Building Cooperation by Developing A Domain of Groups & Organizations

John O'Brien

Why do we need another word to describe the social arrangements that people with disabilities rely on? The concept of a domain arises from the recognition that groups and organizations as separate as a church congregation, a group residence, and a homemaker service are commonly concerned about the set of social problems which have to be addressed to improve the social situation of people with severe disabilities. Each group and organization in a domain is engaged with some common issues (though they may not know it), each has an important perspective , each can contribute uniquely to a positive response, and each can create problems for the others. But no one group or organization can solve all the problems because the problems are complex and mixed up in each other. In fact, attempts to make things better for one organization could end up making the whole situation worse.

Common involvement in complex problems defines an interorganizational field. There is a strong inclination to try to manage the field by creating a hierarchy (remember the enthusiasm for human service super-agencies and all powerful case managers who "make it work, or else"). The complexity of the problems and the fact that the field relates groups and organizations with necessarily distinct identities makes bureaucratic control unlikely to work. One reasonable alternative is to invest in the formation of an interorganizational domain.

Eric Trist (1983, 1977) named this necessary social form, and offers some useful ways to think about forming and strengthening a domain. He says a domain grows when groups and organizations engaged with a set of problems develop a shared appreciation of their common interests and make decisions within their own organizations which correlate their distinct directions with each other. He identifies five aspects of domain formation:

- Creating a shared appreciation of the set of problems that creates interdependence.

- Recognizing that the domain exists and acquiring an acceptable identity for it.

- Setting an agreed direction expressed in shared images of a desirable future and a pattern of development into that

future.

- Shaping the boundaries, size, and activities of the domain in terms of the agreed patterns of development.

- Evolving a structure for mutual accommodation among the parts of the domain.

Opening up these new opportunities for learning creates new opportunities for action. It allows renegotiation of boundaries between service providers, service users, and community groups. It also causes anxiety among people who see the advantages of present boundaries and habitual patterns of thinking and action. People who lead development of a domain encourage the exchange of divergent perceptions and values without pressing for premature agreement and support collaborative efforts without demanding major reallocations of resources or subordination to external coordination authorities.

Building a domain means bringing people together to share their ideas about what-is now and what-to-do to create a more desirable future. The aim is not a plan that solves all the problems on paper but a structure for sharing experiences and ideas that will provide a foundation for action.

This process differs from common human service planning practice in two ways. It is based on an alternative to usual ideas about how planning influences what organizations do, and, it follows a different strategy for thinking about problems.

Alternative Forms of Influence

Many human service plans are ambitious. As a reflection of the complex circumstances that create deep problems for people with disabilities and their families, plans often call for major reorganization and substantial increases in funding. They are filled with many recommendations which can only be implemented with substantial influence from the very top and near superhuman coordination of efforts.

Many plans are made because some external authority thinks they should be. But the plans that change things most aren't usually thought of as plans at all. Most of the time, human services are controlled by small changes in annual budgets. What is called planning is disconnected or at best loosely related to budget decisions. And synchronizing changes in one program with changes in other programs strains top down management past the breaking point. No wonder so many human service planners worry about how to sell decision mak-

ers the answers they discover.

People creating a domain build a different kind of influence. They contribute to a pattern of improvement by. . .

> . . .bringing people from many different parts of the field face to face. . .

> . . .to learn together by

>> . . . searching for new understandings of their common interests and seeking complementary visions of a desriable future;

>> . . .sharing their experience of what works; and,

> . . . to negotiate more order in their shared field by

>> . . . seeking agreement on how to manage common limits and constraints, especially where destructive competition is likely;

>> . . .defining strategies for moving toward their visions of desirable futures;

>> . . .identifying constructive steps that each could take within the bounds of her or his personal and organizational resources.

This approach to coordination calls for big changes a little bit at a time. It's not the same as representatives of different groups agreeing on a single common project, to which all will contribute. That might happen, but a single project with many parents is less likely to work than many projects in many places which express common values and patterns for growing. It's also different from near-sighted muddling through: taking small steps with no clear sense of direction. Direction comes from agreement about the environment containing people's efforts, the values people want to express in a desirable future, and the strategies they think will get them there. Direction is exercised by learning together, across organizational boundaries, through a pattern of trying a change, sharing what worked and what needs improvement, and trying another change. (Chevelier & Burns, 1978) This planning process has the same kind of influence as a dandelion.

Building a domain also differs from some other human service plans in its basic strategy (Cartwright, 1981). The most common planning strategy can be diagrammed like this.
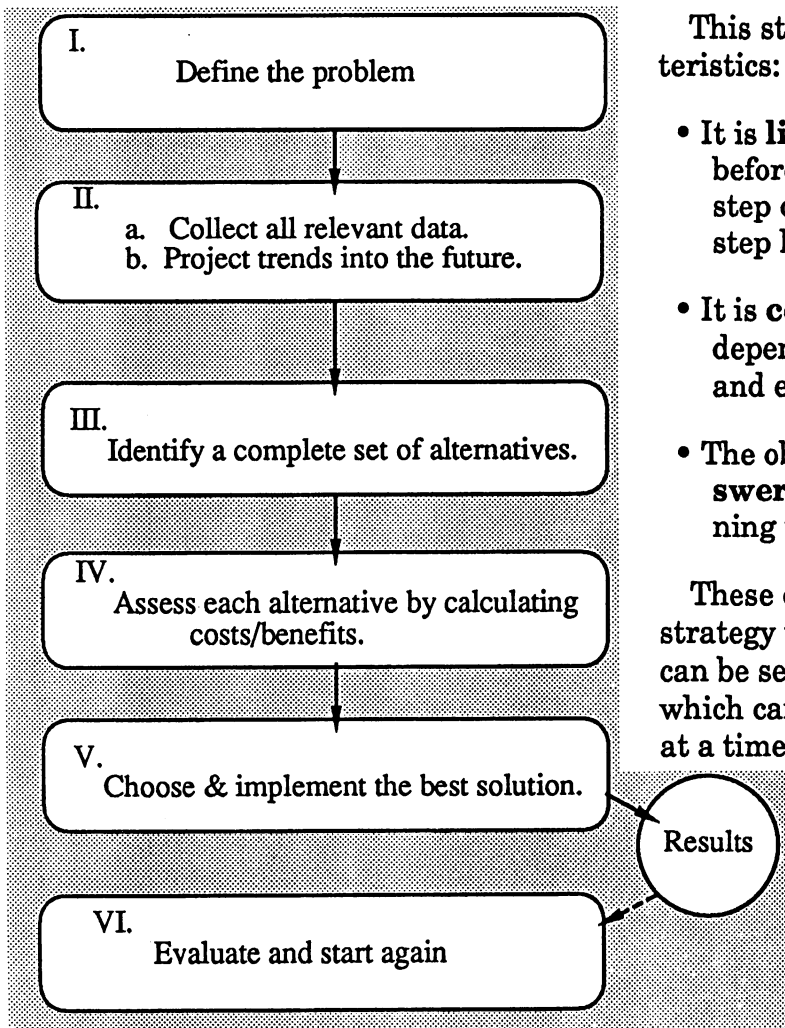
This strategy has three important characteristics:

- It is **linear**. Each step follows the one before. Successful completion of every step depends on how well each previous step has been done.

- It is **comprehensive**. Good solutions depend on collecting all important data and exploring all possible alternatives.

- The objective is to find **one best answer**. When that answer is found planning is over and implementation begins.

```
I.
    Define the problem

II.
    a.  Collect all relevant data.
    b.  Project trends into the future.

III.
    Identify a complete set of alternatives.

IV.
    Assess each alternative by calculating
    costs/benefits.

V.
    Choose & implement the best solution.

    ( Results )

VI.
    Evaluate and start again
```

These characteristics suggest when this strategy will work best. When a situation can be separated into distinct problems which can be clearly defined and solved one at a time, a linear strategy will solve more problems than it creates. When information needs can be met satisfactorily with available data and research methods, a situation will allow a comprehensive solution. When the problem can be solved with a specific set of actions that can be identified in advance, and when decision makers with sufficient power to implement solutions can accurately calculate costs/benefits of alternatives, the objective of a single answer can be met. In short, this strategy assumes a high degree of certainty and control.

Improving social conditions for people with severe disabilities presents a complex set of tightly connected problems. The most important information about what-to-do and how-to -do- it is widely distributed in the experience of many people who live with handicaps, direct service workers, and managers. Both family life and the operations of supporting agencies are changing rapidly with the effects of environmental turbulence. Not only is there high uncertainty, there are no decision makers with enough power to implement a comprehensive solution even if one could be found.

Circumstances won't presently support improvement by straight line planning alone. Building a domain supports action learning among participants. The process has these characteristics:

- It supports invention of new forms of assistance by encouraging many trials in different places. A final, exclusive definition of the problem isn't necessary to begin. Progress and problems will lead to redefinition. Sometimes there will be enough information to confidently generate a set of alternatives; sometimes implementation of part of a solution will generate new information. Many costs and benefits won't be discovered until after a possible solution is tried. This way of planning doesn't describe a straight line of progress. It cycles back on itself. It is not linear but iterative.

- It aims at many small steps guided by shared values and a common vision of desirable futures. Instead of looking for a total answer, this way of planning is a search for patterns of improvements. It is not comprehensive but incremental.

- It is an ongoing process of trying, reflecting, and trying again which involves people from many places. The benefits come as much from how the planning is done as from what is decided. This process is not a once a year activity for planners but an ongoing chance for many people to be active learners. It is not terminal, but continuous.

This planning process combines four basic tactics to create a problem solving network and strengthen a domain. It can be pictured like this:
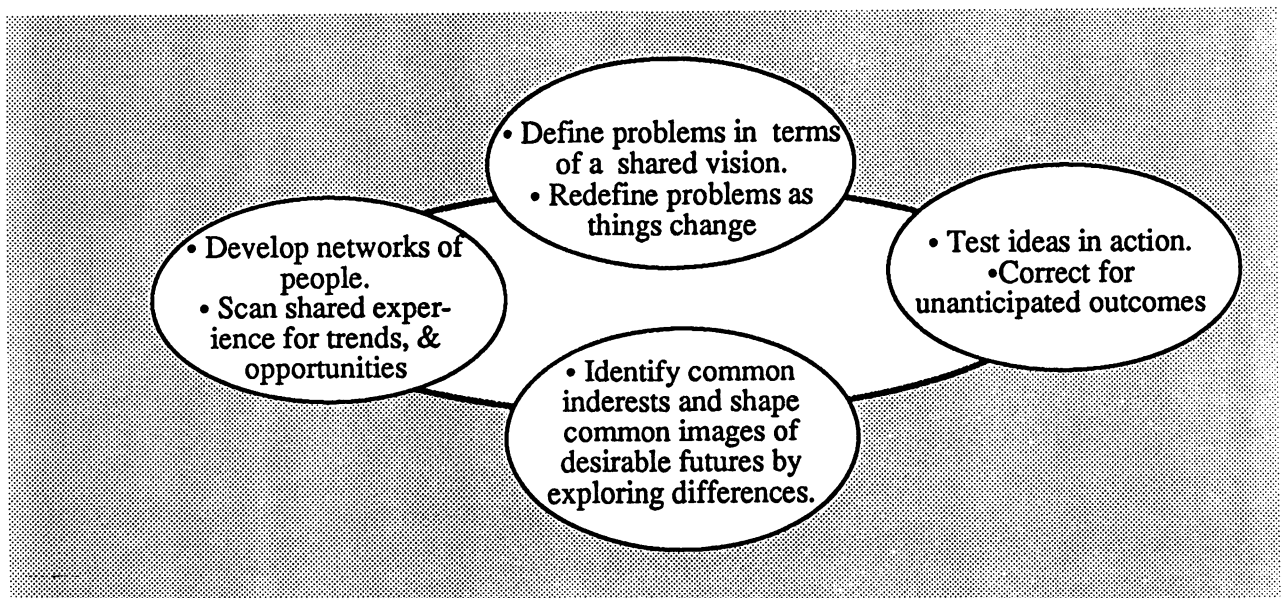
This way of planning recognizes high uncertainty and imperfect control. It offers people a chance to actively identify and work toward a future they desire. It calls for collaboration and learning together, through action.

References

T. Cartwright. (1981) The Science & Art of Long Range Planning. *Contact*. 13:1, 23-36.

M. Chevelier & T. Burns. (1978) *A Public Management Strategy for Development & Environment*. Ottawa:Canadian International Development Agency.

E. Trist. (1983) Referent Organizations and the Development of Interorganizational Domains. *Human Relations*. 36:3, 269-284.

E. Trist. (1977) A Concept of Organizational Ecology. *Australian Journal of Management*. 2:162-175.