

The Challenge of Peer Organisation

or

the art of being in charge of ourselves
and still working productively together

JanPieter Hoogma

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Preface

In 1996 friends repeatedly asked me to write down my vision of how Co-Counsellors can organise themselves. How can peership be combined with effective organisation? The reason they gave me was that Co-Counsellors in the Scottish network did not really know and understand what my vision was. Eventually I accepted this challenge and wrote two articles for the Scottish Good&Newsletter, published in 1996 and 1997. This publication contains the almost unchanged version of these two articles.

Chapter 1 "Some facts about Co-Counsellors" describes facts that I think need to be taken into account when Co-Counsellors try to organise themselves. These facts actually pose challenges that are easily overlooked. When not dealt with, efforts invested into Co-Counselling often are wasted and lead to disappointment.

In Chapter 2 "Choices made in Scotland" you will find the decisions we made in the Scottish experiment, e.g How did we meet the above-mentioned challenges in Scotland in the period from 1992-1997?

Consensual peership not only promises everybody to have a voice in decision-making but also the opportunity to block everything what one doesn't like. Therefore each peership organisation is confronted with the challenge to avoid the trap of messy, ineffective democracy and to develop a decision making process that involves as many Co-Counsellors as possible and produces wise decisions and good results as well. In Chapter 3 "Decision Making" I take a closer look at critical issues in the decision-making of peer and voluntary organisations. I also describe the proposals I made for the 1997 AGM to improve decision making and involvement in the Scottish Co-Counselling network. Many of my proposals are now implemented, though in amended forms.

At the time it was my aim to write a chapter about how the development of a strong Co-Counselling volunteers base can be stimulated. In 1998 however, my priorities shifted and I didn't finalise and publish the draft. A slightly changed version you can read in the Scottish Section of the five Case Studies "How can we support new Co-Counsellors to settle into Co-Counselling."

Finally, the things I have written are not pure theory or speculative fantasy. I am pleased to see that those ideas translated themselves very much into a vibrant Co-Counselling community in Scotland, now already existing for several years.

Thanks for your attention,

JanPieter Hoogma, February 2001.

Chapter 1: Some facts about Co-Counsellors.

When thinking about organisation generally, I find it important to look at what is 'given'; what is characteristic about the people who are involved in the organising process. Supporting a group of children to organise themselves is different from organising a group of engineers to build a bridge. So what 'facts' do I think are relevant when thinking about a Co-Counsellors peership organisation?

1. People do not enter Co-Counselling to do voluntary jobs; they join for sessions, access to workshops and mutual support

I think that especially after the Fundamentals Co-Counsellors prefer to attend workshops and Co-Counselling events organised by other people rather than to organise them themselves. One cannot assume that after Fundamentals everybody is immediately an autonomous, 'in charge', responsible Co-Counsellor. It takes time to build confidence as client and counsellor and even more time to appreciate Co-Counselling to the full. It is this appreciation that seems to motivate Co-Counsellors to do voluntary jobs for Co-Counselling.

Challenge 1: Supplying Co-Counselling events.

Several aspects are important here:

- Initially most Co-Counsellors behave as consumers: they pick what they like and leave what they don't and look for what they still need elsewhere, if necessary outside Co-Counselling. They vote with their feet. So what Co-Counselling events do they need or want?
- General Co-Counselling workshops provide a good start for new Co-Counsellors: opportunities for sessions and meeting other Co-Counsellors. I believe, however, that the huge variety and needs of Co-Counsellors can only be met by topical workshops related to their different needs, awarenesses and backgrounds. This explains the great success of the International CCI workshops where an enormous variety of workshops is on offer.
So, how can workshops be supplied in Scotland to meet the needs and interests of Co-Counsellors?
- Being supplying with workshops may be nice, but it still leaves us with the question: How can Co-Counsellors be encouraged to develop the skills, the confidence and motivation to organise and facilitate workshops themselves?

Challenge 2: Where do you find volunteers?

Apart from running workshops people are needed for other jobs, essential for keeping the network going and growing, for example the production of the

newsletter, financial management, membership administration, facilitation of the network decision making process, etc.

Quite a lot of Co-Counsellors are prepared to take on small, short term jobs with a clear beginning and end. Only a few are willing and able to offer a long-term commitment that involves a lot of effort and not giving in when things become difficult.

2. Co-Counsellors vote mostly with their feet

Most Co-Counsellors attend workshops, have sessions and organise the support they need. **Many Co-Counsellors don't like business meetings.** They leave Co-Counselling if they don't find what they want or need, rather than making their feet bring them to business meetings to state what they need. Even, if all goes well, only a 20% attendance can be expected at an AGM.

Co-Counselling lacks a good feedback culture.

If there is something that Co-Counsellors don't like, they process that in sessions (or not) and very often they don't feed this back to the organisers. Also the 'Positivity' culture inhibits feedback: Co-Counsellors are encouraged to express the 'good and news' of a Co-Counselling event, but NOT what they have found lacking.

So there is hardly any direct feedback for the organisers, facilitators and teachers, unless they actively encourage and promote forms of feedback. If there is feedback, the challenge for organisers is to stay distress free and 'hear' the feedback without saying 'This is your problem. Work on it by yourself'.

Challenges

So there you have the challenges: Given an unavoidable lack of participation and feedback:

- how to create decisions so wise and realistic that they effectively promote Co-Counselling
- how to organise a decision making process that checks in with as many Co-Counsellors as possible and that doesn't rely solely on business meetings.

3. Co-Counselling is not only about one-to-one sessions, but also about socialising

CCI Co-Counselling is mostly perceived as Co-Counsellors having Co-Counselling sessions. In most Co-Counselling literature 90% of the text is about sessions or session related issues. Co-Counsellors, however, spend a lot of time with each other outside sessions and they seem to like it. In the Co-Counselling literature peer relating, fundamental for CCI Co-Counselling, socialising and organisational issues seem to be almost an afterthought.

In this socialising contentious issues can surface: breach of safety, control & manipulation, abuse of power, sexual attractions, conflicts between people, split up of relationships, gossip, to name but a few. It is wonderful that so

many Co-Counsellors with difficult relationships in their background (perhaps one of the reasons why they joined Co-Counselling) are able to relate to each other. Having listened to many safety issues at the 'Conflict & Safety in the Network' workshop, I think, however, that many of these remain buried by the rule of 'Confidentiality'.

Challenges

Challenge 1: How can an awareness of pitfalls, and of healthy / unhealthy socialisation be promoted?

Challenge 2: How can people be provided with empowering support to deal positively with safety, conflicts & complaints issues?

4. People bring into the organisation not only their Person, but also their Patterns

This sounds obvious: why else should people enter Co-Counselling? Particularly relevant here is that **Co-Counsellors bring in patterns around 'organisation', 'conflicts', 'peership, leadership and authority'**. Look at it the other way around: if they were comfortable with their skills in dealing with these situations, do you think they would have needed to join Co-Counselling?

Some damaging patterns for any organisation

The 'Image Builder' pattern

The aim of this pattern is to persuade an audience to confirm a chosen identity of the Co-Counsellor, like 'Bridge builder', 'Defender of the Co-Counselling spirit', 'Defender of the peership or any other Co-Counselling Principle', or simply 'See how good (intelligent, skilled, courageous etc.) I am'. The key here is the audience: only those jobs will be carried out that will make a good impression on the audience.

The 'Fundamentalist' pattern

Although this pattern can take the form of 'Defender of the Co-Counselling Spirit', or 'Defender of the Peership or any other Co-Counselling principle', as in the 'Image Builder' pattern, it is exclusively about principles. And the audience is totally unimportant, as the pattern is based on self-righteousness. The damage lies in the fact that this pattern is basically not interested in making things work. Even when the principles are upheld, there will be a search for another principle in danger of violation. There is a notorious example from Vietnam: 'We celebrate the liberation of this village from communism on behalf of democracy. We regret that in the process there are no people left anymore....'

The 'Victim' pattern

This pattern is recognisable by blaming 'You are powerful (disempowering, hierarchical), and your power (actions, approach) stops me from being powerful myself.' The key here is: the blamer is basically not prepared to

become powerful him/herself and to negotiate a good power sharing. Often the aim is to damage and this manifests itself sometimes in the fact that the person concerned may be the last one to hear of the complaints. By which time the gossip patterns can be rife.

The 'Stirrer, Rebel or Creating Chaos' pattern

This pattern enjoys stirring other people and playing games with them, in order to see confusion and chaos simply for the sake of it. This needs to be distinguished from honestly issue raising that might happen in a provocative way, but with a commitment to bring these issues to a good end. Here the challenge is to recognise properly what the underlying motives are.

What does this mean for organisation?

The challenge for individual Co-Counsellors:

When confronted with these and other patterns, there is a big invitation to get hooked into them. The challenge is to avoid this. By the way, this is easier said than done.... People can really believe their own patterns that they are doing absolutely the right thing and acting in good faith. Not all Co-Counsellors can see through this and link in with their own patterns. This can lead to a snowball effect and utter confusion and demoralisation.

The challenge for peer organisations:

Just as the door is open for everybody to be involved in the decision-making processes, the door is also very much open for everybody's patterns, which may be destructive to Co-Counsellors who work for Co-Counselling and so to the organisation itself.

- If the organisation doesn't want to lose its active people - who are scarce in Co-Counselling anyway- it needs to provide protection against these harmful patterns.
- On the other hand the active volunteers need to be kept accountable to the other members of the network. So methods of challenging them in an open, safe and responsible way need to be devised.

Patterns around making commitments

Apart from these four unproductive patterns Co-Counsellors can have other difficulties around making commitments. People like to show their willingness and make a good impression by taking on jobs. The line that 'Everybody is in charge of their own lives' seems to encourage Co-Counsellors to break their commitments almost as easily as they take them on. Sometimes they don't even respect the need of others to be informed of their change of mind!

The challenges:

- to operate with commitments which are not fulfilled
- to create a culture that values & encourages realistic commitments that can be honoured.

5. Most Co-Counsellors have a limited and fragmented awareness of Co-Counselling

New people come into Co-Counselling continuously. During Fundamentals, understandably they explore the basic skills for sessions and gain some insight into the Co-Counselling culture. There is little time to highlight the vast richness and historical variety of Co-Counselling or to acquire insights into how the peership organisation has been developing. There is almost no literature about the CCiS, its history and its organisation. So it is not amazing that most (new) Scottish Co-Counsellors don't know why we decided in 1992 on "Scottish" instead of "Small & Local", on the objective of "the highest possible Quality", and on "Network instead of Community".

Some of the challenges

- Clarifying to Co-Counsellors how many opportunities Co-Counselling has to offer.
- Making the previous experiences and insights available, so that people can make their own informed choices and decisions, and that re-inventing the organising wheel again and again is minimised as much as possible.

6. Physical restrictions of peership

Experience shows that only groups of 6 (8 under the most optimum conditions) are able to run themselves purely as a peer group i.e. without any appointed facilitator. The condition for success is that each group member is equally distress free, knowledgeable and able to manage a group process. The reason for this is that the bigger the group, the more information needs to be processed and negotiated by each member.

Thus in Co-Counselling even small peer groups often work with an appointed facilitator and because of the peership principle rotate the facilitation.

Although peership logically dispenses with the cult of the personal leader, it can't dispense certain activities and functions of leadership, for example focusing meetings, creating directions, co-ordinating activities and encouraging the available volunteering manpower. These are all vital and necessary processes in any organisation.

The bigger and more heterogeneous the groups are, the more complicated these processes become. That means that somebody who is able to facilitate a support-group evening may not necessarily be able to facilitate workshops, or to see a business meeting through from start to finish, including the preparation, the meeting itself and its aftermath.

Challenges

- As the quality of the facilitation is crucial for the results, how can Co-Counsellors be encouraged to become good facilitators?
- How can facilitation in the network be organised in such a way that everybody can feel in control of the decision making process?

Chapter 2: Choices made in Scotland

After having described some challenges in the previous chapter, the question is raised now "How were these challenges met in Scotland?" Here I describe the experiments we came up with in Scotland in the period from 1992-1997.

1. 'Scottish' instead of 'Small & Local'

Decisions

- *At the East of Scotland AGM in November 1991 the common aim was agreed to go for a 'membership of 1000 Co-Counsellors in five years'.*
- *The founding meeting of the CCiS in October 1992 decided to go for 'Co-Counselling in Scotland', 'Scottish' in this context meant as geographical area to be covered rather than 'national'.*

1. A 'Big' network provides more volunteers than a small one

If one takes as nominal figure that about 10% of the Co-Counsellors is prepared to do committed voluntary work, then in a small community of 50 Co-Counsellors only 5 people are available to carry the flag. This makes this community dependent on them. In a network of 1000 Co-Counsellors there will be 100 people available, and then the outlook is totally different. Enough people for organising & facilitating workshops and more than enough people for the newsletter etc. So in the future continuity needs not to be dependent on individuals like me.

2. A 'Big' network can better meet the diverse needs of Co-Counsellors

A big network is not only able to organise a great variety of topical workshops, but can also sustain a yearly recurrence of some of the more 'vital' workshops, like 'Death, Loss & Bereavement', 'Relationships', 'Bodywork', 'Conflicts' etc. Key is here that there will be enough Co-Counsellors interested in these workshops. For example, in 1994 with a small network of about 100 members, there was a workshop on 'Death, Loss & Bereavement' attended by about 24 Co-Counsellors. The years after on average only 2-3 Co-Counsellors were interested. In a network, ten times bigger, 20-30 people each year would be interested, enough to organise this workshop for again and again.

A big network also prevents 'unnecessary' dropout. In a group bigger than 100 there is far more chance for everybody to find partners of their liking. In a small community however the differences among people can turn into a selection process: those who don't fit, tend to leave, as there may be no partners available.

3. A 'Big' network supports small, local communities that otherwise have a smaller chance of survival

When small communities are embedded in a bigger network, their members are more likely to attend Co-Counselling events outside their local community, weaving their connections with other Co-Counsellors and finding some additional Co-Counselling inspiration. This strengthens the Co-Counselling within the small community. In times of crises the small community is more likely to ask for and to get support.

2. The choice for 'Quality'

During the discussions about the Newsletter at the AGM in November '92 we decided to go for the 'Highest Possible Quality'.

Co-Counselling is about improving the quality of life. On the whole Quality attracts Quality. It is a quality Good&Newsletter that keeps Co-Counsellors in Scotland connected in a dynamic network. It is the quality of Co-Counselling that inspires Co-Counsellors to tell other people about Co-Counselling. It is quality that persuades people to want to know more and more about Co-Counselling and to stick with Co-Counselling in the longer term. As time goes on a more varied and knowledgeable core of Co-Counsellors develops in Scotland, inspiring other Co-Counsellors in their turn.

Mandela paraphrased: 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate in the face of 'quality'. It is our 'Quality', not our Inadequacy, that frightens us most.'

3. 'Network' instead of 'Community'

A **network** is generally defined as a pattern of connections, e.g. chains of people, of computers, of broadcast systems, or a train network. One can access networks and generally they provide opportunities. The word '**Community**' stems from 'common unity' and means a group with common interests, beliefs or origins. A community supposes a 'we all belong together'. In a community, people are part of it or not. If they don't like the community, the only choice is to leave the community.

In a network everyone is free to choose with whom to relate and on what basis and to stay away from people if they wish to.

Decision at the AGM 1994: the CCiS describes itself not anymore as 'Co-Counselling Community' but as 'Co-Counselling Network' with one of its aims, being to support 'forms of community'

Some of the reasons for this change:

- People entering Co-Counselling are more interested in joining a Co-Counselling network that provides Co-Counselling opportunities than a Co-Counselling Community that expects individuals to belong to a group.
- As long as Co-Counsellors share their truth instead of imposing it on others, a network can carry a huge variety of basic beliefs, e.g. Marxism, Buddhism, Christianity, Socialism, new age spirituality etc. A single community, however, can have per definition only one set of shared beliefs, their common unity. A Co-Counselling network therefor can give

equally space to Co-Counsellors who think that 'spirituality' is the new paradigm of Co-Counselling, and to others who think that this is irrelevant.

- The concept of a 'Network' provides a down-to-earth clarity, as in daily life most people are familiar with a road or rail network; they know some implications: a 'code of conduct' is necessary for 'safety', and effort needs to be put into it for maintenance and development.

Where does this leave peership so far?

For Co-Counsellors using the Co-Counselling network

Like using a car on a road network Co-Counsellors are able to travel to anywhere, with anybody they like at the pace they like. In this way they are peers.

The more developed and the more attractive the Co-Counselling network, the greater the opportunities for individual choices. More and more people can enjoy Co-Counselling. In this way I feel CCoS starts to function, providing more and more workshops, support groups and other Co-Counselling opportunities.

What about peership & the network organising group?

It may be clear by now that there are some fundamental imbalances: some Co-Counsellors volunteer to do network jobs and others do not; some people want to be involved in the decision making processes, others vote exclusively with their feet. And that is still OK!

Challenges for peership organisers

(In my order of priority)

1. How to get as many Co-Counsellors as possible involved in volunteering to jobs necessary for the network?
2. How can 'wise' decisions be made, knowing that quite a lot of Co-Counsellors don't want to be directly involved in this process?
3. How can peership be maintained in spite of this inequality in participation?

Chapter 3: Decision Making

Decision-making: a hot topic.

At the moment several Co-Counsellors in the CCiS seem to take an interest in decision making processes.

There is the challenge of our growth too. The bigger the networks, the less everybody knows everybody. More and more new Co-Counsellors join the network. Also fewer and fewer things can be done in an informal way. Thus the decision making processes need to be clear and on paper to inform and involve them...

Everybody knows how messy and pointless democratic meetings can be. It is possible to make - in 10 minutes - many, many decisions. However with zero effects, like on New Year's Eve. So what challenges do we need to face up to in order to make effective decisions?

Challenge 1: Implementation

Is there any point in making decisions at AGMs or in the network, if they are not going to be implemented? So we need to look first at this aspect of decision making.

'Mission critical' jobs

Back to implementation. It simply means that jobs need to be done. However, some jobs matter critically to the functioning of the Co-Counselling network, more than others do.

I call jobs '**mission critical**', when

1. a bad implementation or none at all damages the Co-Counselling network or the reputation of Co-Counselling in general
2. a quality implementation is a must for the functioning of the Co-Counselling network.

They are in my opinion:

- **teaching Fundamentals:** *Fundamentals are crucial for bringing in fresh Co-Counsellors, the life blood of the network. Ineffective Fundamentals produces people who are not only unable to put Co-Counselling in practice, but are also likely to give Co-Counselling a bad or indifferent name. Several Co-Counselling communities acknowledge this by having accreditation procedures for Co-Counselling teachers.*
- **publishing the Good&Newsletter:** with its diaries, workshops, address lists, etc. *It forms the main communication channel among all Scottish Co-Counsellors. If it is too late, unreadable or badly laid-out, people will not get the information in time, or worse lose their interest in reading it. Some Good&Newsletter posts are mission critical, such as the editing, co-ordination, laying-out, printing and distribution, others are not.*
- **facilitating the Summer Week & New Year Workshop:** *Not only of great value for the overall Scottish connections, it is of critical value for*

new Co-Counsellors to settle in into Co-Counselling. If badly facilitated it can put them of Co-Counselling.

- **facilitating the General Meeting processes:** the AGM and other general meetings are crucial for the decision making process. *Bad meetings put Co-Counsellors off to come next time, while bad decisions are unhelpful too.*
- **Trust Persons:** *as they need to be skilled and trustworthy to support Co-Counsellors with safety and conflict issues. Safety in the network is of crucial importance.*
- **Treasurer & Membership Administrator,** *as it is of critical value to keep the finances in control*
- **Workshop Organiser,** *as this needs to provide the supply of workshops that Co-Counsellors need for staying in the network.*

Mission Critical Jobs are so important that we need to ensure at AGM level and in the Constitution that their implementation has the best possible results.

Different levels of commitment

Mission critical jobs require high levels of commitment. Apart from patterns around making commitments (see my previous article), I observed in Co-Counselling different levels of commitment. Depending their personal situations, people contribute valuably to Co-Counselling, but not always with a commitment sufficient for a 'mission critical' job.



- **'Continuity commitment':** a long term commitment (a year at least!) to make or keep things working, including facing adversary conditions and dealing with them without backing off. A commitment necessary for mission critical jobs, like the two key functions in the newsletter: 'co-ordinator' and 'composer'.
- **'Serious, occasional commitment':** almost the same as 'continuity commitment', but only for the durance of one project, for example the organisation of a SummerWeek, or child minding.

Then there are levels of commitment that are not sufficient for mission critical jobs, especially when there are deadlines to be served.

- **The 'serious, timeless' commitment:** people will do their job at some time- you can be sure about that -, but deadlines won't be kept.
- **The 'easy going' commitment:** here the commitment depends on the situation, mood or what makes the heart sing. If it happens, then the job will be done wholeheartedly.

The challenge so far to the AGM

Because of the perceived scarcity of volunteers willing to do jobs, almost any offer at an AGM to do a job meets often immediately acceptance and relief. However, this may endanger a good implementation, specially when people offering to do a job, think they can do it and actually lack commitment and/or skills.

This raises some questions:

- What are the mission critical projects?
- What levels of skills and commitments are minimally required to ensure them an as good as possible implementation?
- When people offer to do a mission critical job, how do we know that they are able to do the job and not running a pattern, for instance going for a 'glamorous' job?

'On behalf of the network.' What does that mean?

People volunteering jobs in Co-Counselling; can be easily seen as doing jobs on behalf of the CCiS. But there is a problem and it has to do with a line in the CCiS Constitution: 'the AGM is the only body which can ratify or change **decisions on behalf of CCiS.**' For some decisions and actions this seems quite clear: spending CCiS money, collecting subscriptions or organising an AGM. It becomes confusing, when it concerns other actions and decisions. Let me explain.

Take teaching Fundamentals? Most of my pupils join the CCiS, so it looks as though my teaching Fundamentals is on behalf of the CCiS. So do I need approval by the AGM for my decision to teach? What if I were not a member of CCiS, and my pupils still join CCiS?

What about the SummerWeek? Does it need AGM approval, because a CCiS member is organising it? The SummerWeek in Lauriston Hall apparently does not, as its organisation is in hands of Co-Counsellors from outside Scotland.

What about a Network Workshop (Network Workshop) as 'Conflict & Safety in the Network'? If teaching Fundamentals appears to be on behalf of the CCiS and does not seem to need AGM approval, why should this Network Workshop need AGM approval?

'On behalf of' has apparently more than one meaning. One is 'as a representative of' or 'in name of'. The other is, 'in the interest of', 'to the advantage of', etc.. The difference is that in the former meaning 'authority' has been delegated to do so, while in the latter this is not necessarily the case.

There is a good reason for diminishing this unclarity. We need to preserve the CCiS as a free, organic organisation with a culture based on initiative, trust and mutual respect. This unclarity causes trouble sometimes for volunteers taking creative initiatives that benefit Co-Counselling. That fact that their activities can at present easily be labelled as 'on behalf of the CCiS' provides some people with an excuse to blame them for being hierarchical, overpowering, etc.

My proposal for the Constitution:

Only those actions are regarded as 'on behalf of the CCiS', only when the AGM has delegated them with a specified authority to a job holder or individual Co-Counsellor.'

All actions for the benefit of CCiS that don't have a delegated authority - although they may 'appear' as being 'on behalf of the CCiS' - do not need any approval of the AGM!

The challenge to the AGM is:

- to sort out which jobs need delegated authority

- to approve proper job and authority descriptions
- to make and keep the executives accountable to the AGM, *specially where quality control is important*

Let volunteers get on with their jobs!

We need to take into account that the implementation generally will be done by a handful of volunteers. They come from within Co-Counselling and most of them did not join for voluntary work in the first place. Thus there is a huge challenge in recruiting volunteers. This topic in its own is so important that I spend the next part of this series on how to get more and more Co-Counsellors involved in the network organisation.

As volunteers are scarce and their time even more scarce, it is important to let them get on with their jobs as much as possible.



Endless meetings

One of the traps of peership and consensus, are endless meetings about any detail and principled correctness. Everybody wants and has the right to have their say in everything. Plenty of patterns and contra-patterns embellish this mess. These meetings often end in confusion and demotivation, while the volunteer is left increasingly bewildered and less likely to volunteer again.

To avoid this trap quite often another trap is chosen: 'Because we all are peers, everybody has access to any job and, moreover, the personal creative freedom to do it in their way. Nobody has the right to tell anyone how this should be done. So get on with the job and trust the process.' In practice, however, this does not always deliver good results.



So how can we get the best of both worlds? How can we achieve that (mission critical) jobs are done with

- **the quality at a level necessary for the Co-Counselling network and**
- **as much freedom as possible for the volunteers so that they can get pleasure and a sense of achievement out of the job**
- **as few and as short as possible meetings**

Creating quality or 'Management by Desired Outcomes'

By this method a project or jobs are described in terms of their desired outcomes, together with a specification of the required quality.

In most cases the process doesn't need to be detailed. This gives volunteers the freedom to achieve the desired outcomes in their own way. For some jobs, however, parts of the process need to be defined, like the Treasurer using a particular computer finance program to ensure quick access to data, making reports and continuity in the accounting method.

When people take on a job, they know beforehand what the desired end results of their jobs are.

The challenge here is to work out these 'Desired Outcomes' and to include these in clear job descriptions.

When a job is too big for one person to produce good results, for instance the Good&Newsletter, it needs to be broken down in a series of smaller, manageable jobs. Each job with its own desired outcomes and clarity about what level of commitment and skills are necessary.

This also implies creating places where people can develop skills and show their commitment, before they take up high level commitments in mission critical jobs. E.g. aspirant teachers can do some teaching in Fundamentals; people interested in the Good&Newsletter can start to take full responsibility for a part of the newsletter, e.g. a regional section, or a series of interviews.

At **AGM level** we can agree on the 'Desired Job Outcomes' and the job descriptions. As an additional advantage, these 'desired job outcomes' allow the AGM to evaluate the jobs done and by doing so increase the accountability of the executives to the AGM.

Getting the most out of as short as possible meetings

In my opinion 'consensus' as way of making decisions is not always a time effective and productive way of making decisions. For instance, talking about newsletter policies or taking about writing a shared article can take forever. At some point, however, the newsletter or the article needs to arrive into the letterboxes.

In the **preparation stage of a project**, the people involved may share and discuss ideas, and consequently negotiate the desired outcomes of the job with the jobholder. Consensus can be very valuable here. The time for this stage, however, needs to be limited so that the job holder(s) can get on with the job at some point.

During the **production process**, the person in charge makes the decisions; the other people are there for support and suggestions only, not for making the decisions. The person in charge may invite support and suggestions, perhaps he doesn't. This frees him up to do the job to his own insight.

In the **evaluation or debriefing stage**, all the people involved can meet and assess whether they agree with the executive's decisions, whether in the future things need to be done differently. Here again, a consensus decision-making process can be useful.

Challenge 2: Juggling the AGM Agenda

At present, anybody can place any topic on the AGM agenda and anyone can take up facilitation on the spot. For an AGM to be really in charge of the Network's decision making, the agenda and the facilitation need to be very relevant and effective.

To clarify this, I would like to draw your attention to the following points to be juggled.



Juggling the agenda

1. Restricting the AGM Agendas: only topics relevant to running the network!

In my opinion an AGM should be about running the network, not about personal or interpersonal issues or whatever else people may bring up. 'Running the network' contains enough topics for discussion and decision making to fill several weekends.

There are two aspects, which I think are relevant for running the CCiS network.

Meeting the needs of the existing Co-Counsellors in the network

I consider this one of the most important priorities, as it forms the base of a spiralling expansion process. The longer Co-Counsellors stay in the network, the more skilled they get and the more prepared they become to facilitate workshops and help to run the network. This in turn will meet the needs of more Co-Counsellors so they may stay longer in the network, get more skilled etc.. The other way around, when the network loses its new Co-Counsellors almost as fast as it gains them, the network is ill: it has diarrhoea. If not cured, there will never be a spiralling up process.

What are their needs specifically?

How can we know what the needs of Co-Counsellors are? Most Co-Counsellors vote with their feet: they do not attend workshops they don't like and don't come to the AGM to tell what they need. This raises the question whether Co-Counsellors attending the AGM really reflecting the needs of the people who are not attending the AGM. I doubt it. Could it be that a good marketing research approach may prove more effective in assessing the needs of Co-Counsellors than consensus at an AGM?



There is an indirect way of trying to assess, whether the network meets its members' needs. This is looking into the membership statistics with questions like:

- 'Is the network membership growing?'
- 'Do new members stick for a while or do we lose them fast?'
- How many people are generally leaving each year?

Meeting the needs of the network members may be a difficult topic to facilitate a proper debate on; still I think it ought to be part of the AGM

a

g	
Aims of the CCiS (1996)	
e	1. To promote Co-Counselling and to improve and strengthen the Co-Counselling skills and knowledge of Co-Counsellors in Scotland;
n	
d	1.2. To provide Co-Counselling opportunities and support for the members of the Network;
d	
a	1.3. To unite and support Scottish Co-Counsellors and to co-ordinate and pool their energies for the promotion of aims 1 & 2;
.	
.	1.4. To support and promote forms of Co-Counselling communities within the Network
.	1.5. To maintain and develop links with other CCI (Co-Counselling International) Networks & Communities.

Meeting the 'network' needs

The second topic group is **looking after the needs of the network organs**, e.g. the Good&Newsletter, Financial and Membership Administration, Mailshop, Fundamentals, teacher training, etc. How are they doing? What practical things need to be decided now, e.g., discharging and appointing post holders, approving a budget for the post? Also what development do they need, e.g. job descriptions?

2. Evaluating the past & designing the future

Of course we want to make decisions that are as wise as possible. Why otherwise all that effort to implement them? It is only afterwards, however, that we may really know whether the decision was a wise one. It is like the proverbial pudding: the proof of it is in the eating.

Here we meet a big challenge to Co-Counselling AGMs. As this meeting is a here and now experience for many participants, with only a little information about the past, there is little appetite for looking back, for evaluating the course of events. So it can be quite difficult to see whether a taken decision was a wise one. Apart from this we do have hardly a good culture for evaluating.

3. Ways to ease the agenda burden

We have only a weekend for one AGM a year. While the network becomes bigger its topics have also the tendency to expand! Thus is worthwhile to consider the question, how we can do more in the same amount of time.

Policy groups & their executives

When the AGM is presented with written policy proposals - perhaps already discussed in the Good&Newsletter - it has a firm base for discussion and decision making. Big groups - what the AGM will be in the future - are not good in thinking up policy proposals themselves; small groups are. So why not leaving this to 'policy groups'? The AGM can give them a list of points, which it thinks are the good characteristics of the specific policy.

Potential **Policy Groups** with the job holders involved, could be:

- Money matters (*Treasurer & Membership administrator*).
- Good&Newsletter & Internal Communications (*The Editors*)
- Safety & Conflict in the network (*Trust Persons & Teachers*)
- Network maintenance & development
- Fundamentals & Further skills (*Teachers*)
- CCiS-Decision making processes

Network Workshops & Special General Meetings

Sometimes topics can be so big that they need a specific weekend. Past examples were: a SGM (March 1995), mainly about the Good&Newsletter statute, and a Network Workshop about 'Safety and Conflicts in the Network' (March 1996).

4. Proposal for AGM Weekend Agenda

If the AGM wants to be really in charge of the CCI's decision making, then it needs to evaluate whether the developments are as aimed at and if this is not the case, to design different ways. That is why we need time to reflect on these three questions:

- **Is the CCI's achieving her Constitutional aims?** (See box)
(Saturday morning)
In a way these Aims form the reason and base on which we work together.
- **How healthy is the network?**
(Saturday Afternoon)
- **How healthy are the CCI's organs?**
(Sunday Morning)

Each of the above sections can have its own debates, proposals and decision-making parts. By bring them together under these headings, there will be integration of the historical background, with the proposals for future change within the frame of the CCI's's aims. The Annual CCI's Reports can play an important role in the preparation of the AGM participants.

Apart from these very purpose oriented sections, I think we need also free floating sessions

- **Common understanding**
(Saturday Evening)
An exchange of questions and opinions highlighting the differences in opinion.
- **Whatever comes up**
(Sunday Afternoon)
Here people can raise attention for network topics not raised so far, without debate, only with questions for clarifications.

Challenge 3: A 'Network decision making' Executive

How can we make the AGM more effective and in charge of the Network's decision making? Quite a lot of the decision making happens outside the AGM, as it has not yet developed sufficiently enough to be in charge. For instance the CCI's has not managed to approve the budgets of the last three years.

When in the future the network has as many as 1000 members, we can expect at least 100 Co-Counsellors to attend the AGM! The CCI's is the only CCI Co-Counselling organisation that spends a **whole** weekend on its AGM.

Therefore, looking at the efficiency of the AGM is necessary. The AGM's success is not only dependant, I think, on its implementation, but also very much on its preparation, its facilitation and how well prepared all its participants are.

One way of strengthening the functioning of the AGM, is to appoint an executive who is in charge of the facilitation of the network decision making process. Here is a possible job description.

1. Preparing the AGM Agenda

The main task here is to juggle the items for the agenda. Some items will be of a greater benefit for the running of the network than others.

2. Preparing the AGM Participants

The AGM often consists of a continuously changing mixture of people. Although peers, there is an enormous variation in experience, intentions, needs, expectations and outlooks! There are

- the **executives and other volunteers** who want clarity & support, and who can be sometimes made accountable to the AGM
- the more **experienced Co-Counsellors**, some with a lot of Co-Counselling business meeting experience, who would like to influence the direction the network takes without always wanting to commit themselves
- the **new people**, curious about the workings of the organisational side of the network, not necessarily well informed about the ins and outs of the AGM and the network, and sometimes straight from Fundamentals.



'Thinking from an overview....'

So what is necessary to prepare this mixture of Co-Counsellors for an AGM?

As well as publishing the agenda prior to the AGM, other measures need to be taken.

1. AGM participants are clear about what they are expected to accomplish

Groups only become productive, when they have a clear, common understanding why they are meeting and what they must accomplish. Normally these groups go through a development before they reach this point.

Because of the fluidity of the AGM's composition, there is much less opportunity for its participants to reach this level of common understanding. This makes it even more dependent on the skills of the facilitator(s).

One of the things participants need to know is how they effectively can contribute to the decision making process. Therefore they need to have an insight into how the CCI's decision making process works and what renders it effective.

2. AGM participants need to think from an overview

Co-Counsellors attending an AGM need to

- be able to see the CCI's network from different perspectives simultaneously;
- from a 'helicopter' view of the Scottish network as a whole - its local communities, its organisation, its Constitution - rather than having only experience in local Co-Counselling

- from the perspectives of new Co-Counsellors who are just joining the network
- through the eyes of teachers trying to provide Fundamentals and the necessary publicity and follow-up
- from the financial perspective
- from an overview of the structural network issues, e.g. safety, organisation and network development
- an overview of the decision making process within the network and the particular place the AGM has in that
- an awareness about conflicts between care for the network versus personal interests

The Annual Network & Community Reports are an attempt to provide this kind of overview.

3. Facilitating the AGM or SGM

I think the facilitation of an AGM needs to be of ‘tiptop’ quality. The AGM is not the place where Co-Counsellors can do their first steps in facilitating business meetings. There are enough opportunities for this elsewhere in the network: regional meetings, ‘Needs, Wants and Offers’ at Summer weeks, Community Days, etc.

On the other hand, it would be great when as many experienced Co-Counsellors as possible participate in the facilitation. The executive can play an important role here, for instance by preparing the agenda with Co-Counsellors who would like to take up parts of the facilitation.

Culture setting

Another aspect of the decision making process is the Culture setting. We have already some effective procedures in place. Clarifying the items of the Agenda in ‘Title’, ‘Reason’ and ‘Purpose’ is one. Working with 40 minutes’ slots and 10 minutes breaks is another one. We need more development here, without discussing and re-inventing the culture setting again and again at AGM itself.

4. Promoting the Network Structure Development

Here several topics that I wrote about earlier come together. It is about supporting the development of:

- The decision making process
- A clear executive job structure,
effective in its organisation & accountable to the AGM
- The Constitution,
proposing amendments and ways how the constitution can get more widespread understanding.

Keeping a check on the implementation of the AGM decisions

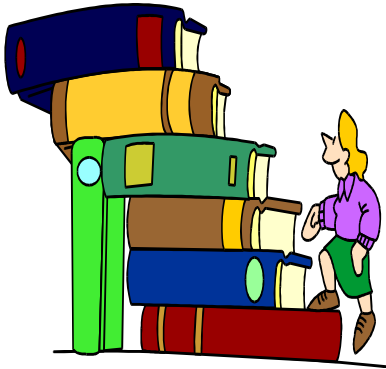
Many decisions of past AGMs have not been implemented at all, for instance the proposal for a ‘Co-Counselling Magazine’ besides the Good&Newsletter. So supporting Co-Counsellors, who committed themselves to implementing an AGM decision, is one possibility; another is thinking about the conditions that make implementation more likely.

5. Other responsibilities

There are some points left:

- Getting as many people as possible to the AGMs
- Publicity
- Organising the AGM venue

Literature



John Heron: **'Co-Counselling Teacher's Manual'** June 1978, *The chapter about 'Decision Making Models' pg. 29-30 suggest other decision making processes as well as 'consensus'!*

Charles Landry et al. **'What a way to run a railroad. An analysis of radical failure.'** in Comedia's Series: Organisations & Democracy'

A splendid analysis why so many egalitarian organisations of the seventies failed...

Fran Rees: **'How to lead work teams. Facilitation skills'** 1991. *One of the most 'simple', excellent books on facilitating meetings I have ever read.*

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