BUILDING COOPERATION THROUGH CONVERSATION[1]

Introduction

Robert Wright (2000) argued that the history of mankind could be characterized by what he called the "vector of life", the tendency of human beings to evolve larger and more complex systems of social cooperation. The directionality of this arrow of history, he said, points clearly towards increasing interdependence and the adoption of *nonzero sum* relationships. Despite the long and obvious human history of *zero sum* relationships typified by win-lose interactions, social Darwinism, conflict and war -- this very competitiveness, Wright argued, continues to move humanity towards greater cooperation, to the point where today it struggles with cooperation at a species level and on a global scale.

That said, cooperation remains an epic struggle to take advantage of the forces that are driving us together, while mitigating the forces that togetherness inspires that also drive us apart.

Within this context, Gilles Paquet has made important contributions to enabling us to accelerate this trend of human and organizational cooperation within a modern context. He is an astute observer of the dynamics of governance which he describes as effective coordination when information, resources and power are widely distributed, as well as being a relentless commentator on public policy and administration.

His 1999 book, *Governance Through Social Learning,* was a compilation of many of his ideas regarding relational governance and it presented governance as a lens through which one could observe the dynamics of organizational cooperation. Despite his 'official' retirement some years ago, Paquet continues to contribute to a growing collective narrative about the need to find better ways to live and work together, and especially about how.

After publishing a second book on governance, *The New Geo-Governance,* in 2005, H. George Frederickson (2006) commented in *Public Administration Times* that Paquet creates "a word-picture of the highest quality, and his portrayal of our likely governance future is a conceptual *tour de force*". Frederikson went on to say that Paquet had advanced the work of leading thinkers and observers, such as Robert Axelrod, Harlan Cleveland, and Peter Drucker, on collaborative governance, especially in the area of public administration, through his emphasis on the technologies and mechanisms of geo-governance "by which he means "the many ways in which (1) individuals and institutions (public, private, and civic) manage their collective affairs in space, (2) diverse interests accommodate and resolve their differences, and (3) these many actors and

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organizations are involved in a continuing process of formal and informal competition, cooperation, and learning in space.""

There is no doubt that Paquet's work continues to underscore Wright's theme. At the same time, his special contribution has been in the area of mechanisms of cooperation, reflecting a degree of pragmatism uncharacteristic of many his peers, but unusual for a non- practitioner.

Governance today

Today's fast-paced, globalized world demands that people in advanced democracies like Canada find better ways cooperate in life and in work.

For the past few decades, Paquet's message, much like that of Block (1993) and Cleveland (2002), has consistently challenged the popular myth that 'someone is in charge' while encouraging organizational leaders to embrace cooperation and shared governance like a surfer riding a wave -- adapting through small movements and social techniques that over time cumulatively begin to shift management paradigms and practices.

The importance of this approach became clear to me the first time I first met Gilles Paquet in 1995, at a tax policy convention for the Conservative Party in late 1995 after its ignominious defeat in 1993. Paquet had been invited as a sort of *l'eminence grise* to advise Party officials on possible changes to its taxation platform.

The social contract between citizens and government has been steadily weakening since the early 1970s as evidenced by the steady decline in the public's trust in government. That trust hovers now as it did in 1995 around 30% (Wilson, 1998, Graves, 2008). Paquet urged the Conservatives to stem this tide by finding ways to engage with citizens in a collective conversation about the means and ends of government intervention. Such a conversation was likely to encourage not only greater tax compliance, he said, but also contribute to better policy effectiveness and social coherence.

He appreciated that citizens needed to understand the real trade-offs involved in making policy choices, to be able to take stock of the consequences themselves. "If the cost is zero," he used to say, "the demand will always be infinite. Unfortunately, the supply is always finite" Yet he believed that discussions about trade-offs had to go beyond the ballot box and the phoney consultations where governments pretend to listen and citizens pretend to have made a difference. Paquet asserted that to restore government legitimacy, citizens needed to become more actively engaged as partners in their own governance. He pointed to the successful efforts of the Quebec Finance Minister to help people save on taxes as a means of increasing legitimacy and bringing them into a conversation. Such was my introduction to the Paquet school of social learning, moral contracting and cooperative mechanisms that have been the centrepiece of his writing and teaching in the decade since.

Why is there a greater need today for Canadians to find better ways to live and work together? Because big 'G' Government in countries like ours is increasingly out sync with the need for little 'g' governance as a process for resolving many issues of importance to citizens (Paquet, 2006) Big 'G' Government asserts that a small group of experts can effectively be 'in-charge' of resolving the country's most important and complex concerns. While this approach of elite accommodation behind closed doors has been discredited since the constitutional failures of Charlottetown and Meech Lake it remains the default governing process, especially in public administration. On the other hand, small 'g' governance, which encourage groups of stakeholders to take ownership of problems and to learn their way out of them, are becoming increasingly common.

The complex, 'wicked' problems / issues of relevance here and which have responded favourably to small 'g' approaches include: public policy challenges; problem solving in the face of rapid technological change; and the fostering of unique socio-economic-technical advantages for geographically-based clusters.

This means that, among other things, communities (broadly defined) need to bet on establishing a *cooperative advantage* in order to tackle the increasing number of chronic, socio-economic problems with a greater chance of achieving success.

Whether public policy challenges relate to matters such as poverty, safety, health or climate change, the irresolvability of these issues is a direct result of their being "collective action" problems (Heath, 2001). That is, they will not be solved *for* us as much as they will be solved *by* us working cooperatively. These are not someone else's problems. They are our problems. As such they demand that we take greater ownership of both problem and solution by contributing to our own governance.

With respect to problem solving in eras of fast paced technological change, Best observed (1990) that inter-firm cooperation increased and was crucial during such periods. He said, "firms not only compete, but they can also cooperate to provide common services, to shape the 'rules of the game', and to shape complementary investment strategies" (Best, 1990:17). In other words, the formation of communities offered a means of improving collective efficiency and providing cooperative defence against external threats.

At the same time, cooperation among local actors can provide a basis for competitive advantage that results from the cultivation of socio-economic-technical characteristics that can be ascribed to some communities and not to others.

For example, Porter (1990) has observed that regional industrial clustering generated trusted relationships between producers and suppliers and created a source of efficiency that could enhance national competitiveness. Similarly, Saxenian found (1994) that close relationships between firms, universities and other local institutions could generate regional innovative advantages that were not easily duplicated. Some communities can effectively generate social capital (Putnam, 2000) and so reduce transaction costs among firms and instil increased confidence in public sector administration (Rothstein, 2005). More recently still, Florida (2002) has suggested that the nature and quality of

communities can encourage or discourage the clustering of talent, the principle economic resource in an era of knowledge-based industry.

Barriers

Nevertheless despite the reduction of the physical constraints of distance and language today, the drive to achieve this *cooperative advantage* is not widespread, rapid, or unidirectional.

The reasons for this are undoubtedly many, but fundamentally, as Paquet points out (2005) that there is no satisfactory recipe for the practice of good governance.

Many theorists and practitioners of administration have promoted the use of more rules, structures, and standardized processes, or the reification of values in order to exert better control over more complex and distributed governance arenas. Paquet, on the other hand, has encouraged the use of mechanisms such as dialogue, moral contracting, mutual accommodation, experimentation and shared learning. "When the ground is in motion," says Paquet (1999: 220), "organizations can only govern themselves by becoming capable of learning both their goals and the means to reach them *as they proceed*". Here there are no fixed rules only creative people, their commitment to change and the relationships of trust among them

A key barrier to accepting this social learning approach to more collaborative governance relates to the underlying notion that 'no one is in charge'.

It is possible that as individuals, we refuse to accept this more realistic but scarier notion of authority largely because of its corollary. If no one is in charge then "everyone is in charge" (Cleveland, 2002): implying that we must take ownership and responsibility for our own futures. However, following that path can be fraught with risk, as every entrepreneur knows, and so for the pretence of safety and predictability we abdicate our judgement and freedom to choose to would-be leaders, assuming religiously that they will save us from ourselves.

At the same time, governments which inhabit a world of positional and coercive power, have particular trouble turning away from the use of rules, structures, standardized processes and reified values. The reality of complex and distributed governance arenas is either denied (Hubbard and Paquet, 2008) or subjected to re-interpretation (Bradford, 2007) in order for the old tools of control remain plausible.

In fact the state architecture epitomized by the agency model of Westminster-style democracy may well be wholly inadequate (Hubbard and Paquet, 2007). A new social contract, one that directly engages the citizenry has become compulsory. According to Paquet this new contract emphasizes collective obligations as much as individual rights, constant negotiation and institutional tinkering (what he likes to call 'bricolage') over grand schemes, and strengthened democracy and stewardship over centralized leadership. It adds up, he says, to a new institutional architecture, "the strategic state", one capable of

directly engaging communities and citizens together with their governments (Paquet, 2001) in an ongoing conversation.

Canadian governments (especially but not only at the federal level) are behaving somewhat schizophrenically in this regard - increasingly embracing partnerships in practice, while maintaining that power sharing beyond the public sector could not and should not happen (Gow, 2007).

On the one hand, there is an unmistakeable trend to more broadly distributed, polycentric governance with its loose arrangements and guiding principles presenting what Paquet has often described as "a game without a master". It is not just governments that are governing but companies, voluntary organizations, neighbourhood groups and yes, individual citizens. For instance, in a recent the survey by the Crossing Boundaries (CBNC) initiative (Lenihan, et al., 2006) a near consensus of public sector managers in Canada (over 98.4% of respondents) indicated that they believed partnerships were both necessary and legitimate in the context of public sector policy making and program delivery.

On the other, Canada's state apparatus has remained "fundamentally Hegelian" where state functionaries continue to view themselves as having "moral purposes that transcend those of its individual citizens" (Hubbard & Paquet, 2007: 100). Even when confronted with evidence to the contrary, in pilots like the Vancouver Agreement (Auditor General of Canada, 2004) or Action for Neighbourhood Change (Gorman, 2007) or the Community Futures program in Nova Scotia (Hodgett, 2008) that experience is marginalized and inoculated from influencing government more broadly.

No wonder the CBNC survey also observed that public servants did not have "a common understanding of the term 'partnership' " and that "Canada – particularly at the Federal level – is lagging behind other Commonwealth Countries and the United States in the development and use of innovative partnering arrangements" (Lenihan, et al. 2006: 3). So while Canadian governments are pushed by circumstance to pursue collaborative strategies with private, not-for-profit and other government partners more frequently, their paternalistically-challenged sense of public interest inhibits their understanding of good partnership practice.

In their recent book *Gomery's Blinders* (2007) Hubbard and Paquuet suggest that there continues to be a sense permeating the public sector, and the federal government in particular, that only public officials are competent to define and protect the public interest. The public -- the citizenry, business and non-governmental organizations -- is consistently dismissed as being capable of understanding complex issues, prioritising options, comprehending tradeoffs, negotiating strategies or coalescing around decisions.

This claim to competence would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous. As one former senior federal bureaucrat instructed me, "politics is not about solutions. Focusing on problems is a luxury for government. Positioning trumps solutions every time." Governments only rarely implement solutions to complex problems because of the time it

takes to sort out what's going on and to generate internally coherent responses. Results take commitment and persistence over time. Positions on the other hand can be determined with the outcome of a poll; cost little to implement; and can be as flexible as the wind. Therefore in a public sector context, competency as defined by results is a non sequitur.

Strangely, the necessity that governments feel to engage in partnerships fails to dissuade them from the belief that they are in full control of all the elements to achieve their policy and program intents. More realistically, when governments choose to rely on others to deliver their mandate, "they voluntarily relinquish their status as sole arbiter of the collective interest" (Wilson, 2007). Public interest becomes intertwined with partnership interests as governments temporarily "become members of an issue circumscribed commons". In such relationships, public interest and the interests of public organizations should be congruent with the achievement of the partnership agenda, and where partnership success naturally depends on the ability of the participants to act as effective partners.

Cooperative advantage and collective conversations

Peter Block tells us that:

"Community is fundamentally an interdependent human system given form by the conversation it holds with itself. The history, buildings, economy, infrastructure and culture are [artifacts] of the conversations and the social fabric of any community" (Block, 2008: 30).

Mary Jo Hatch has written about how new ideas become part of cultural norms through a bi-directional conversational process. "What is essential," she said, "is that a critical mass of appreciation for a new [cultural] artifact be built up so that diffusion takes hold within retroactive realization processes" (Hatch, 1993: 668). Hatch also quotes Wilson.

"We do not build up a pattern of society from descriptions of single actions [in an additive way]... but rather develop an account in a hermeneutic fashion, forming ideas about overall patterns on the basis of particular events and then using these same ideas to understand more clearly the particular events that gave rise to them"(Wilson, 1987: 385).

Building on this notion of how new ideas become part of cultural norms, it is possible to set out the dynamics of community culture presents two opportunities: a) to evolve community-based paradigms, assumptions and values by referencing the many individual activities that feed into a community through innovation, affirmation and dialogue (*clockwise*); and b) to understand the relevance and utility of new ideas and practices by referencing the community's broad understanding of an issue through a provision of context, the diffusion of new knowledge to sectors and organizations, and the assimilation of knowledge and 'best practice' by individuals (*anti-clockwise*). When both of these conversations reach a "critical mass", then new ideas, practices and products gain acceptance within a newly formed and accepted community paradigm (The dynamics are set out in Figure 1).

The *cooperative advantage* of community is generated by reduced transaction costs from trusted relationships; innovation and adaptability through social learning; coordinated actions from shared commitments; effective infrastructures and streamlined regulatory regimes from common purpose.

Note the underlying thread of conversation that delivers that *cooperative advantage*. It is through the many conversations among community members that relationships and social capital are built; that social learning occurs; that commitments become shared;

Figure 1: Dynamics of Community Culture

Enrich — Individual Citizen — Assimilate

Align — Adapt

Assumptions — Innovate

Regional Community Culture — Multi-organization Sector Linkages

Dialogue — Affirm

Absorb — Anticipate

Contextualize — Private/Public Knowledge Infrastructures — Diffuse

and that purposes can be understand as common. And while it is true that communities have encouraged and made space for individual freedom, excellence, creativity, and competition, they also demand participation in a collective conversation through which each member, each organization and each institution can acknowledge their interdependence and contribute to a shared agenda, acting as "an investor, owner, and creator of [a] place" (Block, 2008: 3).

If the collective narrative is open and welcoming; if it is directed to future opportunities and not the wrongs of the past; if it gives meaning and expands our sense of self; if it promotes ownership and accountability among community members; if it is all these things then people can grow into an evolving story by contributing their knowledge, resources and commitments. What may have been unthinkable in an older narrative becomes possibility in another.

If, on the other hand, as Block (2008) has suggested, the narrative marginalizes hope; if it waits for someone else to take charge; if it seeks accountability through control and coercion; if it seeks to find fault and market fear; if it seeks entitlement over commitment; if it demands more rules, laws or regulation; and if it minimizes the value of citizen contributions; if it is these things then it will fail in creating community change and only affirm the collective action problem: "we can't do it alone but we can't do it together either".

Such narratives promote cynicism, dependency, free riding, social fragmentation, unaccountable leaders, an absence of citizenship and ultimately despair in the belief that people can make a change. They also give rise to ideational "zombies" - ideas held to be
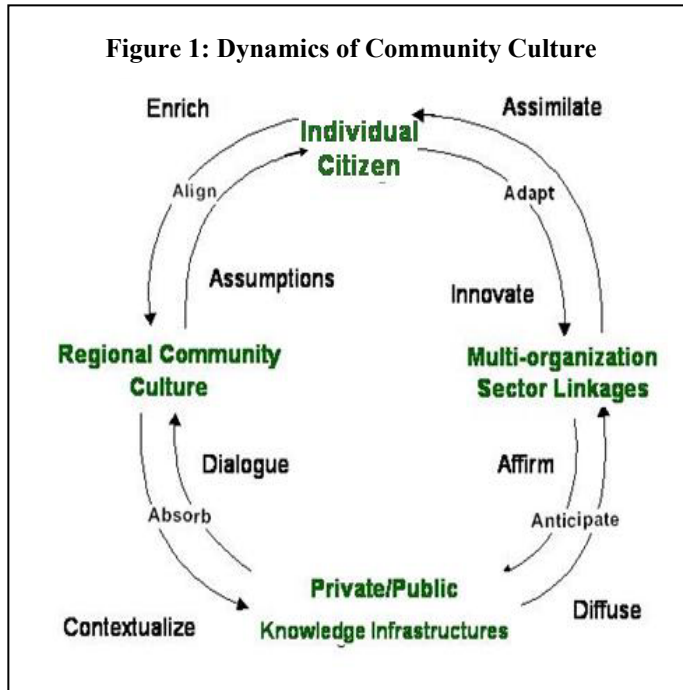
true within the community despite their lack of evidence or even evidence to the contrary (Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO, 2006).

This suggests that the quality of a community's collective narrative is an essential thermometer of community health and resilience but it also acts as a tool for altering the structures, social fabric and form of the community itself. This in turn suggests that community wellbeing may be improved if those conversations can be modified to take better advantage of the forces that drive people together while mitigating those that drive them apart.

Nonetheless, redirecting a community's conversation will likely require changing its initial dynamics fundamentally and a great deal of patience.

It begins with the small things. Who do we include in those conversations? Are we inclusive enough of diverse perspectives yet small enough to allow everyone to fully participate? Where do we hold them? On neutral ground or do we host them in-house? Do we set up to lecture people or do we roundtables to facilitate dialogue? Do we listen or just present our own ideas? Do we utilize champions and brokers? Is the conversation we try and initiate reflective of the broader conversation we would like to have?

> *"The key to creating or transforming community, then, is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. The shift we seek needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend. For at the most operational and practical level, after all the thinking about policy, strategy, mission, and milestones, it gets down to this: **How are we going to be when we gather together***?"* (Block, 2008: 10) ('bold' added for emphasis)

Changing the nature of a conversation also takes patience. Not appreciating this simple truth and trying to rush into collective action is a recipe for failure. Many times I've been in meetings where partners continually ask "what am I doing here?", "where are we going with this?", "what am I supposed to contribute?" – even after several meetings where this has been discussed and where the questions were supposedly answered before the group ever got together!

In part this is because the group has not yet succeeded in getting the attention of participants but in part also because people are used to someone else telling them what to do. Just shifting to the idea that they are responsible for answering these questions takes time. Yet with patience, as anyone who has worked in a collaborative process knows, there comes a time when suddenly everything just seems to 'click'. People begin to take ownership of the collective agenda, their language changes from 'I' to 'we', and suddenly the debate becomes a conversation much like that among friends after dinner. If things are really clicking, people begin to feel a collective sense of positive energy similar to what Mihály Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow' (2003).

With groups, flow is prompted by the interactions among people, usually their conversations together, and might be characterized by things such as:

1. Clear group goals and targets, not 'win-win' goals but a single 'win' commonly understood;
2. The development of a common language / lexicon, that bridges diverse perspectives;
3. The use of prototyping, straw dogs, and visualization;
4. The adoption of shared ownership and identity and a shift away from 'us' and 'them' to the use of 'we';
5. The accommodation of different perspectives even if agreement is not present;
6. Heightened concentration and creativity where group members no longer feel bound by their native paradigms.

With luck, a sense of expansion or of 'everything fitting into place' emerges as members begin to appreciate a wholeness that is more than the sum of their individual contributions, and they may begin to feel a sense of excitement and altered time – something that accompanies an individual experience of flow.

Peter Senge and colleagues have described this group experience. They say, for example that if "we penetrate more deeply to see the larger wholes that generate "what is" and our own connection to this wholeness, the source and effectiveness of our actions can change dramatically" (Senge et al., 2005: 12). Senge et al. believe that the process involves using conversation (in the broadest sense of interacting with one's environment) to shift attention away from the established patterns of meaning and behaviour and open it up to future possibilities. That openness, they term *presencing*. "Presencing," says Senge colleague Otto Scharmer, "is a learning that is not based on reflecting the past, but rather on feeling, tuning in to, and "bringing-into-the present" all future possibilities ... Presencing means: liberating one's perception from the "prison" of the past and then letting it operate from the field of the future (Scharmer, 2002: 1).

Unfortunately for those wedded to management science, *presencing* and *flow* do not conveniently emerge on demand but do so organically and in due time. One sets up some initial conditions and let's go, something like diving, having faith that the people and the conversational process will yield a desirable, even if not the intended result.

Returning to the *principles* and *mechanisms* espoused by Paquet, these are in effect, guides for intervening in the conversational pathways.

Some principles that have proven helpful, as Paquet points out, include "price-cost relations, competition, subsidiarity, maximum participation, (and) multistability" (Paquet 2005: 78).

He emphasizes, however, that a focus on mechanisms and what he refers to as social technologies (forms of coordination arrangements that are rooted in particular physical support but that shape social relationships), while initially appearing to be less effective and more 'messy' than principles, rules or structures, may turn out in the long run to be more practical (Paquet 2005: 299-317). He notes as well that they have the advantage of

lending themselves to the necessary improvisation and experimentation that accompanies tackling complex collective problems effectively

Some of his ideas for improving cooperative governance include:

1. *Lowering entry and exit barriers* to reduce the risks of cooperation, increase participation and reduce the likelihood of active or passive subversion;
2. *Facilitating conversation* by using roundtables over consultations, dialogue over debate;
3. *Choice*, presenting real options to inspire learning and innovation but also recognizing that trade-offs need to be made because there is *'no free lunch'* – there is a price for everything;
4. *Developing a common knowledge base* and lexicon instead of debating the merits of the existing ones;
5. *Reframing exercises* to facilitate collective learning about future possibilities rather than past mistakes. For instance, "the assumptions one is not aware one is making are indeed important learning blockages" (Paquet, 1997);
6. *The presence of and willingness to use failsafes*. These are the undesirable processes or conditions which would automatically come into play in the event that cooperation breaks down; and
7. *Informal feedback* processes, like the use of neutral brokers, personal meetings, dinners, coffees, etc. to build partner relationships and confidence between partners.

Conclusion

The above ideas are not cooperative behaviours *per se* but they do encourage cooperation whilst discouraging 'free-riding' and other uncooperative behaviour. They contribute to an atmosphere of trust, honesty, openness, transparency, mutual accountability, and mutual benefit that has been associated with effective cooperation.

While Paquet has never been much of a practitioner, he has always had a keen ear for their stories. As time passes his repertoire of stories of successful collaboration continues to grow but there is one which he used in his book, *Governance Through Social Learning* (Paquet, 1999) that is particularly revealing of the type of conversation he has sought to inspire. A conversation that is likely to enhance and enable good community governance and collaborative partnership.

It is from a story by John Womack about Gildaro Magana (who took over the Mexican Revolution after the assassination of Zapata). He says of Magana,

"*What he learned was to mediate: not to compromise, to surrender principle and to trade concessions, but to detect reason in all claims in conflict, to recognize the particular legitimacy of each, to sense where the grounds of concord were, and to bring contestants into harmony there. Instinctively **he thrived on arguments, which he entered not to win but to conciliate**"* (Womack, 1969).

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