

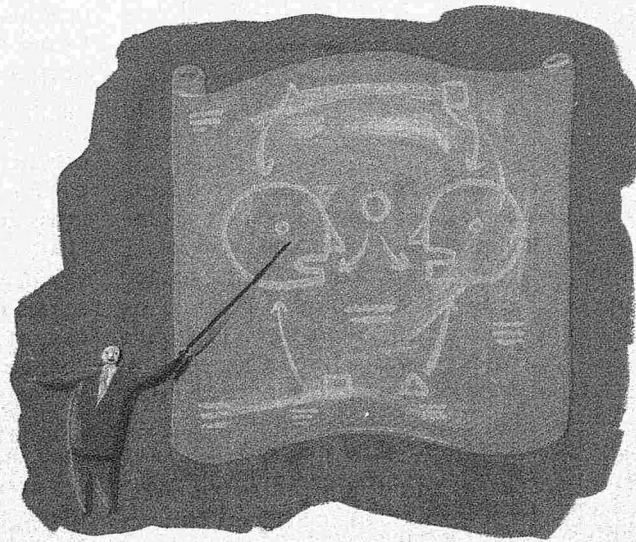
HELPING

DAVID SIBBET TAKES THE HUMBLE FLIP-
CHART AND FAMILIAR GROUP PROCESS TO
NEW HEIGHTS. HIS UNIQUE METHODS HELP
GROUPS "SEE" HOW THEY LEARN.



BY PATRICIA A. GALAGAN

GROUPS



LEARN

Picture David Sibbet preparing to facilitate a meeting. You'll have to stretch your thinking—beyond standard flipchart pads and three markers in primary colors; in fact, beyond any simple idea you ever had about how to make a meeting work.

David Sibbet works BIG when it comes to group facilitation. With a full rainbow of markers spread out in his left hand, 10 yards of white poster paper taped on a wall, and an ear trained by three decades of "public listening," he captures images from the seemingly chaotic dialogue of groups, and he maps them into huge narrative displays. Using simple icons and people's actual words, he creates large time lines, landscapes, and other visual frameworks.

Sibbet operates in the area where group facilitation meets the learning organization. Along with depicting the knowledge a group is creating, he simultaneously mirrors how the group learns. His approach is called graphic facilitation; it is gaining attention as a tool for helping organizations face issues of great complexity.

"My role," he explains "is to help groups learn by making their whole process explicit and visual. The drawings mirror the cognitive part. My questions, movement, and interactions with people mirror the feelings, behavior, and spirit of the group. The fact that it's all interactive makes it collaborative at its core."

Head start

Sibbet grew up in Bishop, California, a town of 5,000 on the east side of the Sierra Nevada. "We had no television, and our imagination was our entertainment," he recalls. "It expanded to fill that vast space."

At Occidental College in Los Angeles he studied physics and literature but says he was more significantly influenced by the serendipitous meeting of Terry Gilliam, later to become the animation genius behind the Monty Python group.

"Gilliam started me creating large graphic posters for campus events. It was a sideline for me throughout college."

Sibbet was also editor of the campus newspaper, and he says that journalism—supported by further

study at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and a stint reporting on urban affairs for the *Chicago Tribune*—taught him "to listen for stories and headlines."

Later, in San Francisco, he directed leadership-development programs at the Coro Foundation, a pioneer in experience-based training in public affairs. "At Coro, we didn't teach," Sibbet reports, "we structured experiences."

Sibbet was forbidden to lecture by Coro's philosophy that people learn by full engagement of the senses, not just cognition. So he began exploring other ways to draw out groups.

Graphic facilitation appeared almost by accident.

Coro's office in San Francisco was next door to Interaction Associates, a



"AT CORO,
WE DIDN'T TEACH;
WE STRUCTURED
EXPERIENCES"

consulting group that pioneered facilitation as a professional adjunct to arbitration, mediation, and negotiation.

One day a Stanford artist named Fred Lakin brought Interaction Associates an 18-foot scroll that could dispense walls full of newsprint. Lakin said it was "to support the new professionals of the information age." Sibbet borrowed the scroll for Coro seminars. He reconnected with poster painting, and life hasn't been the same for him since.

"All my latent skills fused in the chaos of trying to get Coro fellows to understand the dynamics of governance in the early 1970s. I found that when they could see what they were doing, their learning and group analytical abilities took quantum leaps."

Five years later, after extensive

exploration of interactive graphics, Sibbet decided to start his own organizational consulting practice in response to the many requests that were coming in for meeting facilitation. In 1988, he started Graphic Guides Inc. to share the many tools he had developed. His group now handles organizational-change and learning projects around the world and has trained thousands of people in graphic facilitation and process-management methods.

Shifting the frame

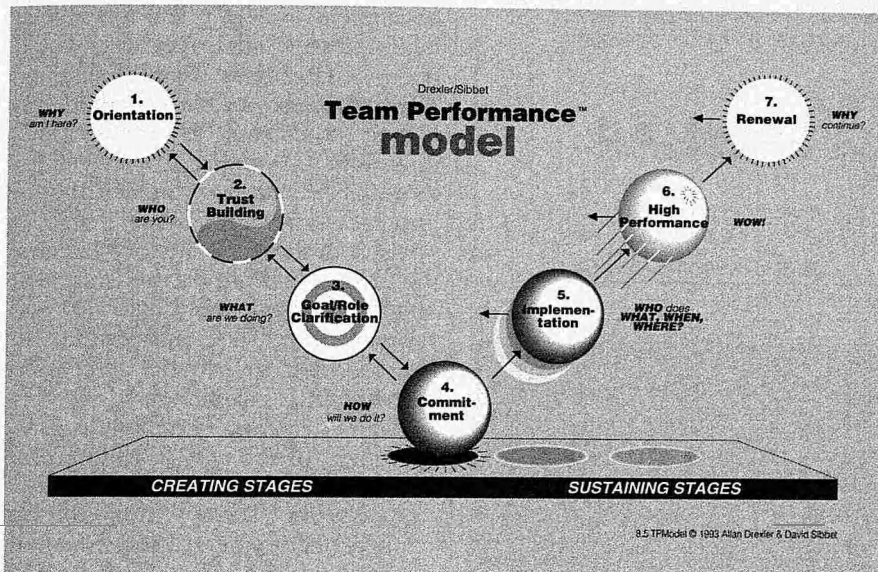
Lately Sibbet has been involved with groupware, a computer-industry term for methods and technologies that support collaborative work. His company and the Institute for the Future host an action research project, now in its fifth year, that involves 15 *Fortune* 500 companies. The firms are asking Sibbet and his colleagues to explore the roles of culture, archetypes, and metaphors in the way people learn and cooperate. "These human operating-system considerations turn out to be fundamental to technology acceptance and effectiveness," he says.

Sibbet believes that his work—collaboratively building and shifting frames of reference for groups and organizations—occupies a professional niche that is unique to contemporary organizational culture.

Abstracting from current realities to make frames of reference for organizations was not a practice in earlier cultures, and it still isn't in most developing countries, he says. "But now, in the industrialized world, the art of making people conscious of their built-in theories is an essential part of organizational change and development, especially in companies that cross cultures and professions as an essential aspect of their businesses.

"Frames of mind shape how we make sense of the world and how we take action. Taking collective action requires shared understanding. A big part of my work is to help people see and understand these built-in theories so they can cooperate more effectively."

Sibbet works with companies that are engaged in some form of conscious organizational learning. "They



usually define it as strategic planning or visioning or organizational excellence," he says. "But at root they are building the capacity in their people to create opportunities and respond quickly to the changing business environment. Many are beginning to believe that people's ability to learn may be the new capital of the information age."

Sibbet distinguishes four levels of learning in organizations:

- ▶ learning to do work
- ▶ learning to do the work more effectively
- ▶ learning to learn in the workplace
- ▶ learning to reflect on the learning process itself.

How teams learn

For 10 years Sibbet and colleague Allan Drexler have been examining all the frameworks that are available for thinking about how teams collaborate. They have designed a model that not only illustrates how teams create themselves, but also shows how to sustain high performance and continuous learning. (See the figure, "Drexler/Sibbet Team-Performance Model.")

The team-performance model shows a cyclical process that moves between two clear boundaries. One is the organization that everyone can see and touch—the bottom-line reality of having to develop and deliver products, for example. The other is the top-line boundary created by people's visions and collective imagination about what is possible. The

creative tension between these boundaries propels forward action, moving teams and organizations up and down in continuous cycles of commitment and renewal.

Sibbet says that the movement of process is a series of learnings and leaps from stage to stage, with groups circling their attention around such issues as trust and goal/role clarity until they have enough understanding to progress. Each new round of learning stands on lessons learned earlier. "Teams cycle a lot in the early trial-and-error stages," Sibbet says.

Tensions between the orderly and dynamic aspects of a team's work repeat at each stage, challenging members' understanding of how seeming opposites work together.

"Groups struggle over whether to plan and analyze or to seize the day, whether to work by consensus or to support executive directives. When the contentions are resolved, then movement can jump to the next level of considerations," explains Sibbet. "It's like a porpoise that dives into the depths for momentum for its leaps, and then leaps out of the water to get perspective for its next dive. The diving and the leaping are only seen as opposites to the person who does not yet see performance as an interrelated process over time.

"It is the same with teams. The downs support the ups, and the constraints enable the freedoms. By shifting to a bouncing-ball graphic and a performance rather than a

building metaphor, we are helping people understand the interrelation between the hard and soft aspects of organizational culture."

Sibbet believes that organizational and process models are essential to cooperation and innovation in contemporary business, "much as the few simple agreements of jazz musicians about chords, count, and rhythm are essential to musical improvisation."

But a common problem in using such models is the tendency of people to see them as static rather than dynamic, Sibbet warns. "They are maps to the territory and not the territory itself. In fact, the more powerful they are to make things clear, the more they can blind people in areas not represented in the model."

Being in question

Sibbet warns against too much clarity too soon. "Being in question is a very important place to hang out if you want to make fundamental change," he says. But getting a group to agree too quickly on a vision can keep people from seeing the importance of dialogue and questioning in human learning.

Sibbet maintains that people shift frames of reference only through a process of first becoming personally conscious of their own reactivity and built-in assumptions, and then feeling the need for different frames of reference because their old ones no longer work adequately.

"This isn't an information problem," he says. "It's a point-of-view and knowledge-creation problem. As Alan Kay, an Apple fellow and a visionary, loves to claim, point of view is worth 80 IQ points. Seeing from another point of view is that big a shift.

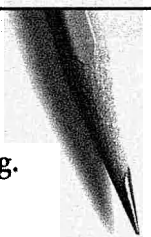
"In the training and development business, I think the challenge and the artistry is being able to listen through people's communication to the deep structure that is really running their perceptions. This is a collaborative task and it takes time."

An example from Saturn

Companies go after that deep structure in a variety of ways, Sibbet notes. In one case, GM's Saturn Corporation asked him to create its history graphically on a 4-by-36-foot mural.

"The presenting reason (for the

Take the FOG*
out of your
company's
business and
technical writing.



For almost 50 years, our one-day onsite seminar has served executives, managers, and editors. We have helped more than 100 Fortune 500 companies take the FOG, or needless complexity, from their writing. And it happens *literally* overnight: you'll see the improved result the following day.

Robert
Gunning

CLEAR WRITING SEMINAR

ROBERT GUNNING CLEAR WRITING INSTITUTE

Dr. Richard A. Kallan, Director • 560 Ricardo Avenue • Santa Barbara, CA 93109-1624 • Phone/Fax: (805) 962-5515

*FOG INDEX is a service mark exclusively licensed to RK Communication Consultants by D. and M. Mueller.

Circle No. 141 on Reader Service Card

The You You See...



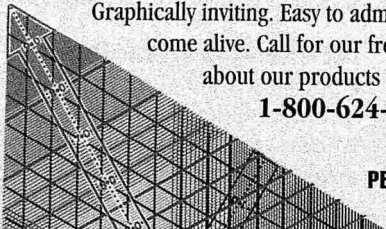
The You They See.

If you're so true blue, how come some people don't take you seriously? The Strength Deployment Inventory® (SDI) and its companion instruments have helped over a million individuals and organizations improve teambuilding skills, conflict resolution, communication and morale. Interactive. Cross cultural.

Graphically inviting. Easy to administer. Insightful. Make your training come alive. Call for our free quarterly journal or more information about our products and upcoming training seminars:

1-800-624-SDIS (7347).

Altruistic
Nurturing



PERSONAL STRENGTHS PUBLISHING



Circle No. 135 on Reader Service Card

assignment) was to orient the several thousand new employees who would open the Greenville, Tennessee, plant. The embedded reason was that conflicting stories over how Saturn came to be were preventing its management and union from aligning on how to create a vision for the future."

Each draft of the history became the focus of intense debate over what would be included and excluded and what imagery was appropriate. "In this process," says Sibbet, "the community came to alignment."

Saturn's history, like many organizations', turned out to be a roller coaster of ups and downs, from the "skunkwork" days when GM remained unconvinced by claims that the small car group could cut costs by process redesign, to the heady days in the late 1980s when GM heralded Saturn as the vanguard of a new era in car making. Seeing the history whole, explains Sibbet, allowed everyone to see the interdependencies.

It only looks like mortal combat

"To companies trying to change, it often feels like vision and current realities are in mortal combat," says Sibbet. "Our current, word-based mental models don't accommodate 'bothness' very well."

The team-performance model reframes that combat by showing how visions and current realities both, over time, frame and shape the evolving organization. "Process is up and down," Sibbet says. "The two concepts don't make any sense without each other."

This is an important shift from older models of team development, which suggest that teams can actually be built and that this is a process of upward movement only.

"Teams can't do much until they get out of their preliminary visions and constrain themselves with some concrete commitments," says Sibbet. And these commitments can't be just abstractions. They involve time, money, people, and organizational support. "But with these in place, the vision needs to reappear and provide the creative tension fueling a bounce back toward implementation and high performance.

"This up-and-down process ex-

plains why resistant people often commit the hardest," Sibbet explains. "They're often the ones who recognize you have to get your head out of the clouds before you can get any bounce. Their resistance helps them engage at a deep level. I've actually come to see resistance as latent vision."

Circulation of energy between different poles of consideration may be what keeps organizations vital, Sibbet speculates. "In training and development, if only standard procedures are taught, an organization can seize up with bureaucracy. This is happening in some quality organizations today.

"However, if all training is avant guard and boundary-breaking, chaos can reign. Apple Computer provides some lessons here. Healthy organizations sustain some of each, in contention and constant challenge to each other."

Keeping it up

Sibbet says he sustains learning in his facilitation by working with blank paper and listening—a source of continuous accident and inquiry. He also uses standard, teachable icons and frameworks to provide, as he puts it, "a stable context within which to 'see' the order in chaos."

In teamwork, learning is the by-product of seeing team process as a continually bouncing ball of activity and consciousness. "You need commitment as a springboard for action and performance, and renewal and reorientation as perspective for new commitments."

In all cases, Sibbet believes, the deepest lessons are in the process of learning itself, when people genuinely engage and bring true questions to their certainties. "Facilitation and tools are the means, not the ends," he says. "The ends are the lit fires of hope and the sparkle of revived imagination." ■

Patricia Galagan is editor of *Training & Development*.

To purchase reprints of this article, please send your order to ASTD Customer Support, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Single reprints, at \$6 each, must be prepaid. Bulk orders (50 or more) may be billed. Phone 703/683-8129 for price information.

The contents appearing in this publication are indexed by

ASIAN BUSINESS\$ CONTENTS

For further information, please contact:

Paul Soosay

ASIAN BUSINESS CONTENTS

P.O. BOX 12760, KUALA LUMPUR 50788, MALAYSIA

TEL (+60-3) 282-7372 (9 lines), FAX (+60-3) 282-7417, TLX 30226 (Answerback MAHIR)

The You You See...



The You They See.

When you're trying to light their fire, do they think you're using a blow torch? Over a million copies of the Strength Deployment Inventory® (SDI) and its companion instruments have increased productivity by turning weaknesses into strengths, and by improving communication and understanding. Easy to grasp. Self-administered. Motivating. Productive. Make your training come alive. Call for our free quarterly journal or more information about our products and upcoming training seminars: **1-800-624-SDIS (7347)**.



PERSONAL STRENGTHS PUBLISHING



Circle No. 135 on Reader Service Card