How To Build A Rich Picture Of A Situation

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ABSTRACT

The starting point for anyone seeking to improve a situation is to understand it. The tools we have, however, are not well understood and each discipline has its own way of approaching the problem. This paper discusses the idea of a Rich Picture and how we can go about building one.

1. Introduction

We live in human situations and that is such a natural part of existence that we rarely question why or how a particular situation exists. We do, however, have relationships with these situations. They support us, energise us, drain us, trap us, concern us or are a source of mild interest or amusement depending on the nature of that relationship. We are sometimes immersed in these situations — so immersed that we can no longer look at them from anything other than our own point of view.

This paper explores a particular approach to understanding situations often called building a Rich Picture.

2. Building a Rich Picture

When we approach a situation we are, to some extent, taking on the role of a researcher. Unlike the physical sciences, however, a researcher in social sciences cannot stand apart from the phenomena he or she is studying. Simply by entering that social situation the researcher has an impact in a way a physicist studying the motion of balls down an inclined plane never has.

In Howard S. Becker's "Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it" we are introduced to the concept of imagery — the picture you build of a situation.

Building this picture starts with preliminary facts. These might include publications and reports. For example, if you were about to visit Venice you might get a travel guide and start reading about the city and the things you could do there. These "facts" about the situation do not stand alone and in isolation but create a picture in your mind that is blended with the concepts and preconceptions that you already have.

For example, if you have children then you might have also seen a "Go Jetters" programme about Venice — something that influences the way in which you present the story of the city to your children. You might have been told that the smell of fish is overpowering in the summer months and be expecting to be a little put off.

This process happens so subtly that it's hard to see it or recognise the importance of it. Reality, for every one of us, is cooked up in our heads stirring together facts and concepts — creating a heady stew that is unique to each us.

What this means is that there is no objective reality — there are instead a plethora of individual realities. What we accept as objective is a function of consensus. If enough people accept that something exists then it does.

If this argument seems absurd to you take the example of religion. If enough people believe that a god exists then, as far as they are concerned. that is objective reality. It's obvious and not up for debate.

If we stay away, however, from situations that exist and are sustained by belief and focus on situations where there is room for improvement, we may have a chance of progressing this discussion. In such situations what we're trying to do is make better choices, do things better. For example, if you have children you may be trying to get better at the way you interact with them and handle the inevitable points of conflict that occur. You may know that there are two rules to remember. The second rule is to avoid getting frustrated and angered by the situation you are in. The first rule

is to stay calm enough to do rule number two. But how would you model such a situation?

The answer is to work on building a Rich Picture of the situation. Part of the reason for why you respond the way you do is because that's the way you learned it was done as a child. You might have read some techniques and approaches in a book or watched someone talk about them. Perhaps a friend shared an opinion. All these contributions go towards building your own point of view, your perspective. The trick is to get better at collecting these and selecting the ones that help you make sense of what is going on.

A Rich Picture is something you can build in your mind from the information you gather and the things you are told. You could draw a literal Rich Picture that shows you the participants, entities and relationships, littered with images and thoughts on a big sheet of paper or using a digital workflow.

The challenge here is to get better at observing, at listening and distilling what you see and hear and feel into a form that you can work with. Ideally, you also want this in a form that other people can work with, especially for the next step of the process — but more on that in a minute.

All this is quite abstract so let me give you an example of how I try and get a Rich Picture of what is going on.

I'll listen to you or a group and ask them to talk me through how they see the situation. As they talk I'll take notes, just jotting down points, drawing quick pictures when an image suggests itself. For example, if they mention a person or a role I'll draw a human shape or a face. I'll try and listen and make notes on topics close to other related points. I use a digital drawing tool that gives me an infinite sheet of paper, with the ability to zoom in and out and I just ask a few questions to clarify or encourage someone to elaborate on something they have said.

What happens is that people quickly forget the mechanics of what is going on an start to describe their point of view. In a group you start to get other people chipping in, adding their perspective and opinions that are also captured. What happens as this goes on is that people see their perspective being captured in front of them but also start to appreciate the perspective others bring. For me, then, this approach helps me capture multiple points of view in a single session and helps me build a richer picture of what is going on.

It's hard to visualise what this end result looks like so here is an example below.
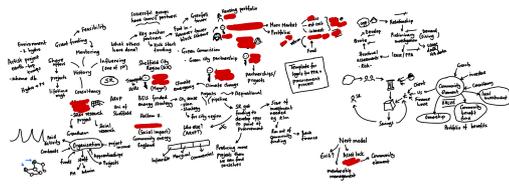
3. Coming to an accommodation

The point of taking all this time to build a Rich Picture is that it helps you construct a model of what is going on. On the one hand the picture itself may act as a model, with elements and relationships. Or it may describe what should be going on, what an ideal situation might look like. Or it could be something in between.

For example you might want to have a flow diagram that set out what happens step by step so that you can see where things aren't working or where things can be improved. Or you might want to see what should be happening so you can compare that model with reality and see where the gaps are and identify what you need to be working on to change things.

Take, for example, a situation where you want to computerise operations in your business. Some people take a purely technical view — assuming that technology will improve any situation. Many situations, however, don't actually need a technological fix. If anything, technology may actually get in the way and result in higher costs and worse service. What you might really need is a different approach, one where you first make the human part of the business work and then add technology when it really adds value. But it's hard to work that out if you don't have the kind of picture of the situation that helps you work that out. A rich one.

4. Really understanding reality

This slightly rambling paper really has one main message. If you try and change things without understanding the underlying situation you will probably make things worse. The place to start is by really understanding what is going on — and what is going in is really a function of the individual views of the people involved. The better you get at listening to and depicting people's points of view the better you will understand each perspective.

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The more you understand the various individual perspectives the more likely it is that you can build a model that integrates those various perspectives. What you're able to do is create a picture of what is going on that the people involved can accept as one that captures what they have in mind. Then, and only then, can you compare that picture with reality and start to see what the gaps are, what's missing and what you can do to make things better. What kind of accommodation, what kind of compromise people will accept and agree to implement.

5. Conclusion

The concepts discussed in this paper stem from my attempts to create a method that can be used to follow the methodology described by Peter Checkland and called Soft Systems. There are more elements to the methodology but the crucial first step to anyone trying to engage with a real world problem is understanding how to approach it in the first place. If you approach it from the point of view of your experience, your knowledge and your history then you will create one kind of change. If you take the time to understand the situation and the perspectives and history and knowledge embedded in it then you might create a different kind of change.

The thing is change happens and it's not always clear when it's good or bad, especially in the short term.

My belief is that change that emerges from the situation is perhaps better than change that is imposed on the situation. And you can only create emergent change when you have the tools to understand what is going on in the first place and that is what makes the Rich Picture approach so useful to us as researchers and participants looking to make a difference in situations.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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