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Second Thoughts on Team Building

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A good example of something needed in Management Development – examining issues raised in practice. In this case the authors question the value and assumptions which underlie team work and team building and ultimately their usefulness in certain settings. On the basis of this analysis they develop ideas for future practice of working with management groups.

PART 1: Teambuilding – At What Price and At Whose Cost?

It all started during one of those midnight conversations between consultants in a residential workshop. We were running a teambuilding session with a top management group and something very odd began to appear. Our disturbing (but also exciting) discovery was that for most of their time this group of people had absolutely no need to work as a team; indeed the attempt to do so was causing more puzzlement and scepticism than motivation and commitment. In our midnight reflections we were honest enough to confess to each other than this wasn't the first time our team building efforts had cast doubts on the very validity of teamwork itself, within our client groups.

We admitted that we had both been working from some implicit assumptions that good teamwork is a characteristic of healthy, effectively functioning organisations. Now we started to question those assumptions. First, we flushed out what our assumptions actually were. In essence it came down to something like this:

> We had been assuming that the top group in any organisation (be it the board of directors or the local authority management committee or whatever the top group is called) should be a team and ought to work as a team. Teamwork at the top is crucial to organisational success, we assumed.
>
> We further assumed that a properly functioning team is one in which:
>
> – people care for each other;
> – people are open and truthful;
> – there is a high level of trust;

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by Bill Critchley and David Casey

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- decisions are made by consensus;
- there is strong team commitment;
- conflict is faced up to and worked through;
- people really listen to ideas and to feelings;
- feelings are expressed freely;
- feelings issues (task and feelings) are dealt with.

Finally, it had always seemed logical to us, that a teambuilding catalyst could always help any team to function better – and so help any organisation perform better as an organisation. Better functioning would lead the organisation to achieve its purposes more effectively.

The harsh reality we now came up against was at odds with this cosy view of teams, teamwork and teambuilding. In truth the Director of Education has little need to work in harness with his fellow chief officers in a county council. He or she might need the support of the Chief Executive and the Chair of the elected members' Education Committee, but the other chief officers in that local authority have neither the expertise nor the interest, nor indeed the time, to contribute to what is essentially very specialised work.

Even in industry, whilst it is clear that the marketing and production directors of a company must work closely together to ensure that the production schedule is synchronised with sales forecasts and the finance director needs to be involved – to look at the cash flow implications of varying stock levels – they don't need to involve the *whole* team. And they certainly do not need to develop high levels of trust and openness to work through those kinds of business issues.

On the other hand, most people would agree that *strategic* decisions, concerned with the future direction of the whole enterprise, should involve all those at the top. Strategy should demand an input from every member of the top group, and for strategic discussion and strategic decision-making, teamwork at the top is essential. But how much time do most top management groups actually spend discussing strategy? Our experiences, in a wide variety of organisations, suggest that 10% is a high figure for most organisations – often 5% would be nearer the mark. This means that 90-95% of decisions in organisations are essentially operational; that is decisions made within departments based usually on a fair amount of information and expertise. In those conditions, high levels of trust and openness may be nice, but are not necessary; consensus is strictly not an issue and in any case would take up far too much time. There is therefore no need for high levels of interpersonal skills.

Why then, is so much time and money invested in teambuilding, we asked ourselves. At this stage in our discussions we began to face a rather disturbing possibility. Perhaps the spread of teambuilding has more to do with teambuilders and *their* needs and values rather than a careful analysis of what is appropriate and necessary for the organisation. To test out this alarming

hypothesis we each wrote down an honest and frank list of reasons why we ourselves engaged in teambuilding. We recommend this as an enlightening activity for other teambuilders – perhaps, like us, they will arrive at this kind of conclusion: teambuilders work as catalysts to help management groups function better as open teams for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- They like it – enjoy the risks.
- Because they are good at it.
- It's flattering to be asked.
- They receive rewarding personal feedback.
- Professional kudos – not many people do teambuilding with top teams.
- There's money in it.
- It accords with their values: for instance democracy is preferred to autocracy.
- They gain power. Process interventions are powerful in business settings where the client is on home ground and can bamboozle the consultant in business discussions.

All those reasons are concerned with the needs, skills and values of the *teambuilder* rather than the management group being 'helped'. This could explain why many teambuilding exercises leave the so-called 'management team' excited and stimulated by the experience, only to find they are spending an unnecessary amount of time together discussing other people's departmental issues. Later on, because they cannot see the benefit of working together on such issues, they abandon 'teamwork' altogether. Such a management group has been accidentally led to disillusionment with the whole idea of teamwork and the value of teambuilding.

We began to see, as our discussions went on through the small hours, that there is a very *large* proportion of most managers' work where teamwork is not needed (and to attempt to inculcate teamwork is dysfunctional). There is, at the same time a very *small* proportion of their work where teamwork is absolutely vital (and to ignore teamworking skills is to invite disaster). This latter work, which demands a team approach, is typified by strategic work but not limited to strategic work. It is any work characterised by a high level of choice and by the condition of maximum uncertainty.

Most people find choice and uncertainty uncomfortable. Many senior managers attempt to deny the choice element by the employment of complex models and techniques. We don't think most people's management experience teaches them to make choices about the future for instance; it puts the main emphasis on establishing as many facts as possible and reviewing options in the light of past experience. That's why models like, for example, the Boston portfolio model and the General Electric matrix are so popular. They provide comforting analytic frameworks for looking at strategic options, but they are

appealing really to our operational mentality. The hope often is that they will magic up a solution to the strategic question. But of course they can't make choices for people and they don't throw any light on the future.

The top team of an organisation, if it is to achieve quality and commitment in its decisions about future directions, will need to pool the full extent of each individual's wisdom and experience. That means something quite different from reacting to a problem in terms of their own functional knowledge and experience. It means *exposing fully* their uncertainties, taking unaccustomed risks by airing their own subjective view of the world and struggling to build some common perceptions and possibilities. This is where that much abused word 'sharing' really comes into its own. In this context it is not merely a value-laden exhortation, it is vital to the future of the organisation. Ideas and opinions are all we have to inform our view of the future, but if we are to take a risk with a fragile idea or opinion, unsubstantiated by facts, we will only take it if the climate is right. Conversely, if we take the risk and the sheer airiness and vulnerability of the idea attracts forth a volley of ridicule and abuse, then it will die on the instant, lost forever, snuffed out like Tinkerbell.

Most functional executives, brought up in the hurly-burly of politics and inter-functional warfare, find the transition from functional to strategic mode very difficult to make. They do not always see the difference, and if they do, they are reluctant to leave their mountain top, the summit of knowledge, experience and hence power, for the equality and shared uncertainty of strategic decision making. And yet this is one area where real teamwork is not only necessary but vital.

We had now got ourselves thoroughly confused. We seemed to be forcing teambuilding on groups which had no need to be a team and missing the one area where teamwork is essential – because choice and uncertainty are at a maximum and for this very reason managers were shying away from the work – work which can *only* be done by a team. We resorted to diagrams to help clear our minds and these new diagrams form the basis of Part 2 of this article.

PART 2: Theoretical Considerations Concerning Management Groups

We found these kinds of discussions taking us farther and farther away from teambuilding and closer and closer to an understanding of why management groups work, or don't work, in the ways they do. In the end, we developed two basic diagrams, showing the relationships between a number of variables which operate in management groups:

- the degree of uncertainty in the management task;
- the need for sharing in the group;
- modes of working;

- different kinds of internal group process;
- different levels of interpersonal skills;
- the role of the leader.

We would now like to present these two framework diagrams as diagnostic tools, which a dozen or so management groups have found very useful in coming to terms with how they work and why. These simple diagrams are helping groups see what kind of groups they are and when and if they want to be a team, rather than jumping to the conclusion that all groups need teambuilding.

Throughout the discussion, we will be talking about the management group – that is the leader plus those immediately responsible to him or her, perhaps five to ten people in all, at the top of their organisation or their part of the organisation.

The first diagram (Figure 1) shows the relationship between the level of uncertainty inherent in any group task and the need for members of that group to share with each other. Expressed simply – 'The more uncertainty – the more need to share'. Everyday examples of this truism are: children holding hands for comfort in the dark or NASA research scientists brainstorming for fresh ideas on the frontiers of man's knowledge – any uncertainty, emotional, physical or intellectual, can best be coped with by sharing.

However, the converse is also true – where there is less uncertainty, there is less need to share. The same children will feel no need to hold hands round the breakfast table where all is secure; the NASA scientists during the final launch will each get on with their own well-rehearsed part of the launch programme in relative isolation from each other. Only if something goes wrong (uncertainty floods back) will they need to share, quickly and fully. It took us a long time to realise the full significance of that in terms of the need to share in a management group.

We are dealing here only with the top group of the organisation where task is the dominant imperative. There are other situations in which other objectives demand sharing, for instance if one is dealing with the whole fabric of a complete organisation and attempting a global shift in attitudes, then culture-building may become the dominant imperative and sharing at all levels in that organisation may become necessary. But that is a different situation – we are focussing here on the top management group where task must be the dominant imperative.

In Figure 1 we have used Revans' powerful distinction between problems (no answer is known to exist) and puzzles (the answer exists somewhere – just find it) to describe different levels of uncertainty. To illustrate the difference between a problem and a puzzle – deciding about capital punishment is a problem for society; tracking down a murderer is a puzzle for the police.

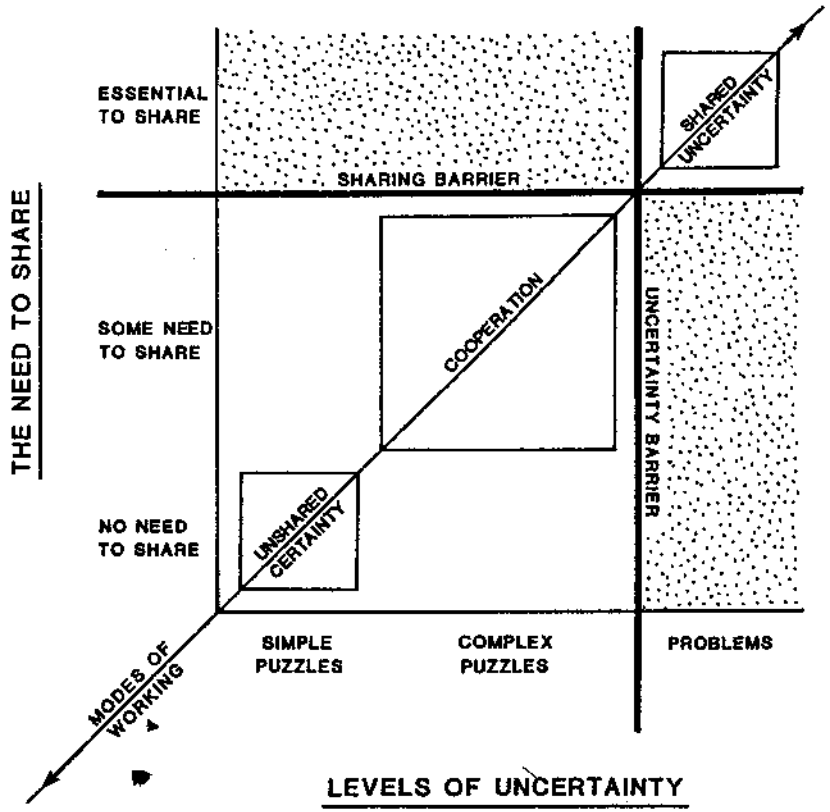

Figure 1. The More Uncertainty in its Task the More Any Group Has to Share

Work groups dealing with genuine problems (of which strategy is only one example) would be well advised to share as much as possible with each other. They should share feelings to gain support, as well as ideas to penetrate the unknown. Our diagram shows two shaded areas. THESE SHADED AREAS MUST BE AVOIDED. The shaded area on the right indicates the futility of tackling real problems unless people are prepared to share. The shaded area at the top indicates that there is no point in sharing to solve mere puzzles.

Two 'barriers' appear on our model; they indicate that a positive effort must be made if a breakthrough to a new level of working is to be accomplished. For instance the uncertainty barrier represents a step into the unknown – a deliberate attempt to work in areas of ambiguity, uncertainty and ambivalence. To avoid the shaded areas and arrive in the top righthand corner, the

group break through *both* barriers at the *same* time. This is the *only* way to solve genuine problems. Most management groups stay behind both barriers in Figure 1 and handle work which is in the nature of a puzzle – and to achieve this they cooperate, rather than share with each other. As long as they continue to limit their work to solving puzzles, they are quite right to stay within the sharing and uncertainty barriers of Figure 1.

As teambuilders, we now see that we must spend time identifying which modes of working any management group operates. The three modes of working come out in Figure 1 as the diagonal and we would like to describe each mode, by working up the diagonal of Figure 1 from left to right:

Mode of unshared certainty The proper mode for simple puzzles of a technical nature in everyday work where every member of the group is relatively competent within his/her field and speaks from the authority of his/her specialism. Ideal when the work issues are independent of each other – as they often are. A healthy attitude is 'I will pull my weight and see that my part is done well'. Attitudes can become unhealthy if they move towards 'my interests must come first'.

Mode of cooperation The appropriate mode for complex puzzles which impinge on the work of several members of the management group. In this mode (very common in local authorities) group members recognise the need for give-and-take, cooperation, negotiation and passing of information on a need-to-know basis. The attitude is 'I'll cooperate for the good of the whole and because other members of this group have their rights and problems too'. Sharing is restricted to what is necessary and each group member still works from the security (certainty) of his own professional base, recognising the professional bases of his colleagues.

Mode of shared uncertainty A rare mode. Partly because it is appropriate only for genuine problems (such as strategy) where nobody knows what to do, uncertainty is rife and full sharing between members is the only way out; partly because, even when it is the appropriate mode, many management groups never reach these professional heights. The attitude of members has to be 'the good of the whole outweighs any one member's interests – including mine. I carry an equal responsiblity with my colleagues for the whole, and for this particular work I am not able to rely on my specialism, because my functional expertise is, for this problem we all face, irrelevant'.

Clearly this top mode of 'shared uncertainty' is extremely demanding and it is not surprising that many management groups try hard to avoid it. We know several boards of directors and even more local authority management 'Teams' who have devised a brilliant trick to avoid handling genuine problems requiring genuine sharing in the top mode. Quite simply – they turn all strategic problems into operational puzzles! How? There are very many variations of this trick available –

Appoint a working party
Ask a consultant to recommend
Recruit a Corporate Planner
Set up a think-tank,
Etc.

To make sure the trick works, the terms of reference are – 'Your recommendation must be short and must ask us to decide between option A or option B'. Choosing between A & B is an operational puzzle they *can* solve and it leaves them with the comfortable illusion that they have actually been engaging in strategic problem resolution work, whereas the truth is they have avoided uncertainty, avoided sharing their fears and ideas, avoided their real work, by converting frightening problems into manageable puzzles. And who can blame them!

We don't feel we have the right to censure top groups for not working in the top mode of shared uncertainty. We do feel we have the obligation to analyse quite rigorously how top groups actually work, before we plunge in with our teambuilding help.

In Figure 1 the size of the box for each mode indicates very roughly how frequently each mode might be needed by most management groups. Sadly, we see many management groups working in modes which are inappropriate to the work being done. It is not just that many top groups fail to push through to the top mode; many management groups get stuck in the bottom box quite a lot of the time, when they should be working in the middle mode. On the other hand other groups go through a pantomime of sitting round a table trying to work in the middle mode, but in truth feeling bored and uninterested because the middle mode is inappropriate and each member of the group could carry on separately with his own work, without pretending to share it with his colleagues, who don't need to know anyway. In other words their appropriate mode is unshared certainty and attempts at sharing are boring or frustrating facades.

Our diagram shows an arrow on both ends of the diagonal, to illustrate that all three modes of working are necessary at different times and effective work groups can and should slide up and down the diagonal. We do not see any management group working in one mode all the time – the really effective group is able to move from mode to mode as the *task* requires. Although it may think of itself as a management 'team', a top group will be truly functioning as a team only when it is operating in the top mode.

We use the word team here, in the sense used in the first part of this article, which we believe is the sense used by most teambuilders in teambuilding work. Because we now believe that working in the top mode of shared uncertaintly is called for infrequently – by the nature of the work – and is actually practised even less frequently, we now doubt the value of teambuilding work with most management groups – when there is so much more urgent work to be done with these groups.

We found in Figure 1 that when we plot the level of uncertainty in the work, against the need to share, we discover three modes of working, on the diagonal of Figure 1. These three modes of working are

– UNSHARED CERTAINTY
– COOPERATION
– SHARED UNCERTAINTY

We now want to go on to answer the question 'How does a management group work in each of these modes? What *processes* are needed, what *skills* are required, and how does the *leader* function?'

The format of Figure 2 is the same as Figure 1, only the variables are different. The vertical axis of Figure 2 is the diagonal lifted from Figure 1 (modes) and two new variables are introduced – *processes* on the horizontal axis and *interpersonal skills* become the new diagonal.

Processes

To start with the horizontal axis – processes. We distinguish three levels of process in any group. At the most perfunctory there are *polite social processes*, very important to sustain the social lubrication of a healthy group but not focused on the work itself. The work is accomplished largely via *task processes* – the way work is organised, distributed, ideas generated and shared, decisions made and so forth. The third level of process concerns people's feelings (*feelings processes*) and how these are handled – by themselves and by others.

Reference to Figure 2 will make it clear that as the mode of working becomes more difficult, ascending the vertical axis, from unshared certainty towards shared uncertainty, so the processes needed to accomplish this more difficult work, also become more difficult, as the group moves along the horizontal axis from simple basic social processes, through task processes, towards the much more difficult processes of working with people's deeper feelings.

Many groups never reach the top mode of shared uncertainty, where people's feelings are actually *part of the work* and all is uncertainty, excitement and trust.

The shaded areas are to be avoided (as in Figure 1). The righthand shaded area indicates that it is absurd to indulge in work with people's feelings if the group is working only in the two lower modes of unshared certainty and cooperation – to engage in soul-searching to accomplish this kind of work is ridiculous and brings teambuilding into disrepute. The top shaded area indicates similarly that there is no need to share deeply when only the two lower levels of processes (basic social processes and task processes) are operating.

However, a management group faced with the need to tackle uncertainty can either funk the whole thing, by staying safely behind the barriers (which is what most management groups appear to do) or, it can have the courage to break through both barriers simultaneously, arriving (breathlessly) in the top righthand corner where the mode of working is shared uncertainty and

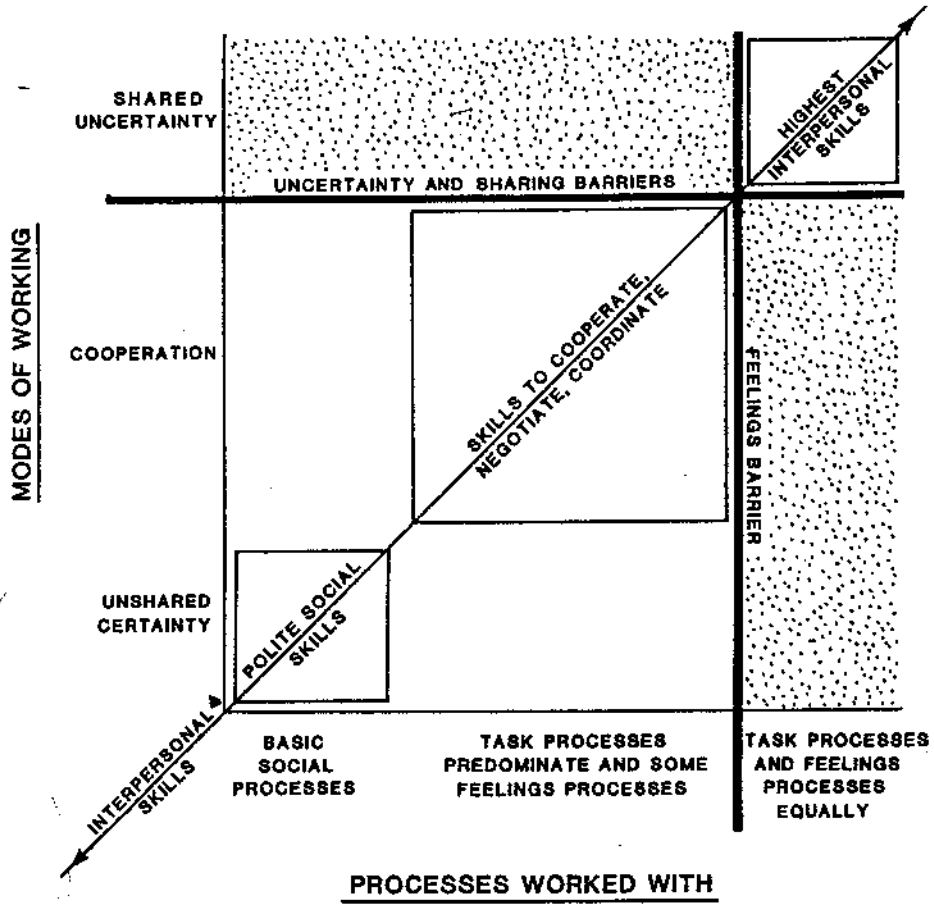

Figure 2. Different Modes of Working Require Different Processes

the necessary processes are task *and* feelings processes together. Those few management groups which accomplish this – become TEAMS.

Interpersonal Skills

The final variable is the diagonal of Figure 2 – 'interpersonal skills' and clearly there is an ascending order of skill from the lowest (but *not* least important) level of polite social skills to the highest possible level of interpersonal skills required in the rarified atmosphere of highest uncertainty and real teamwork. But, for the middle mode, a solid raft of straightforward interpersonal skills is needed by all managers – empathy, cooperation, communication, listening, negotiating and many more. We have come to believe that here is the greatest area of need.

The Leader's Role

The group leader and group leadership have not been mentioned so far, in an attempt to keep things simple. The whole question of leadership is fundamental to the operation of all management groups and we would like to make some observations now.

Leader's role in the mode of unshared certainty: The leader is hardly needed at all in the unshared certainty mode and, indeed, the social lubrication processes of a group working in this mode may well be carried out much better by an informal leader – there is nothing so embarrassing as the formal group leader bravely trying to lead the group through its Christmas lunch in the local pub!

Some local authority Chief Executives (so called) suffer an even worse fate – they cannot find a role at all, because the members of their management team (so called) steadfastly refuse to move out of the bottom mode of working, tacitly deciding *not* to work together and denying the Chief Executive any place in the organisation at all! This is not uncommon.

Leader's role in the mode of cooperation: The leader's role in the central (cooperation) mode, is well established in management convention. For example a clear role at meetings has been universally recognised to enable the leader to manage the *task* processes in particular. This role is of course the chairperson. Coordination of the task is at its core and most group leaders find this role relatively clear.

Leader's role in the mode of shared uncertainty: No such role has yet been universally recognised to deal with the processes in the highest mode, of shared uncertainty. In Britain, we have the added difficulty of our cultural resistance to working with feelings (in action learning language 'No sets please, we're British'). In this sophisticated mode of working, the word 'catalyst' seems more appropriate than the word chairperson and often a teambuilder is invited in to carry out this role. But where does this leave the group leader? All management group leaders have learned to be the chairperson, very few have yet learned to be the catalyst. And in any case, to be the catalyst and the leader at the same time, is to attempt the North face of the Eiger of interpersonal skills. It can be done, but not in carpet slippers. If on the other hand, the role of catalyst is performed by an outsider, the leadership dynamic becomes *immensely* complex and adds a significant overlay of difficulty when working in a mode which we have already shown to be extremely difficult in the first place. No wonder teambuilding often fails.

Conclusions

Many teambuilders are unaware of the shaded no-go areas and dreamily assume that any progress towards open attitudes, free expression of feelings and genuine sharing in any management group, is beneficial. This is not so – to be of benefit there needs to be a very delicate and deliberate balance between what WORK the group has decided to pursue (what level of UNCERTAINTY) and the degree of sharing and expression of feelings the group is prepared for, to accomplish that work. Only if the balance is right will the management group be able to aim accurately at the top righthand corner of Figures 1 and 2 and succeed in breaking through all the barriers at the same time, to experience real teamwork. Attempts to push through only *one* barrier (trying to handle uncertainty without sharing; sharing for the sake of sharing; being open for the sake of being open) will fail and in failing will probably make things worse for that management group.

Strategic planners are often guilty of pushing management groups towards handling uncertainty WITHOUT the concomitant abilities to share and work with feelings. Teambuilders are often guilty of the converse sin – pushing management groups to be open and share their feelings, when the group has no intention whatever of getting into work where the level of uncertainty is high. Neither will succeed. It is no coincidence that both strategic planning and teambuilding can fall quickly into disrepute; it may be too late to save strategic planning from the management scrapheap – it is not too late to save teambuilding.

SUMMARY: Putting Teambuilding In Its Place

The problems we described in *Part 1* of this article centred round the dangers of consultants imposing their own values on a client management group when they engage in teambuilding work, instead of first finding out how that management group actually works, its context within the organisation, and hence what it really needs.

In *Part 2* we developed a diagnostic tool, in the form of two diagrams, which in the hands of a management group will enable it to understand how it actually works, and will provide it with a means of articulating the kind of group it wants to become, starting unequivocally from an analysis of its role and purpose and the work it has to do, rather than from some prior assumptions or values about how a management group 'should' work.

Some people will argue that management groups cannot even begin to engage with each other in any kind of serious work, such as for example establishing what the key tasks are, until they have first built a degree of openness and trust. We would disagree on two counts.

In the first place, as our diagrams illustrate, high levels of openness and trust are only rarely needed, and management groups get most of their work done very well without them, preferring for safety and comfort to remain relatively closed, and, covertly at least, distrustful. To ask such groups to make a major cultural shift, to take such big risks with each other as to be fully open and trusting, requires some mighty cogent justification.

Secondly, we have a theoretical objection to starting with feelings. Most management groups are likely to be task-centred, to be working at an intellectual rather than an emotional level. Approaching such a group suddenly at an emotional level will either generate shock, pain, distrust and confusion, or will produce a warm, cosy, euphoric, one-off experience. In either case it will often be followed by rejection of the approach and its sponsor, the teambuilder.

So we are suggesting to all would-be teambuilders, that if their purpose is to be of real *value to their clients*, that they start by encouraging their clients to clarify the role and purpose of the management group in question, to identify the nature of the tasks which they need to address *as a group* – complex puzzles or real problems, and then to consider the appropriate modes of working, and the skills and processes which go with them. When we have reached this stage, most of us have the skills and technologies to provide what is needed. What is often left out is the diagnostic work which gets us to that stage.