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Contrasting GDSS's and GSS's in the context of strategic change-implications for facilitation

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on a comparison made between two series of computer supported strategy workshops. Each of the series of five one-day workshops was designed within the context of a project aimed at planning and implementing major strategic change within the organization and the project reported involved over fifty senior managers during a two year period. The subjects of the research had to deal with the reality of an organisational history, and, even more importantly, the knowledge that their contributions to the meetings would influence their future as a managerial group. The project enabled a number of exceptional opportunities to be tapped including i) a researcher as observer throughout the process, and ii) videotaping of each one day meeting.

The first series of workshops was designed to generate and structure the strategic issues and context that were to be worked upon during the second series of workshops. Thus the first workshops used a group support system designed to provide high levels of participation in raising strategic issues, and the second series, a group decision support system designed to enable decisions to be made and implementation plans to be created. These design objectives closely correspond to the tasks set out by McGrath (1984) where a GSS was defined as a support system to primarily aid creativity/idea generating tasks and a GDSS was to support planning/evaluation tasks.

The workshops were each embedded within the Strategic Options Development and Analysis methodology (SODA) (Eden and Ackermann, 1992) and, involved a number of different support technologies. In these workshops the usual facilitated procedure was used in tandem with a multiple workstation system which allowed participants to interact with the modelling process, and with a number of manual techniques which were designed to interface with the approach. Thus "manual group support" (MAGS) was used alongside, and interacting with, both facilitator driven "single user group support" (SUGS) and "multi-user group support" (MUGS). To achieve this interweaving of modes the software COPE was used directly in both the SUGS and MUGS modes of support and the underlying concepts used during the MAGS mode mirrors the COPE software. The difference between the two series of workshops comprised i) the purposes behind the usage of each mode of working, and ii) the combinations adopted, i.e. the choice of using particular modes in a particular order which both have implications for facilitation.

As a result of the comparison a set of implications which differentiate the role of a facilitator using group support systems (GSS) to the use of group decision support systems (GDSS) has been produced. The implications may be taken firstly as a contribution to the future design and facilitation of each type of meeting, and secondly to the effective design of the each of the systems (GSS and GDSS). The paper begins by considering some of the issues around the research method adopted, provides details of both of the workshop series, lists the characteristics which emerged as a result of the workshops and have implications for facilitation, and then briefly touches on the conclusions.

Research Method

The comparison between two series of events, leading to a set of suggestions (in the form of implications) provides useful information for the facilitation of group support systems (for idea generation) and group decision support systems (for evaluation and planning). While there must be some hesitation about the degree to which the suggestions can be applied generally, the exceptional opportunities of this research project provide important data which are not often available. As with all "real" data it is important to realise that care must be taken in their interpretation. It is important to note the very important distinction between laboratory based research conducted with students and what is reported here. Whereas with student groups it is possible to control many of the characteristics that might interfere with those aspects of the events under study, it is not possible to do so with real "elite" groups (Cannel and Kahn, 1968). The subjects of this research had to deal with the reality of an organisational history, and even more importantly their contributions to the workshops would influence their future as a managerial group (Eden, 1995). Nevertheless, these suggestions are likely to be robust and may be taken as a contribution to the future design of each type of workshop, regardless of system used.

The Strategic Change Workshops

Supporting Strategic Issue construction - using a GSS. The first series of workshops focused on encouraging the participants to raise and elaborate upon the strategic issues facing the organization so as to have an influence on the resultant management strategy. It was not designed to provide them with any decision making authority. Their involvement would not only increase the robustness of the outcomes through the capture of ideas and issues originating from different levels of the organisation but would also increase the senior managers' ownership of the strategy and their understanding of it (Ackermann 1992). Through this it was assumed that implementation would be more successful. Each of the five workshops used an identical process and all workshops were carried out over a 1 month period. They adopted the following design.

1. Explanation to the day
2. Idea generation - building up a 'big picture' with the material captured through the use of a manual technique known as the 'domino' technique

3. Focusing on a key theme/cluster by examining all of the themes and manually vote for those they thought were most important and should be further elaborated and worked upon
4. Exploring the organisation's performance from the perspective of stakeholders
5. Elaborating the prioritised key issues using the multi-user facility within COPE (MUGS) to allow them to enter directly their opinions concerning a). why the theme was important and b). possible actions. After each use of the multi-user facility the group examined their output with the facilitator, by structuring the data into an hierarchical "cause map". This stage of operation being in the single user mode (SUGS). The day was completed by using a multi-user electronic voting exercise (MUGS) asking group members to prioritise which of the portfolios of options they had generated they would most like the top management team to explore.

Strategic Action Agreement workshop - using the system as a GDSS for planning. Using the work achieved by the above workshops and subsequent work undertaken by the board of directors, a second series of senior management workshops was planned to focus specifically "on developing practical solutions to specific strategic issues of high priority". This was done in collaboration with members of the executive team with the aim of not creating more work but to do the organisation's job more effectively. Each workshop would focus on a specific strategy making each group's task unique. However, while the specific content task was different for each workshop, the workshop design was to be the same.

1. Briefing group members to explain how their efforts fitted into the overall strategic process, and to provide them with some idea of the structure of the workshops.
2. Exploring existing information, and identifying potential action programmes by reviewing the synthesis of the existing material generated by the previous series of workshops and using the multi-user facility to raise new themes or potential options (MUGS). This material was structured by the group with the facilitator using COPE in single user mode (SUGS).
3. Identifying which action clusters to develop using the multi-user voting facility to prioritise the action programmes (MUGS) to produce a top four for further development and action.
4. Developing the Option clusters into Action Packages by dividing the group into two subgroups and assigning each two clusters to develop in detail. The manual technique which they had experienced during the first series of workshops was used to capture and structure their ideas and then evaluating them against resource implications and leverage.
5. Generating potential actions for the next strategy workshop using the multi-user facility to allow group members to electronically generate possible options to be considered by the following workshop members and enable them to contribute to more than one strategy/action workshop.

Implications for the Design and Facilitation of GSS/GDSS meetings

This section explores the three main implications identified from an examination of the research material, listing the characteristics supporting the implications and providing a small amount of context. It is asserted that each characteristic has important considerations when designing and facilitating GSS/GDSS meetings.

Implication 1 - Supporting managers accountable for agreements (GDSS) - rather than - Supporting the generation of options for future discussion (GSS)

This section discusses the issue of accountability for the agreements - the clear and explicit intention that participants take responsibility for the outcomes rather than generating options for the purpose of future discussion - and notes some of the characteristics associated with it

i) GDSS members had no ability to hide from the outcomes generated whereas the GSS participants could relax in the knowledge that the outcomes were being lost in the large amount of material generated

ii) GDSS members had concern for the quality of the outcomes whereas GSS members acted in an open, freewheeling and creative manner.

iii) GDSS members were continually testing their ideas in relation to their practicality whereas GSS members were more concerned with the variety and quantity of ideas generated.

iv) GDSS members were continually heard to evaluate options with the expression "yes but.". where as GSS members were typified by a "yes and.." attitude encouraging innovation, excitement and creativity.

v) GDSS members expected tangible change within a given time whereas GSS members wanted evidence of their influence on the thinking of senior managers

vi) GDSS members developed a sense of team spirit especially in relation to the actions they were agreeing whereas for the GSS the team spirit created resulted from a sharing of local problems

Implication 2: Incorporating a conceptual framework to guide the decision making process (GDSS) - rather than - adopting a structure focusing on the management of large amounts of qualitative data (GSS)

i) GDSS members were provided with clear rules about the form and manipulation of data, struggled with the application of the rules and had to go through a point of 'realisation' that the framework and rules gave them important benefits whereas the GSS member never had a full explanation of the approach they were using

ii) GDSS members worked to ensure that agreements they were reaching in relation to their own issue were recorded as having implications for other issues whereas GSS

members were more concerned about whether the quantity they were generating was greater than other workshops.

iii) GDSS members were content argue their own divergent views and demand a revote whereas GSS members seemed happy to accept the voting as indicative.

Implication 3: Maintaining Political feasibility (GDSS) - rather than - Treating the workshop as a 'bounded' event (GSS)

The characteristics surrounding this implication represents observations concerning the political ramifications of outcomes. Maintaining political feasibility refers to the explicit acknowledgement that groups are social entities and that the outcomes from a planning (GDSS) workshop need to be considered within the light of their feasibility within the context of the whole organisation and the power structures within them (Eden, 1989). When working with idea generation groups (GSS) this necessity is not so apparent and the facilitator is able to treat the workshop as a 'bounded' event in that it is discrete and has no direct implications for members of the group.

i) GDSS members saw the facilitators paying attention to the involvement of specific players to avoid sabotage and gain ownership whereas for GSS members the facilitators treated everyone equally.

ii) GDSS members were reined back from quick responses and too much idea generating activity (listening and thinking was encouraged) whereas GSS members, the opposite was true and facilitators were concerned if members were not involved.

iii) GDSS members saw side comments taken seriously in case they were the root source of a potential political dynamic whereas for GSS members side comments' were often used as a way of encouraging participants to laugh at themselves and at others

iv) GDSS members experienced the facilitators rewarding the contributors for making constructive suggestions, where as GSS members were encouraged towards equality of contributions

v) GDSS members were restrained from becoming emotional and were often encouraged to focus attention on the rational analysis of the content whereas emotional outbursts were developed and rewarded in the GSS workshops

Concluding Remarks

Whilst specific suggestions can be made concerning the facilitation and design of either GDSS or GSS meetings according to one of the three specific implications provided earlier, there are a number of overall implications which are worth further consideration. These are that the:

i) facilitator builds sufficient time into the workshop design especially when working on evaluative tasks.

ii) group members have an overall familiarity with the conceptual framework supporting the methodology

iii) facilitator has the ability to manage group processes

Thus, whilst the technology - the manual (MAGS), single user (SUGS) and multi-user modes (MUGS) - was identical in both sets of experience, its application and resultant effects were different. It is recommended, therefore, that facilitators, when undertaking workshops either for idea generation or for evaluation and planning, consider the above material and design their interventions accordingly. Whilst there is no guarantee for success, the more the possibilities for failure are reduced the greater the chance for a positive and beneficial intervention.