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PARTICIPATION AND POLITICS IN ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE: INSIGHTS DERIVED FROM TWO APPLICATIONS OF SOFT SYSTEMS METHODOLOGY

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This verbal presentation discusses the outcomes of research which examined the effectiveness of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to enable systemic organisational change within UK local government and NHS environments. Checkland's Mode 2 variant of SSM was applied on an experimental basis to two environments, both of which were experiencing significant organisational change. SSM is inherently participative and requires candid, open contributions from all participants.

The applications were carried out as Action Research and data was analysed qualitatively using template analysis and open coding. The results demonstrate a causal connection between the ultimate effectiveness of SSM and the tenacity of the existing politics and culture of the problem context, notwithstanding the implicit advantages of a 'culturally independent' SSM facilitator. Further, this work suggests that open and candid participation cannot be assumed, nor robustly evaluated. The combined influences of the interpretive paradigm of discourse within which SSM takes place, and the political power structures and cultural agendas which are commonplace within organisational life, will always militate against uninhibited communication of worldviews, which has implications for the effectiveness of SSM. Freewheeling participation will be blocked wherever strong hierarchies of power exist and this research suggests that the debating process is in reality highly segmented and marked by inequity.

The presentation concludes with some observations regarding how the SSM facilitator may achieve greater exposure to the participants and gather cultural and political messages which will strengthen understanding of the political climate of the situation, and increase the effectiveness of SSM in highly politicised environments.

