

A review of
Solving Tough Problems
by Adam Kahane
published by
Berrett-Koehler (San Francisco, 2004)
ISBN 1-57675-293-3

Rating: 10

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Discarding anything lower than 6 produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

I need to offer two premises to ground this review. Premise One: We initiate projects to alter the *status quo*. That is, no one ever announces: “We’ve just launched a new project to keep the same accounting system until 2008!” Premise Two: Change typically results in resistance from some affected persons. Note that I did not glibly say “All people resist change.” If you were to give me a significant amount of money with no strings attached, rendering me independently wealthy ... well, that would be a change and I would not resist!

If we put these premises together we get this – projects are likely to engender resistance. Looking at the source and scope of that resistance is beyond the limits of this short review. (Indeed the whole field of *change management* is rife with books and speakers and theories and techniques and such.) I want to use an example here a *project* the size of which few will have the opportunity to encounter: How about re-inventing an entire country?

Adam Kahane worked at Royal Dutch Shell Oil in the strategic planning group in the early 1990s. He found himself effectively loaned to the Republic of South Africa as it endeavored to extract itself from decades of apartheid. What’s the right strategy for moving *to* a progressive democratic government *from* the oppression of the black majority by the white minority? Quick now: any volunteers to lead *that* project? Think it involves a change to the *status quo*? Think there might be some resistance?

Kahane’s involvement ultimately led to the creation of the Mont Fleur Scenarios¹ – essentially outlining three possible futures for South Africa with each implying a different strategy. This book focuses on what he learned from that process and how he has since leveraged that learning. He also distills that learning – and it seems to me that it applies to the projects that all of us lead.

First, here’s how Kahane describes tough problems:

“Problems are tough because they are complex in three ways. They are dynamically complex, which means that cause and effect are far apart in space and time, and so are hard to grasp from firsthand experience. They are generatively complex, which means that they are unfolding in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. And they are socially

¹ For more on the Mont Fleur Scenarios, visit <http://www.gbn.com/ArticleDisplayServlet.srv?aid=455> .

complex, which means that the people involved see things very differently, and so the problems become polarized and stuck.”

The dynamic, generative, and social complexity furthermore compound one another.

Second, he describes a shift from his work at Shell to his work in South Africa.

“... the same methodology ... for a fundamentally different purpose. At Shell we built scenarios to improve our managers’ ability to adapt to whatever happened in the future. At Mont Fleur, by contrast, the team built scenarios not only to understand what was happening and might happen in the future, but also to influence and improve the outcome. ... The team did not believe they had to wait passively for events to occur. They believed they could actively shape their future.”

And this is a key lesson: effective leaders create the future, they do not simply settle for greater reactive agility.

What about the essence of the techniques they used, discovered through after-the-fact reflection and conversation? Well, it came down to communications. The team first moved painfully through four phases of talking:

1. *Being stuck*
2. *Dictating*
3. *Talking politely*
4. *Speaking up*

About talking politely, for instance, Kahane says

“Politeness is a way of not talking. ... Talking only about concepts is one way of being polite.”

That is, it’s all abstract and intellectual – from the neck up. The consequence? Kahane writes in a lovely phrase that they ended up with a *dialog of the deaf* – all talking and no listening.

Then the team progressed through several phases of listening:

1. *Openness*
2. *Reflection*
3. *Empathy*

Here’s what Kahane says about reflection:

“When they listened, they were not just reloading their old tapes. They were receptive to new ideas. More than that, they were willing to be influenced and changed. They held their ideas lightly; they noticed and questioned their own thinking; they separated themselves from their ideas (‘I am not my ideas, and so you and I can reject them without rejecting me’).”

What does this mean for us? We accomplish much of the work of contemporary organizations through projects. And whether that means an update to a website or re-inventing a nation, as leaders we must pay attention to the quality of both our talking *and* our listening.²

² To hear an abridged version of Kahane’s book, visit <http://www.gbn.com/ArticleDisplayServlet.srv?aid=33490> for a forty-minute video.