

Sustaining Human Aspiration: Action Learning in Falkirk

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In late 2001 the BP Grangemouth refinery in the Falkirk area of central Scotland announced 1000 redundancies, throwing the local community into despair and attracting vocal criticism from local and national politicians for abandoning the region to its fate. Yet the community today boasts an ambitious programme of economic transformation under the banner "My Future's In Falkirk", a programme that reached the global final (last 16) of BP's prestigious Helios Awards in 2005. It was the only project to be nominated in two categories: as an exemplar of BP's "progressive" brand values and as of "partnership" between BP and other actors. Today the region boasts a new-found confidence and a leadership determined to push the boundaries of what is considered possible. This is the story of the International Futures Forum's contribution to this remarkable turnaround, a story of action learning in the futures field.

BP provides the connection. In early 2001 they provided a generous grant to establish the International Futures Forum (IFF). IFF is a diverse group from a number of countries brought together around the realisation that we live in a complex world that we no longer understand and cannot control. So long as most of our policies and actions are based on the opposite assumptions it seems many complex challenges today will remain deeply intractable. IFF was set up to explore new ways of making sense of the world that might provide the basis for more effective action and therefore a more hopeful future.

A year into our existence we approached three organisations and asked each to give us their most diffi-

cult problem, preferably one showing up as a paradox. BP Grangemouth told us that they were cutting 1000 jobs from the plant to restore global competitiveness, yet this would depress the local economy on which they also depended. We took up the challenge and initiated a "case encounter": a carefully prepared half-day in the community followed by three days reflecting on this and the other two cases.

Many members of the IFF group already earn a comfortable living taking on this kind of engagement. So the first challenge was to take it on in ways consistent with our emerging collective intelligence and insight. We went back through our work and looked for any hint of instruction there about how to behave, what to look out for, what to pay attention to, how to make sense, how to engage with a messy and confusing context. This exercise generated 70 short phrases or "prompts". These helped to recall to mind our own learning, reminded us who we had become as a group and prompted 'IFF thinking' rather than any of our more familiar default modes.

The starting point for our encounter in the spring of 2002 was the "Falkirk Action Plan" – a plan for economic transformation put together by BP and the local authorities containing the boldest initiatives and aspirations for the area then imaginable. What we came to see was that this document itself was in danger of limiting what the Falkirk partners might achieve together. It suggested an underlying model in which the experts had come up with the answers and the only challenge now was for the people of Falkirk to put them into prac-

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tice. And if it failed it would be the people's fault, not the Plan's. That is not how to operate in the complex world, seeking to shape the world to your will: quite the opposite. So we encouraged a less rigid adherence to the Plan.

We suggested that they stretch the Plan – in all directions. That they think more about going out into the world to look for opportunities rather than concentrating only on what they could identify on their doorstep. That they operate in a world of open networks rather than closed clans. That they consider what might be possible if BP were regarded not only as a dirty refinery and chemicals plant (which it is) but also as a creative and resourceful community (which it also is) – coordinating people, machinery and product in a creative, even artistic, process.

What we did at every turn was to look at the language, the attitudes, the processes, the structures, the mindsets that were limiting or risked limiting Falkirk's aspirations – and ways to make sure that they did not do so in the future.

The IFF has remained engaged in the project ever since, supporting the central management team and nurturing the insights from that first encounter. Falkirk gained a greater sense of its potential – "expand what you consider a resource for yourself" was the relevant IFF prompt. As a result this is a community, including a local media, willing to see the glass as half full if given the chance. Leadership, management and planning processes have become more organic to respond to the release of energy in the community rather than seeking to limit or control it. There is a new language and new metaphors – "the living plan", the partners "walking in each other's shoes". And there is a commitment to continuing exploration and an eagerness to learn from other countries, other perspectives, other ways of knowing. There has been a shift in the balance of emotions from fear – of failure, of comparison, of missing targets – towards the excitement of learning, innovation and discovery.

For IFF the learning has been equally significant. We found that the "prompt cards" worked not only for us but also for others. We

now market them as a finished product – their users have included the Microsoft UK board and the Scottish Parliament. We were able to relate our experience to the theoretical epistemological distinctions between actual, probable and possible worlds. Messiness and confusion can be a highly creative space, full of possibility: the encounter helped us understand how to open up that realm and how to manage the consequences.

We learned that all of our thinking and abstract knowledge is worthless without committed individuals who are willing to risk innovation in practice – and that nurturing an insight into action depends more on nurturing and supporting those individuals than articulating and advocating for the idea. And we are learning now that every project has a cycle. This is Falkirk's challenge today – to maintain the energy and momentum of the early years, just at a point when the founders have moved on, the accolades are attracting attention from the rest of the system, and expectations are higher than they have ever been. IFF looks forward to continuing to play a role in this evolving story. In an age of boundless complexity every project is action learning. To quote another IFF prompt: we must "redesign the plane whilst flying it".

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