



Integrating Ideas & Organizations toward a New Paradigm

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Abstract

Global agendas such as the World Academy's New Paradigm project call for integrating ideas and organizations concerned with the future, but typically neglect to explain how this is to be done. Here are two good examples of successful methods of integration. At an intellectual level, the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and its offshoot, the Center for Human Understanding, have brought together noted intellectuals, artists, and political figures to discuss the world's future in broad, humanistic terms. At a more practical level, Sweden's Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has convened small groups of scholars and practitioners to tackle specific problems of international development. The lessons these two organizations provide the World Academy include: (1) realizing that success in such work depends on leadership from people who have an extraordinary ability to reach across the boundaries of disciplines, professions, and countries and form lasting and trusting relationships with people from many different backgrounds, people whose opinions count; (2) depending on small networks of friends from many countries; (3) having access to money; and (4) understanding that some people seem unable to do such integrative work in spite of high intelligence and a large store of knowledge and social skills.

Global strategies and agendas commonly emphasize a need to “integrate” ideas and organizations concerned with the future. The World Academy’s New Paradigm project is no exception: it aims at “formulating an **integrated perspective**...” on the “realities, needs and emerging opportunities of the 21st century.” In an early progress report, Ivo Šlaus and Garry Jacobs wrote that “This endeavor to define, develop and formulate a new paradigm demands, on one side, research, education and creativity and, on the other side, an **integrated activity** by a network of committed global organizations.”¹

Here, an “integrated perspective” means combining ideas to assemble a more complete or harmonious statement about the future; and an “integrated activity” refers to bringing together a range of organizations to work in a coordinated way toward a common purpose.

What tends to be neglected in ambitious ventures such as this is structure and process, that is, the “how” of integration. The methods used in such ventures can have a profound influence on their results. Too often they rely on big conferences, formal committees, and “kitchen cabinets” (groups of unofficial advisers), but there are many other models.

For better answers, we need to look no further than our World Academy Fellows.

First of all, a fundamental point that permeates all the others made here: Former WAAS President Harlan Cleveland (1918-2008) wrote that “All real-world problems are interdisciplinary, interprofessional, and international. ... A committee of narrow thinkers doesn’t produce integrative outcomes. The best interdisciplinary instrument is still the individual human mind.”² In what ways does this happen in the intellectual and more practical spheres?

1. At an Intellectual Level

At an intellectual level, universities can be blamed for much of the narrow professionalism that produces what Alfred North Whitehead called “minds in a groove ... The specialised functions of the community are performed better and more progressively, but the generalised direction lacks vision.”³

This overspecialization has been a recurring theme for Michael Marien, a WAAS Fellow who is a frequent contributor to *Cadmus* and *Eruditio*. In reviewing and “mapping” tens of thousands of new books and reports for *Future Survey*, which he edited for many years, and now as director of Global Foresight Books, he has found that academic authors all too rarely cite, and so seem unaware, of work on the same subject by scholars in other disciplines. “Academia does not need capacities for trend-spotting, forecasting, scenario-writing, or envisioning the good society, which are found in all of the disciplines and professions,” he wrote. “What it does need very badly is systemic, **integrated views** to balance rampant hyper-specialization (even when inter-disciplinary).”⁴

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In 1941, another WAAS Fellow, the economic historian John U. Nef (1899-1988), founded the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, a pioneering interdisciplinary, Ph.D. granting program that seeks to foster original research without regard for conventional academic or international boundaries. Its distinguished visiting members have included the artist Marc Chagall, the poet T.S. Eliot, and the composer Igor Stravinsky. It is still going strong as the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought.⁵

Nef moved to Washington, D.C. in 1964 and set up the Center for Human Understanding in his home, a large old house on N Street in Georgetown. Formally a unit of the University of Chicago, a sort of extension of the Committee on Social Thought, the Center was Nef’s personal project. He described it as “a group of close friends united in their mission.” Among its members and associates were Chagall, the philosopher Jacques Maritain, the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the historian of religion Mircea Eliade. I got to know Nef through my then wife, who was his research and editorial assistant and the Center’s sole staff member.

The Center’s original purpose was to establish “a world university of the future.” “Such an innovation would have to be universal as universities have never been. It would have to provide a model of its own for what a university ought to be. It must not copy the models provided by the universities as they are.” In promoting such an entity, “We will be faithful to the mission we have set ourselves: to transcend all particular and specialized interests

on behalf of the individual everywhere and always.”⁶ Although this “world university” never got past an early discussion stage, the World University Consortium (WUC) linked to WAAS could probably learn from Nef’s efforts to found it. During its ten-year existence the Center held several small gatherings of noted intellectuals, artists, and political figures from different countries and backgrounds. Papers from two of these events became books. The “Bridges of Human Understanding” meeting centered on the challenges of communicating across cultures and international boundaries (“The greatest problem of communication is the illusion that it has been achieved,” one participant remarked). “Towards World Community” included then World Academy President Lord John Boyd Orr; its proceedings were published as WAAS Publication No. 5.^{7,8}

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2. At a More Practical Level

Efforts at integrating ideas and organizations at a more practical level face challenges similar to those faced in the academic world. For example, there is growing recognition that synthesis and analysis are both essential in public policy work and complement each other. Synthesis (integrative or “lateral” thinking) is needed to break out of old thought patterns and generate new ideas. Analysis (sequential or “vertical” thinking) is needed to choose the best course of action and carry it out. However, skills in analysis are more common and much more widely applied than skills in synthesis.

For 45 years, the organization I lead, InterEnvironment Institute, has specialized in synthesis, especially making connections that otherwise would be unlikely to happen. The “Inter” in InterEnvironment stands for interconnections, as well as international. We have done this by producing resource guides that “map” organizations and their activities; by helping to define and promote the concept of sustainability, which cuts across political, social, cultural and economic, as well as ecological concerns; and by convening groups of leaders and experts to search for, design, and implement solutions to public and international problems.

If done right, policy dialogues and other forms of convening can be powerful integrative tools for solving problems and improving policies. In addition to organizing dialogues on a range of environmental issues, we have experimented and studied different methods of convening. In 1989, we held a workshop, “The Power of Convening”, for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Its purpose was to look at how policy dialogues could be used more effectively to promote nature conservation and sustainable development. Participants were practitioners and researchers from seven countries and international organizations. As a consequence of the workshop, IUCN started understanding and promoting its “convening power.”⁹

The Institute's approach to convening is different from that of many other organizations in that we stress collaboration rather than conflict resolution. The difference is encapsulated in a comment by Jean Monnet, father of the European Common Market: "Do not come together to argue and negotiate; come together to solve a common problem."¹⁰ In such collaborative policy forums, leaders and experts who represent different constituencies and points of view meet to explore solutions to policy issues and further their different interests. Participants come to the table with sufficient respect for the legitimacy of one another's needs and concerns to operate by consensus procedure. Policy forums are not a substitute for conventional political processes but offer a complementary, more informal path.

My favorite convening organization is Sweden's Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. I first visited it in 1984, while searching for interesting models of organizations that succeed in linking ideas to action. I returned in 1987 for long interviews with its then director, Sven Hamrell, in the Foundation's headquarters, a little two-storey wooden house in Uppsala. My chapter about Hamrell in the proceedings of "The Power of Convening" workshop was reprinted two decades later in the fiftieth anniversary number of the Foundation's journal, *Development Dialogue*.¹¹ Its methods were distinctive — a staff consisting at the time of two professionals and two secretaries, a small network of friends from many countries, carefully prepared invitational seminars and workshops with an ideal size of 20 participants, an ability to move quickly from one to another very different issue — and its success depended entirely on Hamrell and his ability to bring the right people together and move ideas toward action. (After Hamrell retired in 1995, the Foundation became a more conventional development-research center.)

3. Lessons for the World Academy

I think there are at least four important lessons here for the World Academy.

First, the stellar success of the integrative work that John Nef and Sven Hamrell did, one in a more academic world, the other in a more practical world, had to do with their extraordinary ability to reach across the boundaries of disciplines, professions, and countries and form lasting and trusting personal relationships with people from many different backgrounds, people whose opinions counted.

Second, their work centered on small networks of friends from many countries. When I first met Hamrell, I asked him how his little group was able to do so much. He was only half-joking when he replied, "We have a lot of friends and we drink together". While it is possible for such small, informal groups to be embedded in large organizations, they will prosper only if they are respected and nourished by their parent organizations.

Third, Nef and Hamrell both had access to money, as well as high-level contacts. Others may have had similar cross-cutting ideas, but such ideas can be a hard sell. In John Nef's case, he had access to the wealth of his first wife, Elinor Castle Nef (1894-1953), who was from the prominent Castle family in Hawaii. Nef was able and willing to give the money his university needed to start the Committee on Social Thought. He also had important family connections, both through Elinor and as the son of the respected founding Chairman of the University of Chicago's Chemistry Department.

In Sven Hamrell's case, his work was supported by the endowment of his organization as a Swedish national memorial to Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary General of the United Nations and Nobel Peace laureate who lost his life in a 1961 plane crash on the way to negotiate an end to a crisis in Congo. This identification with Hammarskjöld gave the foundation instant credibility. And for most of his tenure at the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (1967-1994), Hamrell had pretty much *carte blanche* to do what he saw needed to be done.

Fourth, some people seem unable to do such integrative work in spite of possessing high intelligence and a large store of knowledge, experience, and social skills. Can they be "trained" to do so? Can integrative skills be learned? Up to a point, perhaps. It is true that "The best interdisciplinary instrument is still the individual human mind," as Harlan Cleveland wrote, but that is only part of the truth. Not all minds have the attributes required.

Integrating the ideas and activities required to construct a New World Paradigm has less to do with attempting to transfer skills than it does identifying and supporting exceptional people such as those I have described. This is one of the most important tasks before us.

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Notes

1. Ivo Šlaus and Garry Jacobs, "New Paradigm in Human Development: A Progress Report," *Cadmus* 2, no. 1 (2013): 120.
2. Harlan Cleveland, *The Knowledge Executive* (New York: Truman Talley Books, 1985), 220.
3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 245.
4. Michael Marien, "Futures Studies in the 21st Century: A Reality-based View," *Futures* 34, no. 3-4 (2002): 275.
5. John Nef, ed., *Towards World Community* (The Hague: Dr. W. Junk, Publishers, 1968), xii- Nef was listed as a WAAS Fellow.
6. John Nef, ed., "Toward Common Values," in *Bridges of Human Understanding* (New York: University Publishers, 1964): 139-141.
7. Nef, ed., *Towards World Community*.
8. John U. Nef, *Search for Meaning: The Autobiography of a Nonconformist* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1973). Nef tells the stories of the Committee and Center in his memoir.
9. Thaddeus C. Trzyna and Ilze M. Gotelli, eds., *The Power of Convening: Collaborative Policy Forums for Sustainable Development* (Claremont: California Institute of Public Affairs, 1989).
10. W.W. Rostow, "A Common Cause for Pacific Basin," *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd March 1989 http://articles.latimes.com/1989-03-03/local/me-179_1_pacific-basin
11. Ted Trzyna, "Convening Thinkers and Doers: Sweden's Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation." In *The Power of Convening*. Reprinted with minor changes in "50 Years Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation," anniversary number of *Development Dialogue*, no. 60, 2012.

* Edward de Bono, who has built a successful enterprise promoting "lateral thinking," believes it can be learned. www.edwdebono.com.