

# The Hauraki Seachange Project:

## A Case Study of Collaborative Decision Making in Multi-Stakeholder Facilitated Groups

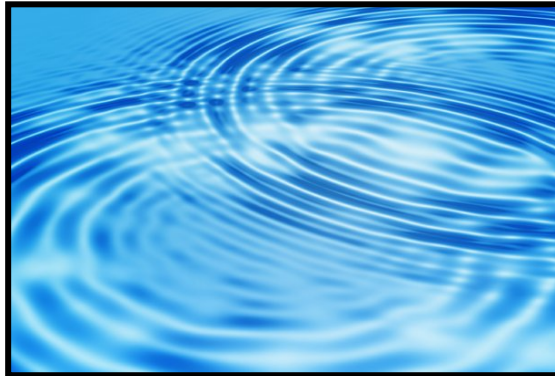
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### Abstract

Creating opportunities for a community to resolve issues that affect it is an exciting and empowering notion. Central to this is a sociometric challenge. This paper describes how a large multi-stakeholder group was facilitated in a decision making process. We present the reasoning behind the use and selection of sociometric criteria and describe the application of sociometry in this facilitated process. A liberating notion is that people can work collaboratively to reach alignment regardless of what their organisational structures and decision making modes are.

### Key Words

Collaboration,  
decision making,  
facilitation,  
multi-stakeholder,  
sociometry.



### The Initial Meeting

My colleague Peter Lawless and I are invited to a meeting of the marine planning team in Auckland. When we arrive we discover that the team includes planners for the Waikato Regional Council and the Auckland City Council. They envision a massive stakeholder-led planning process and want us to assist them. Our job is to facilitate a process to choose a stakeholder working group (SWG) that will have a central role in making all the decisions related to planning for the future use of the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand. We are confronted, as they are, by the sheer number of

organisations involved and the complexity of the project. However we know, from previous experience, some of the essential sociometric ingredients for success and we agree with some excitement to facilitate three days of group process that will assist the people of the Hauraki Gulf to choose and mandate it's SWG. This paper is our story of that process.

### ***Seachange Hauraki***

The Hauraki Gulf comprises 1.2 million hectares of ocean. \$2.7 billion in economic activity flows through the use of the area each year. It is home to a rich diversity of seabirds, whales, dolphins, fisheries, and has unique undersea habitats. Over 2 million people living in the Auckland and Waikato regions are affected by the use of the Hauraki Gulf. Some 400 organisations of all sizes and kinds have a direct stake in decisions relating to the use and preservation of the Hauraki Gulf. How do these 400 organisations choose 14 people to make all the central decisions relating to the marine spatial planning process initiated by Auckland City Council and Waikato Regional Council in partnership?

### ***The Hauraki Seachange Project***

We suggest that we can facilitate an adequate social process to create the best opportunity for an effective Stakeholder Working Group to be chosen by conducting two fora or large gatherings and one workshop over a three month timeframe. We are committed to the notion that any and all stakeholders who have an interest in becoming involved in the process of choosing the mandated representative SWG will have the opportunity to do so.

We design one forum in Auckland and one in Thames followed by a workshop halfway in between. The two fora are promoted to over four hundred stakeholder organisations and also publically as the beginning of a bottom-up multi-stakeholder marine spatial planning process. Each forum is attended by about one hundred and twenty people.

## **The Forums**

The Auckland Forum is set in a huge round room on top of the Auckland Museum. Windows all the way around give a panoramic view of the Hauraki Gulf and its connection to Auckland City. As people arrive at 8:30am they are directed to first meander through an exhibit fortuitously on display of the many species of marine life that live in the Hauraki Gulf.

The seating is set up so that all one hundred and twenty people are sitting in a large three quarter circle with chairs two deep. All participants can see each other across the room. The opening speeches by a few key people who hold positions of authority set a tone of meaning and significance for what we are hoping to achieve. The steps in the overall process are set out: participants in this forum will select representatives to attend an upcoming workshop where they will determine who will be the members of the SWG. The role of the SWG and its independent chairperson is clarified. Having warmed up to the purpose, we focus on the work of the day.

We ask every person to stand up and introduce themselves including the organisation they are from and its connection to the work. This takes quite a bit of time but it is important



for the group to get to know who is present. The project leader from Waikato Regional Council then makes a presentation introducing some of the detail of the use and associated issues with the Hauraki Gulf.

What is evident in the room as people introduce themselves, is how passionate they are about their use of the Gulf and how much this is expressed as a tendency to position themselves and advocate for their cause. There is a positive feeling of anticipation in the group as we break for morning tea.

Our thinking is that the SWG needs to be small enough that it can operate as a consensus-making group. This means no more than fourteen people because as the number of relationships grows, the complexity of each person being genuinely involved and visible increases and the potential to get bogged down in a consensus mire or skip over the top in 'pseudo-consensus' mode increases. Further, these people will not develop the social cohesion necessary to make consensus decisions if they operate as advocates for particular subgroups. So our process is designed to have this broad public stakeholder group identify the best possible people from the community to make the decisions on behalf of all of them. We identify that the people selected will meet two key sociometric criteria: 1) they will be held in the highest regard by the widest range of people across the community; 2) they will have the capacity to continue to connect with

others when difference is being expressed. We design our whole process with these criteria in mind.

### ***The Process***

During morning tea we have fourteen round tables set up in the room. We assign people to tables that create a good mix of different viewpoints. We ask them to talk together about the issues that bring them to the forum. We ask the people at each table to frame some overarching vision statements for the future Gulf they would all like to see. When we have the group share their visions for the Gulf, two things are evident: 1) even though many tables have antagonisms represented, all could name visions that all agreed to; 2) across the room the visions from various tables are remarkably similar. Everyone identifies that the Gulf has to be healthy if it is to continue to provide a living, be a place to play and have thriving wild life. People are surprised to discover that a unifying vision is acceptable to all and that the commercial aims are linked inseparably from the environmental values.

We ask people to gather at the outside edge of the room and say: *“Please consider that the most important thing to discover today is what stakeholder sub-groups exist here. From these you will choose people to represent you at the workshop in a month’s time and that group will choose the SWG from among their number. There are four hundred organisations represented in the room. We need to form stakeholder groups that make sense to you. We want any of you that feel inclined to name a stakeholder group that you feel is important and needs to be represented in the process to name it now. Then take a position at one of the tables, as we do this we will begin to form groups. If someone names the stakeholder group that you want to belong to you go and join them at a table.”*

People excitedly begin naming subgroups – *“Commercial fishing”* – *“Recreational fishing”* – *“Island dwellers”*...

As this continues we say, *“You will see that this is a matter of forming a picture of the whole social system with the right degree of granularity. With so many stakeholders we could form one hundred and twenty groups, equally we could form one group of people committed to the future of the Gulf. The right number of sub groups is the number that makes useful sense of the complex system represented here today.”*

We end up with fifteen stakeholder groups.

As each of the stakeholder groups form at a table, people appear to feel very much at home. We notice they are linking with people who think similar things to them and see the world somewhat how they see it. They

begin discussing the issues they feel strongly about and which also contain the differences represented by the various sub groups in the room. Believing that this will lead to a debate about the issues rather than a focus on selecting who best can form the SWG, we surprise them. We ask each subgroup to begin mapping the organisations that are connected to their sub group; any group whether positive or negative should be represented on their map if there is some kind of relationship between them. People get to work on this task. We introduce the notion that if we put all the maps together we will have a pretty complete picture of all the organisations with a stake in the future of the Hauraki Gulf. We notice that generally these maps only represent positive connections.

Next we introduce the criteria for choosing the people that will become members of the SWG: 1) they are held in the highest regard from the widest range people across the community, and 2) they have the capacity to stay connected with others when differences are being expressed. These people will be our 'Wise Heads'. We ask each stakeholder group to name people and position them and their links on their maps. They then select no more than two people they believe met the criteria. These two people will be the ones with the most positive connections on their maps. They do not have to be present at this day but they have to meet the criteria.

Many groups have difficulty getting down to just two people but all manage two or three. These are the people who will attend the workshop one month later.

We repeat this process in Thames with another one hundred and twenty participants. In Thames they are very passionate about being listened to initially and want to discuss the issues and the rationale for the process we have designed. This appears to us to reflect both a greater awareness of facilitated process and associated issues of power, and also a greater anxiety about the opportunity for them to become genuinely involved. The sixty five people selected by these two fora make up our workshop to be held one month later.

### ***Discussion***

We know that since we live in a democratic society people will readily warm up to advocating for causes, as this behaviour is effective in democratic societies. The people attending are also largely the people that have had long experience influencing decision makers in council, local government and national government. We also know that the SWG won't function effectively if it operates in a democratic fashion. Advocating, negotiating, voting and compromising to arrive at solutions will not

produce an innovative or strong enough outcome. If the group operates this way it will become fractured into subgroups that will be oppositional and that the alignment necessary to produce outcomes will get blocked. Unless the people in the SWG are highly regarded by the community at large, the decisions of the SWG will not hold the respect required and thus the outcomes from the SWG will not be considered a broad mandate from the community. Because the decisions the SWG makes will not represent any one position held by any one stakeholder group, the SWG members will have to stay engaged with their various communities so that people outside the SWG understand and appreciate the conclusions it is reaching. So our task is to assist the large group in finding the people that could operate this way and to warm them up in such a way that they know this was who they needed to choose for the SWG.

This leads us to developing our two key sociometric criteria. The main focus is to warm up the large groups of participants to choosing people who are capable of reaching consensus on contentious issues. The Hauraki Gulf community needs a group of people that could genuinely represent all the key issues and positions to each other while building enough social cohesion that they will be able to grapple with those issues and come to consensus decisions. Working to develop social cohesion and recognising criteria for choosing and rejecting is essentially a facilitated sociometric process.

Many people in the room are highly regarded as advocates – they have built strong reputations as effective change agents. These people are highly regarded by those within their stakeholder groups on this criterion. However this same criterion makes some of them the most highly rejected by members by other stakeholder groups.

The large group process we use is designed to warm the whole community up to a different way of working, where they can thoughtfully assess who could provide leadership based upon these new and different criteria. This warm-up will assist the work of the SWG once it is formed, as there will be awareness in the community of the task required of those they have mandated to be in the SWG.

For these reasons, we consider it vital in the fora that people started thinking about the whole system of relationships and thinking of the work of the SWG outside of the normal battle lines. It is also vital that we did not support the warm-up to debating the issues.

## **The Workshop**

The workshop is set in a rectangle shaped room just large enough for the 65 participants and 10 council staff to sit in a circle with a small space in

the front for speakers. The day is opened with a mihi welcome and karakia prayer. The independent chairperson for the SWG is introduced and makes an opening address about how he perceives the SWG.

Outside in front of our room is a larger rectangular grass courtyard. After the opening we all go outside and construct a geographical map of the Hauraki Gulf like a postcard that fits the rectangle area. Each person locates themselves on the map by standing where they live; and in turn yells out their name and location. We then make a line of people north to south and fold it in the middle so that each person ends up in a pair with those farthest north paired with the farthest south. People introduce themselves in these pairs and talk about what brings them to this meeting. Next each pair joins with another pair and they are invited to discuss the key issues they perceive face the Hauraki Gulf. Each quartet then meets another quartet and they are invited to discuss the clusters of issues they notice in the conversations so far. Each eight joins another eight and the groups of sixteen find a place to sit. They are asked to develop a set of four high level issues statements that contain all the issues present in the gulf. These issue statements are a way to name and include the substantive concerns across the whole group.

Our dual intent is that this is an initial beginning of framing the scope for the marine spatial planning process and that it gives the participants a chance to make new relationships across the stakeholder groups, including experiencing how each other person acts as a member of a working group.

After morning tea, we reconvene in the room and describe the stakeholder groups that have been formed in each forum. We then describe how we have grouped these stakeholder groups into eight clusters that fit together. We ask them to choose a cluster where they feel most at home.

### ***Who Created These Cluster Groups?***

At this point someone objects to the fact that we have created these clusters. There is quite a high degree of anxiety in the group about our creating clusters and people express concerns about the process. As we talk about it, it becomes clearer that people are relating to concepts that the councils have introduced. The council project team have invited people into a bottom-up process in which the participants will be free to think 'blue sky' about any issues they perceive and at the same time, set a timeframe of two and a half years. We describe how this is actually a mixed model rather than a bottom-up model because a two and a half year time frame creates a restriction that means a totally bottom-up process (which

takes five to ten years) is not possible. Participants express that their trust has been damaged and we take time appreciating this.

We describe how we have created a process that will enable this group to choose the best possible people for the SWG and that we have given advice to the council's project team that a SWG consisting of twelve members chosen at this workshop, representatives from two Iwi<sup>1</sup>, an independent chairperson and a facilitator, has the best chance of doing the work required of them.

The group spends some time enquiring into what clusters we have created before choosing the cluster they feel most at home belonging to. They have accepted our process. The clusters have emerged from the stakeholder groups the forum participants have formed and our change is a change in granularity not content. We do not invent new cluster groups, however we do connect some of the stakeholder groups together so that we can give more space to the forming of the SWG membership. If we had an additional day we would have been able to involve the group in making clusters.

Interestingly two people choose clusters that are very different to the stakeholder groups they have been selected to represent. This appears to be an attempt to manoeuvre into clusters where they will more likely be chosen for the SWG and highlights to us a strong sense of the underlying concern that a genuinely collaborative process cannot possibly generate outcomes that will work for everyone.

The cluster groups then meet, introduce themselves to each other and discuss the issues statements that have been developed in the morning. Our main intent is that each group gets to know each other sufficiently well that they can successfully choose their SWG member later. One key issue for us as facilitators is that for our sociometric process to be at all effective, the selections people make have to be based on meaningfully knowing each other. The council project team initially allocated one day for the SWG selection process. They accepted our proposal that three days were needed to ensure there was enough time and social process for the choices made at the end of this workshop to be meaningful. Three days still creates some process constraints however we felt confident the stakeholder group could achieve the central task of choosing its SWG membership intelligently in the time frame of three days.

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<sup>1</sup> Iwi are Maori tribal groups and bicultural partners with the Crown. In this case, the Crown is represented by the councils which it mandates. They have an obligation under the Treaty of Waitangi to include iwi in decision making processes that relate to the natural resources (Taonga) of New Zealand.



### ***Sociometric Process of Choosing the SWG***

Once back in the whole group, we invite each cluster in turn to be the focus of the whole group. We invite any person from the cluster that wants to be selected to be on the SWG to put themselves forward and to speak about why they would be a good member of the SWG. Once we have all the people who have self-selected from one cluster group standing up in different places in the room, we invite the other participants not from that cluster to “go stand next to the person they will most value having on the SWG”. This results in group members standing around each cluster member that has put themselves forward; enabling us to count the number of choices and work out the two potential SWG members most highly valued as wise heads, by the wider group, from each cluster.

Once we have done this for all the clusters we send the cluster groups away to select one SWG member from the two chosen by the wider group. This process ensures that two criteria – 1) the people most highly regarded by the whole community; and, 2) the best possible representative of the cluster of stakeholders - are central in the choosing process. We reconvene mid-afternoon once the cluster groups have chosen. In the meantime we have placed twelve chairs in a semi-circle in the middle of the group space. The Iwi participants have developed a separate process to choose their two members of the SWG at a separate hui (meeting).

The eight people are presented by their clusters to the whole group and the group is asked “*Is anyone not OK with these eight members being on the SWG?*” The group celebrates that the SWG is in the process of being formed. The participants are valuing that the process that is producing these eight people is robust and they are able to choose them unconditionally. These eight people then take their chairs in the centre.

Our hope is that every member of the SWG will have the full support of the whole group present. Our process is designed to make enough sense of the complexity present that people can say yes to each person even though it might not be a person they would choose themselves. This is a sophisticated collaborative process made possible because of the sociometric understanding of the group. It is not truly a consensus building process – we would call it a highly collaborative democratic process because even though we are not deciding by voting and there is 100% agreement for the first eight people, there has not been an overt power of veto set-up. If, for example, one person objects to a selection, our plan is that they be listened to and we use a sociometric process such as a continuum to test the degree of alignment in the whole group to their concern. While we will be able to assist the whole group to explore the response they have to the concern, it is unlikely (although not impossible)

that the group will allow a small group of say five to stop the selection of someone the rest of the group is happy with. More importantly, sufficient social cohesion has developed that people are valuing the process and the members that the process is producing and celebrating.

We ask the whole group to consider the eight chairs currently filled and to now think about what gaps they perceive for the SWG to work effectively and have effective representation of all the central issues. Then we initiate a process of proposing. Each cluster group gathers together in a different area of the room, except those people already chosen for the SWG. They are able after discussion to name an issue that needs representation and a person that would best sit on the SWG for this issue. As people make proposals we have the whole group stand on a continuum from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In this way the group can assess the degree to which each proposal is accepted by the group.

The group is serious-minded about this; people are proposing only issues they feel are very important. We do not have to deal with many people advocating for their private agenda as the group is well warmed up to the task of choosing the best possible SWG for the whole community.

Only one proposal is not accepted 100% by the whole group and this is made by a woman who had been chosen at a forum to attend, representing a particular stakeholder group and who then made the decision to join a radically different cluster in the workshop. It becomes apparent the wider group rejects her more than the issue she is raising. At the request of some group members, we test the issue by asking the whole group to stand on a continuum in relation to the issue she is raising without reference to who will sit on the SWG to represent that issue. From this we get much greater acceptance that the issue matters to the group. The group is able to unanimously accept all the proposals for the last 4 seats on the SWG except for this last one.

In regards to the final issue, the group is conflicted and no one is able to propose a solution that is acceptable. We elect to leave this unresolved question in the hands of the independent chair as he considers the makeup of the whole SWG group. This is



indicative of an autocratic process rather than a democratic or consensus building approach and the independent chair is clear he wants to make a decision with the current members of the SWG fully involved.

We celebrate and end the process of forming the SWG.

## **Discussion on Decision Making in Groups**

In our work, we have observed that there are fundamentally three decision making modes – autocratic, democratic and consensual. These modes are not intrinsically good or bad. However they are almost always a consequence of the structure that is in place. The structure defines who can authorise which decisions and what processes will be involved. For example, a voting process on a committee means it's a democratic structure. Whereas large stratified organisations, such as government departments are structurally autocratic; that is, every manager needs to be aware of what decisions they are authorised to make and which they must escalate to their manager.

While consensus decision making is intrinsically collaborative it is not primarily about everyone agreeing. It is an agreement to keep working with a decision until it will work for everyone. Consensus decision making means that all participants have the power of veto. Because of this power of veto it is not acceptable to fall back to voting when people cannot agree. It is necessary in a consensus decision making context that people are committed to reaching agreement and this means working actively to create proposals that may be acceptable to all. For these reasons, being involved in consensus decision making requires the participants to have developed the capacity to hold the point of tension between what will work for them and what will work for the whole social system. This self-awareness does not necessarily develop as a result of being involved in consensus decision making processes. When social cohesion is low, consensus is either very slow or unworkable because people tend to fall back to a veto position rather than coming forward to attempt to understand the perspective of the other.

It is always possible to design a facilitated process to assist those affected by the decision to be involved in contributing to making it, regardless of how the decision is actually authorised at the end of that process. We define collaboration to mean the process of facilitating involvement in decision-making by those affected. Often, as in this instance, when working collaboratively, people can be fully aligned with the decisions that are made, regardless of the mode of decision making.

The collaborative principle that people can work to reach 100% agreement (alignment) regardless of the decision making mode is evident in the case study described above in four ways.

Firstly, the mode of decision-making. When the councils promised a 'bottom-up' process people broadly assumed that this would mean decisions would be made by a consensus of the stakeholders. However in deciding a two and a half year time frame the council also created a constraint and modelled that actually they were authorised to decide. This is not at all problematic from our point of view. A two and a half year time frame means we must focus more tightly on the scope of the work to be done and be very clear about who is making which decisions at each point. However it was problematic that the council set up a conflict in that people were invited into a process and told they would decide, then later once they had accepted the invitation found out that it was not completely true. This kind of confusion in decision-making is frequently experienced as damaging to trust and it has been our experience that if it happens more than once without being repaired, people become disengaged. We believe it happened in this instance because the council was unaware of the conflict it was creating between time and process. The misperception that every decision must be made 'bottom up' by a consensus of the stakeholders was based on a belief that this was the only way to generate engagement. In our experience however people are excited about getting involved in decisions that affect them and the best way to facilitate this involvement is to be absolutely transparent about the nature of the involvement being offered and the decision-making process in each case.

Secondly, being transparent about what decisions are on the table and which are not. We provided advice to the council's project team about the number of people that could be in the SWG. This was accepted and we designed a process that would achieve this outcome in the time we had negotiated. This means that while the stakeholder group decides who is in the SWG they don't get to decide how many people are in the SWG. In this case, we provided advice based on extensive experience of SWGs, both successful and unsuccessful, that run in other parts of the country. We believed deciding the group size in the fora or the workshop that followed, would have been a considerable distraction. We could have contracted to assist the group to make this decision but it would have taken considerable extra time and we did not consider this would have increased engagement in the process or resulted in a better outcome and it may well have resulted in an unworkable outcome, if, for example, the workshop group settled on a sixty-five member SWG. Some people did express the perspective that they should have been making this decision as a

stakeholder group; generally however people accepted the approach we took.

Thirdly, the decision about the final seat on the SWG could not be decided on the day and was left in the hands of the independent chairperson. This was a shift from a democratic collaborative decision making framework to an autocratic collaborative decision making framework. In some respects it is not ideal. It would have been better if the group on the day could have resolved all the issues associated with forming the SWG and we ran out of time to do this. However, the group present did mandate the independent chair to make this final decision. It was important that this decision was left in the hands of the independent chair rather than the hands of the SWG because the partly-formed SWG cannot be impartial about the membership of the SWG. We have found that it's important not to idealize complex social processes because personality dynamics in social systems mean that very often solutions are not perfect and the real test is in whether the SWG holds the mandate of the community it represents.

Lastly, the councils reassured the fora groups that the outcomes of the SWG work would be taken on board. This is because while they had set up the SWG process to resolve the issues, they had no legal obligation to implement its conclusions. Transparency and the assurance that the work will be taken seriously are essential parts of successful collaborative processes when the decision making authority does not rest with the group.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has described a facilitated large group process of considerable complexity. We believe creating opportunities for the community to resolve issues regarding the use of public spaces is an exciting and empowering notion that involves the sociometric challenge of choosing the best people to work on behalf of all of us. We are delighted to be involved in developing ways that this can be done effectively and contributing to the underlying theoretical framework that guides how things can be done effectively in the group.

We have been inspired by Moreno's work on sociometry. Between 1932 and 1938, Moreno directed action research at a residential school for delinquent girls. In 1937, he launched the journal of Sociometry and by 1942 had opened the Sociometric Institute. These provide the background to his (Moreno, 1953) seminal sociometric work *Who Shall Survive?* His central notion is that we will not survive as a species until we develop the social capacity to keep including each other in the face of our differences.

We believe that developing this capacity is the central concept of Moreno's 'Sociatry'<sup>1</sup> and that the work described in this case study is an example of it. We hope that as the work of the SWG resolves many of the issues on the use of the Hauraki Gulf over the next two years, that people will feel more engaged in the community they are creating.

### **Reference**

Moreno, J. L. (1953). *Who shall survive?* New York: Beacon House.

*Hamish Brown and his colleague Peter Lawless are a part of the team of five that founded Phoenix Facilitation Ltd in 2008 based in New Zealand. Hamish is a Psychodramatist and TEPiT on staff at the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama. He has been working as a consultant and training group facilitators for 18 years. He can be reached at [hamish@phoenixfacilitation.co.nz](mailto:hamish@phoenixfacilitation.co.nz)*



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<sup>1</sup> Moreno's formulation for the treatment of society.