

Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI)

The Institute was founded in 1958 as an independent, nonprofit center for research, education and advanced study in human affairs. Based in San Diego, California, the Institute's programmes have ranged from group leadership to international relations and strategic management. The International Executive Forum is unique in its use of computer conferencing technology, an approach WBSI pioneered and which is central to its current research interests.

MANAGEMENT OF THE ABSURD. From April until July, 1989, the Institute ran an online course entitled Management of the Absurd. It was moderated and inspired by the co-founder of the Institute, Dr. Richard Farson. The thirty participants represented a broad range of business, industrial, academic and government expertise, and their interactions form a remarkable record of the application of conferencing technology to the field of management studies. Permission has been granted by the Institute, in agreement with the participants, to quote extracts from the conference in this paper.

In addition to the conference transcript, an equally valuable form of data for this analysis of moderating skills, is an interview with Dr. Farson, conducted at-a-distance via set questions to which he responded on audio tape. Used in triangulation with the conference messages, these personal views of the experience over a year later give further insight into the essence of successful uses of the medium.

ORGANISING IN PRACTICE. The aims of the conference workshop are intriguing. Farson refers to the demeaning of management issues in the current rash of management literature, quick-fix advice, and 'One Minute' books, and suggests that managers, as a profession, do not have sufficient respect for themselves and for the difficulty of the tasks before them. He says in his opening remarks:

It is my hope that in this conference, we can partially compensate for this trend to oversimplification by examining the paradoxes in organisational life, by respecting the complications and absurdities, and thereby give ourselves that salutary minute in the history of management that we might call 'Management of the Absurd'. It is the goal of this workshop to engage a group of you in a discussion of the paradoxes of organisational life, using your own experiences, your own management cases, if you will, to illustrate these paradoxes and absurdities. In this workshop, however, we are going to try to approach paradoxes somewhat differently. We are going to resist the immediate temptation to resolve them in ordinary, rational, linear ways, and instead just let them wash over us for awhile, see if we can become more comfortable using a kind of paradoxical logic to understand management and human affairs, and perhaps even come to enjoy thinking paradoxically. (Management of the Absurd [MA])

As the participants begin to offer examples and thoughts about the absurd management situations they have experienced, Farson further refines the aims and clarifies his expectations for the workshop:

Gloria's multilayered paradoxes, paradoxes heaped on each other, further illustrate these predicaments and begin to show what leaders are really up against. . . It's what you ARE that your people learn, not what you do deliberately. What parents do deliberately probably makes almost no difference in whether their children grow up to be happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, good or evil. My guess is that the same dynamic occurs in management, and leadership. That's why the technology of management, like the technology of parenting is such a blind alley, or worse, such a wrong turn, taking us to a place we shouldn't be going. . . It is my hope that we in this workshop will come to enjoy looking at situations this way, and that rather than crippling or paralyzing us, we will be able to embrace the paradoxes and act anyway. [MA]

At various points during the three month discussion, Farson introduced a new perspective by means of a paradoxical statement or aphorism for the group to ponder and exemplify in their comments. For example: "nothing is as invisible as the obvious"; "the better things are, the worse they will feel"; "technology creates the opposite of its intended purpose". In this way, he provided structure and pacing for the workshop, as well as a sense of leadership. However, the following extract demonstrates the superb casing in which he surrounds this apparently simple organisational role:

Aristotle gave us the idea that A can't be NOT A. A thing is either one thing or another, not both, and certainly not its opposite. I think he called that the Law of the Excluded Middle. It has dominated western thought for two thousand years. That's why the following statement is so difficult: Profound truths are true also in their opposite. Why does it always sound wise when confronted with a conflict to say, "Well, yes and no". or "It's both", or some such statement about the coexistence of opposites? Can we think of examples? Living is dying. Dying is living. I love you. I hate you. Less is more. Leadership is membership. No two things are as similar as opposites. What kind of practical value can we get out of that notion? . . [MA]

We see that he does not pose his conundrum and leave students to get on with it. He provides it with context, with his own personal opinion, with 'hooks' to stimulate others to respond. Half way through the conference Farson performs the classic role of 'reviewing objectives', and again he clothes it in such a whole picture that participants get a meta-view of the endeavor:

As we reach what I hope is the midpoint of our experience together, I'd like to review the basic idea of the workshop and remind ourselves of the objectives. We are trying to gain a different perspective on the world of management and human affairs, one that is not constrained by linear, rational thought, one that can embrace paradox as a fundamental condition of human experience. Not that we want to dismiss this traditional logic that has helped us get where we are, but to give ourselves a moment when we are not captured by it, where we can transcend it. To do this we are examining a number of seeming absurdities, not just to deplore or laugh about the apparent stupidities, but to alert ourselves to the deeper meanings involved, and more, to gain the humility and compassion that is required of truly significant human relationships, which I believe can be acquired only by recognizing the overwhelming absurdity of life. The format is for us to generate paradoxical or absurd statements we believe to be true about management and human affairs, describe absurd situations we have experienced that might fit those statements, and offer criticism or attempt to make generalisations about them. My goal is to mobilise the combined wisdom of our group. . .[MA]

Drawing the conference to a close is also the job of a moderator. Here is one of the last messages from Farson:

Now that the workshop is drawing to a close, I would like to ask those of you who have been participating to reread the opening couple of comments in this conference. I would be interested to know if they read differently than they did at first, and if so, how.[MA]

So we see how the moderator has used even the organisational aspects of his role to develop the sense of a learning community.

How did the moderator view these organisational aspects of his role? One of the questions he expanded upon via interview tape was: Did the workshop develop differently from your plans as laid out in the early messages?

Yes, indeed it did. . . I found first of all that people completely misunderstood absurdity and could not distinguish it from stupidity. I also did not get the kind of rich case material I would have liked. I think that is the lesson to be learned from computer conferencing - it has its own direction; it is very difficult to control. It is some- thing like

Alice's effort to play croquet with live flamingoes - they kept being alive! That's what happened in the conference - it was alive and therefore, not controllable. On the other hand, it developed much more enthusiastically and satisfyingly than I ever expected.1[Interview]

Despite providing strong leadership and a definite structure and agenda for the conference, the moderator had to be responsive to the unexpected, changing reactions of the participants. This organisational dynamic has been usefully described as follows:

The moderator is like the lead player in a jazz ensemble. Participants do not know in advance what roles they will play in relation to the others: they begin the ensemble in pursuit of a theme; but how that pursuit will progress, the contributions to be made by each member, and how it is to be resolved to a satisfactory conclusion remain to be discovered. It is the moderator who organizes and leads each participant to create an ensemble. (McCreary, 1990)

CREATING A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING. The guidelines to moderators about being friendly and welcoming, personal and responsive to participants, seem relatively easy to put into practice. In the hands of an expert, however, they become a very powerful educational tool. For example, Farson takes the 'rule' about responding to each student contribution and makes it a vehicle for refining the aim of the workshop by pinpointing the relevant and positive in each participant's message:

Student: If I remember correctly, a paradox is a self-contradictory assertion based on a valid deduction from acceptable premises. . . My favorite paradox is the famous liars paradox. . . Epimenides said: "The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true". Epimenides was a Cretan. . .

Farson: Thanks to Beryl for his helpful definition. . . Variations on the liar's paradox are very good examples of precisely what this workshop should be about, because they illustrate the paralyzing nature of the dilemmas that people face in dealing with organizational affairs. They show how the situations we confront are often predicaments, not problems. . . [MA]

Similarly, he transforms the 'rule' about welcoming new participants, into a building block of the course material:

A big welcoming hug to Kathy, and thanks for the fascinating comments. I'm so glad you are with us. Your story of the answer to the question, "What are you doing coming through my window at night?" is a good example of the double bind situation - - a classic absurd condition in which you are damned if you do and damned if you don't; you can't answer and you can't not answer. . . Yours is a funny and trivial example, but there are many which are not, such as the mother who asks for a kiss from her child and averts her face as he or she approaches. [MA]

He is also quick to acknowledge the insights of others in the group:

We are indebted to John again, for making the case for this conference better than I can make it, and for keeping us on the track. And I found your admonition not to rush to agreement too fast very apt. . . So I am once again chastened, John, and I thank you. [MA]

The most outstanding characteristic of all his messages, however, is his involvement, enthusiasm and commitment to the workshop and the ideas it aims to convey. This is clearly the most powerful element in the group process. In fact it is one of the key elements in the creation of a learning environment, as Farson acknowledges in his interview:

What we have learned is that when a leader enters with enthusiasm and passion and commitment and a real interest in conveying what he knows about this material, that more than accounts for the success of the conference. That kind of moderator can violate all sorts of other 'rules', and still have a successful conference. People can tell, in other words, when the leader is present as a person, and when he isn't. Participants will forgive a long-winded discussion, comments that run for two or three pages from a leader that is passionately interested in the conference, in what he is doing and in trying to convey ideas to the group and being responsive to their ideas. That carries the day. So I would say, much more important than skill is commitment, passion, involvement, absorption in the conference. [Interview]

He elaborated on the function of this aspect of moderating in response to the question, 'Why was the conference obviously so successful even though there were really very few messages which addressed the central issue-experiences of the absurd in which things could not have been otherwise even with more planning or any other kind of human interaction'?

The conference worked in some transcendent way I suppose - I think it really did convey something of what was intended even though it didn't look as if it was getting through. But I'm not sure any of the participants really understood what I was trying to do, and very few messages did address the central issue. I don't know what I can add. I suppose I could say that people tend to feel good about a conference, not when they have simply absorbed something, but when they have contributed something. People learn when they are talking not when they are listening. They learn when they are teaching not when they are being students. So people felt good, not only about my participation, but they felt good about their own. I think they learned more from themselves and from each other than they did from me. I think what they liked about it from my point of view is that I was obviously really involved in it. I was there 100%; they could count on that. And even though they didn't like a lot of what I was saying, and didn't agree, they certainly appreciated what I was giving to the conference and what it meant to me. [Interview]

These are key insights into the nature of conferencing, into the evaluation of 'successful' conferences and particularly in this context, into the examination of expert educational moderating. The implications of these notions are that online tutoring is not a set of techniques or a mysterious art, but clearly in the same arena as face-to-face teaching, subject to the same general conditions defined by the nature of learning itself. A good teacher, with enthusiasm, dedication and intellectual curiosity, is the essence, though by no means the totality, of an exceptional learning environment.

MODERATING AS TEACHING. As is well understood, the primary educational advantage of computer conferencing is that it is interactive. How does this impinge upon the moderator as teacher? Farson highlighted the impact by comparing moderating with writing an article:

Leading a conference confronts one with good ideas from others developing during the process. That means that the critical appraisal of one's ideas is going on during the process of writing. That makes it very different, even though it shares the similarity with print that one's reflections are disciplined by having to commit them to writing. . . . When one is dealing only with one's own words in print, one assumes the message is getting through, when it may not be. In computer conferencing it is made abundantly clear when that is not happening. [Interview]

As we have seen, many of the participants in the Management of the Absurd conference did not always understand the moderator's intentions. It is instructive to look at how Farson handled misunderstandings:

We are indebted to Murray for trying to get us to focus our efforts in this conference. But I think that in one sense there is no way to "deal with the absurd" in the way one might learn to handle problems. The examples that you listed, Murray, seem to me to be ways to manage what I would call stupidity, that is, behavior that you know to be

mistaken, incompetent or blind to the facts, and which you would know better what to do. I would distinguish that kind of behavior from the absurd, which is jarring, outrageous, paradoxical. In the instance of stupidity it is easy to see how to do it right, so the situation calls for correction. But absurdity arises from the essential humanness of the situation that simply throws us a curve, that doesn't work the way we would expect it to if people were only rational machines. In that instance we can't know what action to take because the situation doesn't call for correction. It calls, instead, for patience, tolerance, acceptance, humility, humor. It's one of those, "Don't just do something, stand there!" kinds of situations. [MA]

The intellectual perceptiveness of this comment may not be obvious without the previous, very extended message to which this is a comment, but the wit, tact and focusing on the real issue surely are. Another example of how he enriches the inputs of students and turns them into teaching vehicles is the following:

Several awfully good comments more or less converge on the idea Hallock picks up, that absurdity is in perspective, perception, feelings, and disappears when viewed from a different vantage point. I'm sure that is correct in the main effect, but equally sure that there is more to it. . .

We seem to want more than anything else to eliminate absurdity. . . Some absurdities are not resolvable, cannot be eliminated through understanding. Take the idea that there is nothing as invisible as the obvious. One might conclude that to make things visible one should examine the obvious. But the obvious is always going to elude us -- because it is too obvious! The paradox, the absurdity will continue to be true, no matter what. It doesn't make any difference where one stands, or how one feels, or indeed whether or not one understands this paradox. [MA]

Basically he uses every student comment - plumbs it for any richness, draws out any faltering insights, enhancing and mirroring back to the student the essence of what they were trying to say.

Student: I think John is right when he says we are probably committing present absurdities even as we recognize past ones. That's why learning from your mistakes is so impractical.

Farson: I think that's an important insight, Ed. Of course we don't learn from our mistakes. Whatever makes us think we do? We all seem to have the idea that we learn from our own failures and others successes. "I'll never do that again!" and "Tell me how you became so rich and famous". It's probably just the other way around: We learn from our own successes and other people's failures. [MA]

In the following example he has taken a small offering from a student, consisting of a quotation from the Four Quartets, and brought out its relevance to the workshop theme:

Thanks, Billy, for the T.S. Eliot. "Ridiculous the waste sad time, stretching before and after". Yes, how quickly the laughter is shut out, and how long the stretches in between. But we must remember that it is the stretches of silence that give the laughter its power, not the laughter itself. Stretches of laughter would make silence blessed. The absurdity is that everything derives its power from its opposite. [MA]

The most powerful teaching 'technique' which Farson uses, perhaps unconsciously, is that of modelling. He doesn't tell students how to think about the absurd; he doesn't ask questions about it and leave students to figure out what the answer is; he demonstrates; he models the concepts in practice.

A good example of this is my feelings about parenthood...and management, for that matter. I used to want to know how to handle my children. Actually, I probably wanted to know how to handle everyone, employees, students, friends. Now it is a great relief to me to realize that I cannot do that. Nor can anyone else. I especially cannot handle the people I love most. I have come 180 degrees from my earlier position. The prospect of such an

achievement now appalls me, and instead I think it a blessing that I, and we, will never learn. Of course, I also believe the opposite of what I just said. [MA]

And again in response to another student:

Hang in there with me, Ken. This is where the going gets tough. I know that the idea that an organization should have full and accurate communication doesn't square with the idea that an organization needs mystique, distortion, and deception to be healthy. But I have come to believe that it is that very inconsistency that is the heart of the matter. It cannot be resolved by coming down on one side or the other because in fact both are necessary. Nor can it be resolved by suggesting that sometimes you need mystique and sometimes openness. No. We need both at once. That is where our ability to appreciate the coexistence of opposites comes in. And that is where an appreciation of our fundamental inability to sort it out, our inability to resolve it with some linear logic, is so important. And that is why management is more art than science. Opposites can coexist, and can even enhance each other. Take pleasure and pain, for example. Scratching an itch is both, so is urination, defecation, sexual intercourse, massage etc. Not pleasure, then pain, or pain then pleasure. But both at once. Granted, scratching an itch too long can become very painful, and not pleasurable, but there is a moment when they coexist, when they are one. Like truth and falsity, good and evil. [MA]

Finally, as an excellent example of developing a student's idea, synthesising the course concepts and demonstrating them in action:

Ken, with regard to your last comment, you haven't missed my point at all. . . The issue you raise, that there might be a functional need for 'deception' (which I prefer to call mystique) but all too often deception is used in ways that do not reinforce the culture, but simply exploit situations for the benefit of some individual or sub unit, is one with which I agree totally. I certainly don't want to condone deception in all its forms. But when you ask how we tell the difference, you are then moving into an area that I would call dilemma, not problem, and of course, there are no clear solutions to dilemmas. That's what makes all this so difficult and interesting! There still exists in your writing a feeling that you may be able to get on top of all this. All I am saying is that we never can, and after we have been humbled by that knowledge, we must try anyway. [MA]

One participant in the conference clearly recognised the presence and power of Farson as model in his comment:

Dick, you are really wonderful! You are defining Zen management, and you are exemplifying it at the same time! [MA]

There is an interesting corroboration of this teaching technique applied to computer conferencing in a research article on electronic networks. After analyzing the message flows and distribution of 'Initiation, Reply and Evaluation' patterns in educational electronic networking, Levin et al. turn to the concept of apprenticeship to describe the kind of interaction they see as typical of the medium. The educational paradigm of apprenticeship is one of learning by doing in the presence of good models of the end goal.

Patterns that we've observed in instructional electronic network interactions resemble those described in face-to-face apprenticeships. Thus we may see emerging a new pattern, 'teleapprenticeships,' with some of the properties of face-to-face apprenticeships. (Levin et al, 1990)

They comment that the apprenticeship model is an example of the new ways of thinking about teaching which will be required in order to use the new interactive media effectively. This is

the real art of Farson - that he continually models the behaviour, the thinking and the activity of the subject he is expounding. This is the source of his magnetism as a teacher and as a moderator.

[[Parent](#)]

Captured 9/4/96