

ESCAPING FROM THE COMMAND & CONTROL PRISON

John Joplin is involved in an exciting project to build an ecological village at Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary, Ireland.

What most interests him is the kind of organisation and the sorts of processes appropriate to achieve this. Here he shares some insights gleaned from direct experience.

The life of The Village can be viewed as having three (not very distinct) phases. The first phase got the project off the ground, the second completes the development, and the third is when people will live there.

In the first phase, a small group of visionary individuals dreamt up the idea and got the project under way. The basic idea was to buy land for development as a model ecological village. An ecological charter covering energy, waste, biodiversity and so forth, was composed. After a long search a 27 hectare (67 acre) site adjoining the centre of Cloughjordan, a once prosperous small town in the depths of rural Ireland, was selected and an option to buy the land for just under Euro €1 million was negotiated with the owner.

An outline planning permission to build 132 dwellings in accordance with the ecological charter was prepared and, at the request of the planning officers, an application for detailed planning permission for the infrastructure works (roads, drains etc.) was lodged at the same time. Great care had been taken to introduce the proposals to the local inhabitants and as a result there was little opposition to the granting of planning permission, which is now expected shortly. In the meantime, the membership has grown to over forty.

The second phase includes completion of the land purchase, construction of the infrastructure works, recruiting another 90 members (except that a few blocks of sites have been earmarked as available for sale to corporate buyers for social housing) and selling the serviced plots at prices which, when added together, equal the total of all the costs incurred. Members can then either build their own dwellings or employ a builder. The second phase also includes the construction of community buildings.

Once all the building has been completed, there will be an endless

process of developing a 'sustainable community'. That's the third phase. People will have their own dwellings and be responsible for their own families. They will have the shared use of certain community buildings and facilities, such as allotments, and a shared commitment to the ecological charter. They will have agreed to involve themselves in the life of the community but not in any particular way.

There will be no 'community' in the sense of a single unit living together. Nor is this a 'spiritual' community with a shared source of enlightenment and wisdom as, for example, at Auroville in South India. We rely rather on the combined wisdom of individual members, learning and developing permaculture and other systems-based principles and, through community, achieving much more in terms of sustainable living than we could have achieved as individuals.

THE FIRST PHASE

The founders adopted the legal framework of a company limited by guarantee, with the stated object of creating and managing a sustainable village to serve as a model for sustainable living into the 21st century. It would normally be the role of the board of directors of a company to determine the means to be used to carry out its objectives, but as one would expect the project was seen from the start as a co-operative venture; and from an early stage the members adopted a consensus decision-making process. Thus instead of decisions being made by the board, the forum for decision-making was the members' meeting, with the board of directors (all members) complying with the decisions taken by members, and the staff (also members – two of the founders) doing what they were told by the board. That at least was the theory.

This structure enabled the project to get to the end of phase



one, but only just. By that time its shortcomings had become painfully obvious (not that anyone understood the systemic weakness of the system at the time). The burden of being responsible for all major decisions had been too much for the members' meetings. The agenda at board meetings was too long. It had proved difficult to form effective working groups and implement a wide range of agreed tasks, leaving the staff as the main 'doers', but without formal decision-making powers.

What had in fact happened was that the founders had triggered the birth, not just of a project, but of a living community, and the organisational framework they had chosen, albeit unknowingly, was that of Command and Control. As John Seddon, the occupational psychologist and management

thinker, explains in *Freedom from Command and Control*, the distinctive feature of Command and Control is that decision-making is separated from work. Normally, one lot of people, the managers, take the decisions, and another lot, the workers, implement them. But it doesn't have to be two separate lots of people. What made The Village's structure one of Command and Control was that it separated decision-making and the work, with decisions being made at members' meetings and then filtered through the board, whilst the actual work was done by the staff with some help from members.

To quote John Seddon again, "To tackle variety with a command and control philosophy is to stifle the organisation's ability to handle variety". This refers to

the principle of 'matching variety'. A football team would never win a match if the players only moved when the captain told them. The Village community's ability to handle variety was stifled.

For a project as complex as this, Command and Control only works if there is a powerful and highly organised group in charge ensuring that people have no choice but to do what they are told, as in a military outfit. Even where such systems operate, they do so at the expense of the people – their freedom and creativity is severely limited. In Ireland today, as in most countries throughout the world, our political and economic systems are dominated by Command and Control; we are effectively imprisoned by them and impoverished as human beings.

SECOND PHASE

Command and Control had failed to cope with the pressures thrown up by the project towards the end of phase one. To cope with the scale and complexity of the tasks ahead we are now learning how to escape from Command and Control. This means reversing the separation of decision making from 'doing'. As all enlightened management thinkers now insist, systems work best on the principle of maximum autonomy for all doers, i.e. maximum decision making power for the people who do the work in question, combined with processes for co-operation which guarantee the integrity of the system and the individuals within it.

These are some of the steps we have taken so far:

► **The Process Group**
We have formed a group whose sole responsibility is to think about the organisational needs of the community – the design of the system. The group makes recommendations to the monthly members' meetings on these issues.

► **Shared Purpose**
We held a professionally facilitated Revisioning Day and are halfway through a process to agree a 'statement of shared purpose'. This will be reviewed from time to time with new members taking part.

► **Shared Out Responsibilities**
We invited members to form groups to undertake responsibilities in the areas they wanted to get involved with. Details of each proposed group, including who they are to be accountable to and what such accountability will involve in practice, must be approved by a members' meeting. These groups then make and act on their own decisions. So far fourteen groups have been approved. A remarkable degree of competence over a wide range of responsibilities has been evident from the monthly reports of the groups.


► **Monthly Members' Gatherings**
These are organised by the Process Group. The dates, times and places are fixed at the start of each calendar year. Regular features are group reports and special presentations. Proposals requiring a community decision by consensus are made by the relevant group, accompanied by their recommendation. Both old and new members value the way these meetings are run, finding them stimulating and enjoyable.

► **Leadership**
In phase one, the leading founder, who was also employed as project manager, enjoyed a

high-profile, but the nature and role of leadership was confused. Under the current system, there are opportunities for many sorts of leadership and, by the same token, for personal growth.

At the same time as developing these systemic arrangements, we have been able to raise the money required to complete the purchase, half by means of a loan from a social funding institution and half by means of loanstock taken up by members and a few of their friends. The success of the loan stock issue reflects the confidence members now have in the management of the project.

THIRD PHASE

One thing is certain: we won't revert to Command and Control! To cope with what may well be very challenging times, we'll need processes that enable us to learn and keep learning. That kind of resilience comes from diversity and flexibility which is what the most resilient natural systems have. We have a lot more to learn from Nature 

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about The Village see: www.thevillage.ie

Next issue: *Ten Steps to Better Decision Making* by Beatrice Briggs, a founding partner of the International Institute for Facilitation and Consensus.

John Joplin is a co-founder of the Worldwide Democracy Network www.wwdemocracy.org and co-author of the Schumacher Briefing, Gaian Democracies. He is a co-founder and current chair of Feasta, the Dublin based foundation for the economics of sustainability, www.feasta.org. He also jointly edited: Creating a Sustainable London, London – Pathways to the Future, and also the first two editions of Feasta Review.