their modern equivalent is now helping companies to realise their potential

How do you make things happen quickly in an organisation when market forces are pounding at your door? You take all the decision makers, lock them in a darkened room for a day or so and enable them to think the unthinkable.

So what will attract the decision makers into that room and what will keep them there? The first thing you need is charisma; the second is a facilitation technique, assuming of course that you know what you are talking about.

Charisma embodies charm, self-belief and great communication skills and is essential; indeed many facilitators rely on charisma alone. The facilitation technique is optional, whether it's dance, painting, role-play or crossing imaginary minefields with a box of matches and tube of glue. It doesn't matter as long as you get the desired result, or so I thought.

If all the participants seek is motivation, team building or a pretext to talk to each other, then anything goes. However, if you want to reappraise your goals, tactics and customer relationships as a prelude to a major restructuring programme, you might need something a little more scientific than a dressing up box and some embarrassing exercises.

Indeed, you might need the services of Group Partners Ltd who staged the November London CoF event at Happy Computers, titled 'Putting Business into Context'.

Armed with lashings of charisma, co-founders David Butter and John Caswell talked us through their facilitative approach. Thanks to President Bush's visit to London, the event was poorly attended but those present witnessed Group Partners Ltd first-ever open presentation, and it was a real eye opener.

David Butter is a dyed-in-the-wool marketing man, ex of Y&R including a stint as their CEO in Melbourne. He was involved in the launch of two of the major transport initiatives of the past decade - Eurotunnel, and the leading airline alliance, STAR. John Caswell started out studying fine art at Cambridge before turning to marketing. For those with memories long enough, he helped to launch the BBC Computer for Acorn in the 80s, a classic of its day (and now worth a fortune as CoF member Flemming Madsen was delighted to discover).

The Group Partners facilitation technique, called Progressive Framework Methodology (PFM), is based on diagrammatic visualisations of business processes. This is very much John Caswell's baby, a fusion of his artistic, business and marketing skills. Other brains have helped to develop the model over a period of 20 years to its now refined state. When you see the list of companies who have used their services, including M&S and British Airports Authority, you realise that PFM is not a toy.

Visualisation techniques for business brainstorming sessions are not new of course. Last year, London CoF staged a session about Lego Serious Play, which showed how building models of a business in Lego bricks can provide rapid insights and are a way to share and develop ideas. Indeed, of the articles on my web site, the one about Lego has enjoyed the most downloads (274 to date), so visualisation is clearly a popular subject.

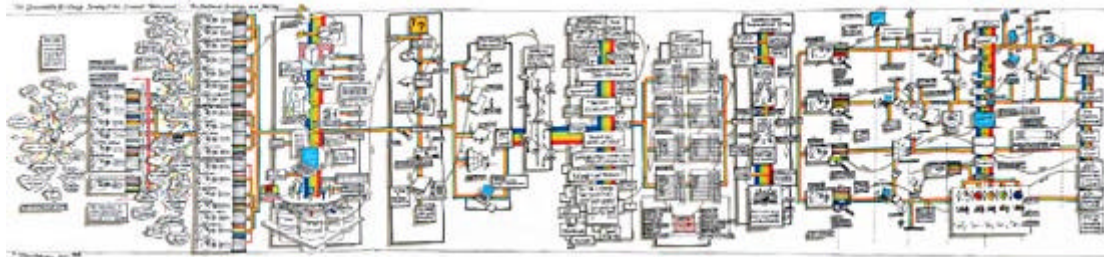
PFM takes modeling and visualisation a big step further. It can even incorporate a Lego session to explore say, the attitudes of staff or customers. PFM is based on a set of eleven key questions, called the Contextual Framework that, when answered, reveal a complete and comprehensible picture of the state of any business. The questions will come as no surprise but, like the ingredients of a great dish, it is the order in which they are combined that makes the difference:

- (i) What are we trying to achieve, what are our goals and our values?
- (ii) How are we going to achieve them in tactical terms?
- (iii) Do we have the appropriate resources and are they in full and open agreement of the strategy?
- (iv) Have we understood the risks, built a responsible set of criteria for engineering our strategy and have we optimised the strategy?
- (v) ...and with What big idea and value proposition?... about ...
- (vi) What products and...

- (vii) What services through...
- (viii) Which channels, solving...
- (ix) What channel needs to
- (x) Which customers of most value, solving...
- (xi) What expectation at minimum risk and maximum return on investment?

After hundreds of sessions with very varied organisations, these eleven questions have survived intact and now provide the foundation for the PFM facilitation process. By establishing the complex web of partnerships and dependencies that connect the customer with the corporation and actually make a business, the questions provide the agenda for the facilitation process.

Now we are ready to go. The decision makers are ushered into the room, the blinds are drawn metaphorically, blocking out all outside influences, and a facilitator from Group Partnership starts to work through the questions. The people in the room provide all the information about the company. The facilitators can dig and probe but do not import their own opinions or observations. It's hard work for everyone and the facilitator must above all keep a straight face when the President cannot articulate even the most basic fundamentals about the business.



The diagram reveals the company's known and well-understood areas of the whole business.

Meanwhile at the back of the room, John Caswell is busily drawing a business equivalent of the Bayeux tapestry, recording each wish and observation across a visual panorama based the eleven questions. The picture that often emerges is one of misconceptions, confused objectives and poor communication. The drawing is kept under wraps until the end of the first session when the delegates are eventually given sight of their 'big picture', warts and all.

When John revealed one of these spectacular drawings there was an audible gasp. It is also a big picture physically, perhaps a couple of metres across and quite a work of art. But then we asked, "Is that it? What then? And what about the people who weren't in the room? How do they feel about it?"

Of course, this would be little more than a great party trick if you lacked the expertise to reveal the problems and opportunities the drawing embodies. Showing decision makers their business in a single eye-full, demonstrating how far apart the wishes of customers may be from the stated corporate objectives is a good basis on which to start to build a

new big picture, one that could actually work. That is the ultimate objective and that's when John gets even more creative.

The line drawing is now translated into a panoramic animated graphic called an Interactive Contextual Map which shows how the business should be working. This is created with some proprietary software developed by Group Partnership and can be continuously updated and refined as the new strategy unfolds.

Sessions like this confirm the value that Fast Company and CoF can bring to its members because I can't think of any other circumstance in which I could have been exposed to this really outstanding process. I shall now be investing in a smart new set of felt pens and a roll of lining paper, so watch this space.

To find out more information and see working examples of their drawings, visit the Group Partners web site at <http://www.grouppartners.net>

Jonathan Priest
Creative Communication
www.creative-writer.com
solutions@creative-writer.com
020 8767 0811

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