

## THE WORKSHOP (May 2001)

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Most organisations are facing major challenges in dealing with rapid change on a large scale. Management techniques have not always been adequate for the task of forecasting and managing processes of change in situations experienced as complex by stakeholders. Research with senior corporate people shows that the traditional skill set doesn't go far enough in 'managing' complexity skills. Systems Practice for Managing Complexity (SPMC) is a new EPSRC<sup>1</sup> funded network designed to generate new insights and research questions by integrating the experience, needs and expertise of the business community, government agencies and the not-for-profit sector with researchers concerned with systems approaches for managing complexity.

The SPMC network has been set up by the Systems Discipline in the Centre for Complexity and Change at the Open University and the Milton Keynes campus of De Montfort University, along with several major international contributors. The aim of the project is to:

- harness the energies of current stakeholders to develop and share expertise within the network
- initiate new 'networks of conversation' between systems practitioners and "joined-up" thinkers in business, public sector, NGO and industrial contexts
- bring together those involved in the interfaces between human and technological systems
- gain an appreciation of the need for Systems Practice and how this might be met by new research and educational initiatives.

### 2 THE PURPOSE OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop was convened with the aim of identifying the needs and enthusiasms of the invited participants, to discuss current trends in systems practice and how these ideas may be put to good use in helping to address those needs. There were 52 attendees from a cross section of the community. They included Seven Universities and the public, charitable and commercial enterprises sector including; The Childrens Society and Save the Children, Abbey National, Action Aid, WWF, Interface Europe, EPSRC, Ashridge consulting, MK council and colleagues directly involved in the Foot and Mouth crisis. Several other colleagues who were unable to attend this day have expressed interest in being involved in future events.

The speakers for the day, and whose presentations are included within this edition, were:

Geoff Mulgan, director of the Performance Innovation Unit at the Cabinet Office, who spoke about the relevance of systems thinking to government and invited the participants to share their experiences of the issues and ideas and suggestions for taking action.

Professor David Robertson, Liverpool John Moores University who gave a presentation on skill needs for complexity management.

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<sup>1</sup> Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council: [www.spmc.org.uk](http://www.spmc.org.uk)

As a means of capturing the main points of the day Professor Peter Checkland, University of Lancaster, and Professor John Ward, Cranfield University, kindly agreed to act as rapporteurs. Professor Checkland agreed to concentrate upon Systems and Professor Ward on strategic management issues. A diagrammatic summary of their feedback is enclosed within this report

The aim of the workshop was to involve some key existing and potential stakeholders in setting a theme for future workshops. The output from the day is to be used to design a major event in the early part of 2002 at which the international members of our network will provide further challenges to current practice and thinking.

It was anticipated that the output from the two events would generate a set of themes that the new network can develop together in an integral experience – business, public sector, NGO and industry. Participants can access enhanced practices and systems practitioners can draw on the expertise of business, public sector and NGO managers and industry in its development of Systems approaches for managing complexity. Of particular importance will be designing a process for challenging new practices. Out of the whole will emerge fresh insights into organisational practice rather more powerful than the sum activity of the parts!

The first workshop was by invitation only and included a range of people from our existing networks known to be interested in systemic thinking and its integration in their current settings. The interests included; information systems, technology management, institutional change and learning and managing for sustainable development.