



New resolutions through Societal Learning and Change

Can we truly find solutions to some of society's most pressing problems? According to Canadian Steve Waddell, author of *Societal Learning and Change*, we most certainly can. His book outlines a collaborative process for innovative resolutions in large scale, complex challenges which involve multiple and varied stakeholders.

When you have tried just about everything with government, civil society and corporations to move forward on key issues – for example, in the environmental or social justice areas – and there appears to be nowhere else to go, the process of Societal Learning and Change (SLC) can help. It has enabled and facilitated a number of wonderful projects to achieve break-

through solutions, with sustainable outcomes, to deadlocked problems on community, national and international scales.

Constructing roads in Madagascar; better managed forestry along Canada's Pacific Coast; water and sanitation projects in South Africa; community banking in the United States; and constructing a new

global reporting system – these case study projects, outlined in the book, all have something in common: they provide tangible illustrations of the types of underlying, profound societal change required in order to respond to the scale of social challenges and opportunities facing us – what Waddell defines as the Societal Learning and Change process.

Today, SLC is an emerging phenomenon occurring across sectors and industries – in resource extraction, infrastructure development, agriculture and information technology – at local, regional and global levels. Quite simply, its essence involves the ability to create rich relationships that bridge large, complex differences and empower stakeholders.

The SLC paradigm relates to large scale and/or complex multi-stakeholder issues.

These may be as broad as trade, poverty and sustainable development, or as specific as road building, youth employment, banking, or provision of water and sanitation services. Usually the change strategy involves creating business–government–civil society collaborations and networks.

SLC's distinct features are very deep level change ('third order' change – see table) and an overall realignment of societal systems. This involves, centrally, both change in ourselves as individuals, but also change in how the three key systems that make up our society – the political (government), economic (business) and social (civil society) systems – function by creating more robust interactions that respond to human and environmental imperatives rather than organisational ones.

One of the first examples of the development of the SLC process was in Quebec, Canada, during the problematic labour issues of the 1980s. At the time, the province was mired in deep recession. Unemployment was at 15.5 per cent and interest rates were up at 20 per cent, causing a lack of capital, bankruptcies and other restrictive problems.

Crisis often paves the way for new ideas, and in 1982 at a provincial economic summit, the Quebec Labour Federation rose to the challenge by proposing a labour-sponsored investment fund to help establish a locally controlled sustainable economy. After working with government, regional interests and workers themselves to launch the scheme, the Quebec Solidarity Fund, and its 4.6 billion Canadian dollars in voluntary pensions, has been a major force in the economic recovery of the province, investing in 1900 small- to medium-sized enterprises and creating over 100 000 new jobs.

The unique thing about the fund today is that its 536 000 shareholders – 14 per cent of the active population – are workers, and that it has a commitment to employee ownership, equality and participatory management. 'The fund has created a new class of investors', says Bernd Balkenhol, head of the Social Finance Program in the International Labour Organisation.

The elements of the Canadian labour situation, says Waddell, are indicative of the SLC process. While we may like to think that to meet a challenge we need to conceive of a solution first, and create the stakeholder process to develop the solution next, the interaction between diverse stakeholders is usually critical to develop really innovative approaches more organically, as

in the Canadian example, and is refined through subsequent events or projects.

SLC works by helping to identify differences in relationships as sources of both tension and opportunity, and results in relationship building that can lead to mutually rewarding innovation, initially unimaginable.

Do not mistakenly think that it's just more of the same in terms of advocacy (representing particular issue campaigns or lobbying) and public/private partnerships. There are some specific points of differentiation, which include the depth of engagement in the issues concerned, and the breadth of understanding reached by diverse stakeholders through focusing on the whole picture of the issue, rather than parts of it. That is why 'societal' change is referred to rather than 'social' change, as 'social' does not capture the breadth of coverage or the scale involved.

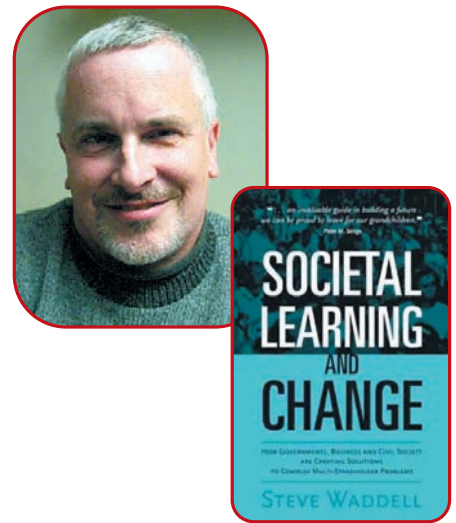
Two key concepts arise from Waddell's work: firstly, as mentioned earlier, SLC is a deep change strategy to address chronic and complex issues. Secondly, the role of global action networks is identified within

Put simply, it can be seen as 'reframing the issue' towards a visionary common purpose which in turn leads to a new collective and unified solution.

the SLC process: they are an emerging form of global governance that also addresses issues requiring deep change.

Waddell is founder and Executive Director of the Global Action Network Net, which focuses on building capacity of, and knowledge about, global action networks. He also works as a researcher, consultant and educator, with a focus on issues and opportunities that require large systems change, in the Collaborative Learning and Innovation group at Simon Fraser University's Center for Sustainable Community Development in British Columbia.

With a management and sociological background, Waddell offers some unique tools such as 'triple loop learning', required to achieve complex changes or the 'third order changes'. His book enables us to



Steve Waddell has a practical message about how to cooperatively negotiate mutually agreeable outcomes. Steve Waddell

understand the different phases and levels involved in achieving real progress in complicated issues.

The SLC process involves reframing the major issues in projects with the collective groups or stakeholders involved, where the focus is on getting people to a comprehension (by looped learning) of each other's viewpoints. Achieving a collective declaration of positioning change can be the hardest task in the process, as the diverse stakeholders have their own views and ownership issues. It can take a long time before stakeholders allow themselves to see things from another's perspective. Once this comprehension is reached however, a new shared meaning and understanding evolves by what is termed a 'generative dialogue'. Solutions are then generated through this enhanced dialogue. Put simply, it can be seen as 'reframing the issue' towards a visionary common purpose which in turn leads to a new collective and unified solution.

Some common mistakes are highlighted in the book, such as appropriating blame, which we can all learn from. In collaborations, people may unconstructively 'blame' others for problems, and issues of misunderstanding and distrust are often present, due to previous, failed attempts to achieve consensus. These issues can be avoided by using SLC as a learning and capacity building process.

This is often tricky though, as the different stakeholders need to let their guard down and allow themselves to be part of

Progress

Criteria	First order change	Second order change	Third order change
Desired outcome	'More (or less) of the same.'	Reform	Transformation
Purpose	To improve the performance of the established system.	To change the system to address shortcomings and respond to the needs of stakeholders	To address problems from a whole-system perspective
Participation	Replicates the established decision-making group and power relationships	Brings relevant stakeholders into the problem-solving conversation in ways that enable them to influence the decision-making process	Creates a microcosm of the problem system, with all participants coming in on an equal footing as issue owners and decision-makers.
Process	Confirms existing rules. Preserves the established power structure and relationships among actors in the system	Opens existing rules to revision. Suspends established power relationships; promotes authentic interactions; creates a space for genuine reform of the system	Opens an issue to creation of entirely new ways of thinking. Promotes transformation of relationships toward whole-system awareness and identity; promotes examination of the deep structures that sustain the system; creates a space for fundamental system change.

Criteria for distinguishing orders of change in problem-solving initiatives.

For those working towards SLC, the critical question is how to bring about third order change. The criteria presented above provide a framework for addressing this question, and has been used in analysing the activities of the networks studied. S Waddell, Social Integration, New York, 23 Nov. 2005

the learning that parallels the 'real work' – to create a supportive operating environment and minimise problems as they arise. This doesn't mean they simply merge together, but instead learn to cooperate to create a more harmonious process while maintaining their identities. Waddell describes the collaborative process as 'the same logics working together, replacing the inter-sectoral with intra-sectoral and intra-organisational collaborations, such as business-to-business arrangements'.

Before undertaking collaboration, there are usually issues of disorganisation and 'mess' that need to be addressed. 'Mess', bluntly classified by author Russell Ackoff in *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach To Societal Problems* (1974), are social scenarios that involve mixed responsibility and jurisdiction, and the intermingling of interests where no one is clearly responsible. In these cases especially, a collaborative learning strategy is identified as most important for SLC initiatives to succeed, given that so many of them deal with complex and innovative approaches to issues.

A case study described in Waddell's book involves negotiations for rice production enhancements in the Philippines. Three characteristic opposing groups with different agendas were: stakeholders – societal representatives, set on achieving high rice yields whilst conserving land fertility; civil

society interests (including the farmers), wanting to enhance the livelihood of small farmers and minimise the use of chemicals; and government representatives, aiming to achieve food security, increasing exports and supporting agrarian land reform.

This case began as a highly fractured approach to rice production with inequitable economic benefits and declining rice yields of low quality. Ultimately the overall business goals were to make contract growing viable and to provide Japanese markets with high-quality rice.

Via the SLC process, an integrated approach to yields increasing in quality and quantity, with more equitable economic benefits, resulted. Furthermore, the Filipino people transformed from being potential employees in a global production system to having more peer-like relationships that now include making decisions about what they will grow, and when, as well as increasing their income. A sense of employee ownership and participation was fostered which evolved towards a form of participatory management.

The case illustrates that, via the SLC process, people can shift from being treated as passive clients of a central government to being active participants and owners of their futures. Aside from exploring collaboration, it appears that people generally find new ways to develop themselves and their opportunities.

According to Peter Senge, founding Chair of the Society of Organisational Learning based in Boston, USA, Waddell's book 'provides one of the first comprehensive treatments of the motivations, processes, pitfalls and possibilities for such change'. Senge believes it is particularly relevant to business, government and civic leaders, essential for practitioners in challenge solving, is one of the few positive books in this area and that change agents in all three sectors will benefit through his message. He found it stimulating, empowering and very practical.

SLC could be a very useful process for the current industrial relations changes taking place in Australia if we reframed the issues and identified new, shared meaning solutions. The organisations involved in labour issues could cooperatively reposition what they stand for and how they actually deliver solutions to ensure a renewed relevance in current society.

It is not news that the world faces unprecedented challenges and this clear from the creation of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. These, and more emerging challenges such as countering terrorism and safeguarding against the potential bird-flu pandemic are just a few of the large-scale issues that require business, government and civil society to work together in new ways. SLC is a brave and timely step forward, showing us that we can create solutions through enhanced engagement and the re-framing of issues for the common good.

● **Sophie Constance**

Sophie Constance is Director of Eco-Society.org, a Strategic Management advisory specialising in Societal Marketing Management and Sustainable Growth. Anyone with issues they may like to explore as part of an SLC pilot please email: sconstance@optusnet.com.au

More information:

Waddell S (2005). *Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems*. Greenleaf Publishing, Sheffield.

Ackoff RL (1974). *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems*. John Wiley and Sons, New York.