BOOK REVIEW

Collaborative Rationality

A review by Larry Susskind, AICP
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In their extraordinary new book, *Planning With Complexity* (Routledge, 2010), Judith E. Innes and David Booher make the case for a new way of knowing and deciding. They call this new approach collaborative rationality. Instrumental rationality—the traditional way of making the case for what needs to be done and why in the public arena—has given way to collaborative approaches to generating and justifying decisions. Innes and Booher point to negotiation theory as the foundation for this approach and use complexity science to explain why it works. They have nicknamed their theory DIAD because it builds on Diversity, Inter-dependence and Authentic Dialogue. Anyone who works in the public policy arena needs to know what Innes and Booher have to say about collaborative rationality.

Diversity. Complexity science says that complex adaptive systems need to involve large numbers of individual agents connected through multiple networks. These agents interact dynamically, exchanging information. Even if some agents only interact with a few others, the effects of these connections ripple through the system. As a result, the system has a memory that is not located at a specific point, but is distributed throughout the system. There are many direct and indirect feedback loops; the overall system is open. The behavior of the system is determined by these interactions, not the components; and the behavior of the system cannot be understood by looking only at the components. Complex adaptive systems display both the capacity to maintain their viability and the capacity to evolve.

So, Innes and Booher suggest that to make collaborative processes more effective, they should be self-organizing, with diverse agents, involving many interactions and non-linear dynamics. These are the keys to making them creative and adaptive. The inclusion of all agents (i.e., full participation of all relevant stakeholders) is required for coherent and novel patterns of action to emerge. They also argue that "the condition of diversity implies that a collaboratively rational process must include not only agents who have power because they are "deal makers" or "deal breakers," but also those who have needed information or could be affected by outcomes of the process."

Interdependence. The condition of interdependence holds that agents must depend to a significant degree on other agents. That is, as is true in all successful negotiations, each agent (or

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stakeholder) has something that the others want. This condition ensures that participants maintain a level of interest and energy required to engage each other and push for agreement. Negotiation theory tells us that interdependence among interests is the key to moving past zero sum games to mutual gains agreement. Such interdependence means that players cannot achieve their interests on their own, and that given their diversity some participants will value certain results more than others. As a group, therefore, they can pull together a "package" that allows every participant to get more of what they value without reducing the value that accrues to others.

Authentic dialogue requires that agents engage with each other in deliberations that adhere to Habermas' ideal speech conditions. That is, deliberations must be characterized by direct engagement so that the parties can test to be sure that claims are accurate, comprehensible, and sincere. Deliberations cannot be dominated by those with power outside the process, and everyone involved must have equal access to all the relevant information and an equal ability to speak and be listened to. (This is what I have described as Joint Fact Finding in previous blog entries.) In authentic dialogue, all participants can challenge the assumptions or assertions put forward by others. Nothing is off the table, and the reasons people give for what they are arguing matter a lot. Authentic dialogue relies on (1) what participants know from their everyday lives and not just on specialized, scientific expertise, and (2) knowledge constructed jointly through interaction and shared inquiry. Many processes that are dubbed "collaboration" fail to meet these conditions, and, thus, do not involve authentic dialogue.

Complexity science explains why collaborative rationality works. Innes and Booher write: "The complexity and rapid change in contemporary society have created an increasing awareness among policy leaders of the limits to hierarchical control by government agencies and to formal expertise in solving problems. This awareness leads to growing uncertainty about policy and a new focus on the need to manage uncertainty, rather than create programs and regulatory regimes that deny its existence. As society has become more culturally diverse, decision makers have to deal with an array of publics with different values, perspectives, cognitive styles and worldviews. Complexity is also reflected in growing inter-dependence among government players, as agencies find they cannot be successful, even on their own limited agendas if they continue to work unilaterally."

The articles on parking (April 2010) were very well-done. I especially appreciate the effort and care that Theresa Alster took to understand and share the perspectives of someone who put the pieces together to make a very, very risky revitalization effort over an extended period of time come to fruition. Providing a realistic view about the role parking played in its various aspects in the revitalization of Old Pasadena is a service to those engaged in similar efforts. No silver bullets, I'm afraid.

Marsha V. Rood, FAICP

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Answer to "Where in the world?" (*Page 8*)

Brasov, Romania: Black Church, Council Square, and Old Town Hall (1420)
Photo by Jason M. Burke, AICP, Oakland

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Collaborative rationality sees the world as inherently uncertain and assumes that all decisions are necessarily contingent. "In this view, planning and policy are not about finding the best solution—indeed there is no one best solution, though there may be many better ways of proceeding than the status quo. Collaboratively rational processes are about engaging with other members of a community to jointly learn and work out how to get better together in the face of conflict, complex changing conditions, and multiple conflicting sources of information. Such processes are not only about finding new ways to move forward, but they are ultimately about guiding community and governance capacity to be resilient in the face of the inevitable new challenges."

A **resilient system** is one that can withstand shocks and surprises, absorb extreme stresses, and maintain its core functions. Resilience (according to Berkes and colleagues, 2003) refers to the amount of change a system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure; the degree to which a system is capable of self-organization; and the ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation in the system. Thus, sustainability is a dynamic process and not an end product.

Now, every time someone suggests a collaborative (bipartisan?) approach to public policy-making, you can assess their authenticity by applying the elements of the DIAD model. Are they really committed to collaborative rationality, or are they just traditionalists hiding behind the mask of collaboration?

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Planning with Complexity: An introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy. Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher (Routledge 2010). Paperback $29.95. 256 pages.
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