Human factors innate to bureaucratic organization impede effective planning . . .

# Cooperative Planning: A Shaky Prospect

**by Dr. George J. Crawford**
**University of Kansas**

I have a friend/colleague who is compulsively curious. His curiosity surfaces in unusual forms and in unexpected (and sometimes inappropriate) ways. He and I observe a convention sometimes apparent between friends: we joke with each other in ways that involve saying the exact opposite of what we really mean. For example, one may say to the other: "That's an awfully unattractive outfit you're wearing today. It's fortunate your tie's so ugly; otherwise, everyone would notice that your suit doesn't fit."

It is important to understand that each of us tends to use this form of joke with people we especially like. This colleague/friend happened to overhear me one day when I used one of these little jokes on a new doctoral student—one whose tenure had not yet grown enough to establish comfortable familiarity with the fact that affection was a strong part of my motivation for using that form. The student left after an explanation had restored her comfort, sense of self-worth and emotional stability. At this point my friend's irrepressible curiosity showed itself.

"What *is* that form of humor?" he asked. He departed to consult his huge, well-thumbed **Oxford**, and returned quickly, his face wreathed with a triumphant smile. "That's 'joshing'!"

According to my more modest **American Heritage Dictionary**, the verb, to josh, means to tease good-humoredly, to banter. In thinking about a framework for organizing comments on things that inhibit cooperative planning, it occurred to me that I might do worse than adopt a teasing, bantering form—all done in good humor, of course—but one which is unabashedly joshing in its character. You would favor me by remembering throughout that this form is used by the perpetrator *only* when he or she believes him- or herself to be among good friends.

To a certain extent wit may be successfully employed to expose folly, vice and wrong-headed thinking. Perhaps to a lesser extent it also can be used to suggest where the thoughts which undergird concepts, theories and practical recommendations are lacking in rigor, clarity, breadth and depth. Humorists of satirical bent and unrepentant, unreconstructed cynics have served effectively to debunk myths, deflate exaggerated claims, and point out other efforts—some innocent, some premeditated—to mislead an unsuspecting audience. Given this background, then, you should not be surprised to find the variance in the subsequent discourse accounted for partially by satire, somewhat by cynicism, and generally by joshing. I *think* I am serious. Well—perhaps *half*-serious.

For the sake of infusing the argument with a certain amount of spirit, let me begin with a particularly blunt instrument, the unqualified assertion: to wit:

> "Planning as an integrative force in educational administration has been sadly overlooked" (**Educational Planning**, 1987, 52). Moreover, the likelihood that this status will soon change is not great.

The unqualified assertion consists of two parts: the first is quoted from the 1987 International Society for Educational Planning conference theme. The second part was created for purposes which may be characterized, on one hand, as being not altogether malicious, but, on the other, not altogether lacking in it. I will argue that planning as an integrative or cooperative force in educational administration (and, by reference, I suspect, in virtually any other field of endeavor) is largely impossible to achieve. If the arguments offered in support of this assertion can be overturned conceptually, theoretically, or practically, I will be pleased and fulfilled, and will consider the purposes of my arguments to have been well-served, and the role of devil's advocate to have been well-played.

The arguments against integrative planning may be grounded for purposes of the discussion within three primary contexts or taxonomic categories. These categories are defined as 1) social, 2) psychological and 3) structural factors which, it will be argued, act singly and in combination in ways which, if not effectively counteracted, make the prospects of achieving an integrated approach to planning remote, difficult, or impossible. Let us examine each of these categories, along with some relevant illustrations of subtypes, in turn.

JOSH NUMBER ONE: SOCIAL FACTORS

> All informed, sensitive people are aware that social groups are formed and maintained along simple lines, follow simple norms and rules, are commendably cooperative, respond favorably to mild, inexpensive incentives, and demand valid, verified solutions to problems, the characteristics of which solutions conform in all important respects to the verified aspects of the problem(s) they are designed to solve.

What does this "social josh" imply? First, society is a complex phenomenon. On a macroscopic level one has only to tick through the lexicon of such terms as East versus West, insiders versus outsiders, racist, sexist, ageist, political viability, party interest, and so forth to be reminded of the palpable fragility of the threads that bind "society." One has only to think briefly to identify multiple examples illustrating the extent to which competition has become a valued commodity in contemporary life. In fact, competition and competitiveness are more pervasive in the life of our world, irrespective of place, culture, party or other identifiable group than is possible to make malleable by the ministrations of integrative planning. Unless a quantum-type discovery is made which effectively sways humankind from a competitive posture to a stance which is cooperative, the prospects of integrative planning are dim.

Evidence abounds in the daily news of nations' unstinting efforts to remain militarily competitive. The "leveraged takeover" has become pervasive in the corporate world. Can anyone argue seriously that this constitutes evidence of beneficent philanthropy? In the local firm (read university, college, school district), one need only look at a few reports of

**Dr. George J. Crawford is a professor of education at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.**

recent board meetings or talk with participants in meetings of involved units to learn how assiduously information (and, therefore, the "competitive edge") is protected. Nations do not cooperate because to do so would be to lose the edge in strategic defense capability. Department heads do not cooperate with department heads. To do so would place the constituents of those cooperating in positions of comparative disadvantagement. To the extent that these characterizations ring true, to the same extent it is impossible to plan in an integrated, cooperative fashion.

As was implied in the preceding discourse on competition, incentives are seen as playing an instrumental role as constraints against integrative planning. Quite simple, unless incentives of sufficient magnitude and value are identified which have at least the *promise* of supplanting society's commitment to self-interest, self-promotion, competition and "winning," integrative planning does not have a realistic chance of succeeding. The worst-case scenario is illustrated by examples suggesting the impossibility of securing interstate agreements to control the deleterious effects of acid rain, to establish *tolerable* sites for the storage of nuclear waste, to share such vital, fragile and scarce resources as water, and so forth. I suspect that something less than a Promethean effort would be required to unearth numerous additional examples from virtually every stratum of society which illustrate the monumental difficulty accompanying most important efforts to persuade society to behave differently than it does currently. The crucial question, of course, is: Who is wise enough to devise these badly needed incentives? Without them, how is cooperative planning to succeed?

The final illustrative subtype under the "social josh" category is this (no longer joshing, of course): There is something wonderfully unique about "society" which causes it (society) to prefer simple (note that I did not say "elegant") solutions. Few of us, it seems, are immune from this inordinate but foolhardy affection.

Let us examine some illustrations from education. Where discipline has been perceived to decline to unacceptable levels, staff members have been trained in the tenets and practices of assertive discipline. Where instructional prowess has been perceived to wane, effective instruction has been trundled out and laid on. Since the principal has been proved the critical link in the effective school, myriad groups of principals have been taught instructional leadership—some more, and some less voluntarily. One may be profitably reminded of the analogous lesson taught by the Wizard (in **The Wizard of Oz**) to the Lion: "You don't need courage! You need a testimonial." The socially sensitive individual may also resonate to the meaning in the reply—apocryphal, perhaps—by the pianist, Artur Rubinstein, to a gushing fan's observation that he " . . . would give my life to play the piano like that!" To which Rubinstein somewhat sourly replied, "I did." At this point it is appropriate to insert a "joshollary." A "joshollary," of course, is the functional equivalent, in the josher's narrative, or a corollary in the narrative of a normal person.

JOSHOLLARY NUMBER ONE

All complex problems have simple solutions. Evidence of this assertion is amply apparent in the pronouncements of heads of state and governmental units, the language of television commercials, defense contractors, transportation consultants, computer programmers, attorneys, physicians, and—Heaven forbid—*some* educational planners.

JOSH NUMBER TWO: PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

All otherwise-normal people are so constituted psychologically that they readily accept personal incentives that are reasonable, practically attainable and readily available, insist on substantive quality in products, problem solutions, etc., i.e., they are not easily duped by the surface, superficial qualities of things; they are so canny and experienced that they will seldom, if ever, accept a thing just because it is "new," i.e., they insist on the "tried and true." (For the skeptics among you, see the recall records on automobiles of American manufacture for the last several years). *And*—they are so oriented as to *never* be fooled by a (simple) solution to a (complex) problem, the characteristics of which solution have no discernible relationships to the characteristics of the attendant problem.

How do the illustrative subtypes contained within the "psychological josh" conform to observational evidence? With regard to the first assertion (speaking seriously now), it seems that dysfunctionally large numbers of people have a psychological makeup which is satisfied *only* by incentives that are unreasonable, impractical and scarce. Illustration: A certain manufacturing division has been understaffed for some time. Product sales have declined. An opening in an instrumental position becomes available. Management recommends hiring an individual having new skills which will contribute uniquely to the division's production (and profit) recovery. The individual requires a premium salary exceeding salaries paid current employees. Current employees strongly object to differential pay for the new employee, asserting that they will withhold services if management follows through on intentions to complete the new hire as proposed.

There is evidence here of what my boyhood days on the farm led me to label the "boss pig syndrome." In an occasional litter there would be an obstreperous, bellicose pig who would be so selfish that he (almost always, in this case, he) would so busily and intently guard the feeding trough from the unwanted intrusions of his litter mates that he would, as often as not, fail largely to eat himself. In the illustration from the farm, the incentive—being "piggish"—was foiled to a considerable extent by the more cooperative efforts of the unselfish littermates. In the human world, however, the range of observable sophistication in behaving in obstructionist ways is infinitely wider than it was in the world of my boyhood pigs. In other words, a certain meanness of spirit is often found in individuals which, because of subtle, sophisticated modes of expression is impossible to detect until its counterproductive effects have become evident. For one who would plan cooperatively it is an unfortunate fact of life that the blocking behavior of people is not as ingenuous as that of pigs.

Evidence of the willingness of people to accept substandard quality in processes, standards of production and products is evident all around us. Consider the television commercial in which an unctuous huckster says: "I'm not a doctor, but I play a doctor on T.V. and I know that brand X cures . . . " We are apparently blandly unconcerned that conclusions no longer need to follow logically from premises—even in the discourse of commercials. If the process did not "sell," it is likely that market research would reveal that fact.

How is it that we have come to tolerate behavior in elected officials in which actions suspiciously like the bait-and-switch tactics of the marketplace are used to turn solemn events into occasions for self-aggrandizement? (A spokesperson for the president of the United States, speaking

on behalf of the president following the untimely death of a Cabinet member commented that the deceased deserved "much of the credit" for returning the country to a state of prosperity).

Finally, in this "psycho-josh" category, we turn with poignant interest to the subtype of problem which asserts that there is something fundamentally flawed in a generation (or several generations) who will blithely not only accept inappropriately *simple* solutions to problems that remain intractable in the face of simple approaches, but who will, in fact, tolerate wholesale substitutions of problems which are permitted to stand *in place of* more fundamental flaws. Peterson (1987), for example, points out that the major components of Japan's manufacturing infrastructure have been totally replaced upwards of seven times since World War II. The effort of manufacturing industries in the United States pales by comparison, as evidenced by discouraging deficits in balance of trade. And who is to be blamed for this, you may ask? (We *must* find some*one*, or some *group* to *blame*, of course!) "Well! Harumph! We have examined the economy! We have scrutinized government policy! And we have concluded—'it,' is—the—fault—of—E-D-U-C-A-T-I-O-N!!" One may innocently inquire what other conclusions might be suggested by more robust inquiries—inquiries more intent on discovering causal factors and less concerned with political self-interest. Again, however, in light of what reality portends for the planner, how is the planner to proceed *integratively* in an environment peopled so abundantly by individuals who are so easily duped?

JOSHOLLARY NUMBER TWO

Most major business firms have gone bankrupt many times over because they insist on pandering to the sophisticated tastes and incredible powers of discernment of their patrons.

JOSHOLLARY NUMBER TWO AND ONE-HALF

Successful politicians *are* successful because of their insistence on telling the plain, unvarnished truth to constitutents, irrespective of the potentially-dire consequences for themselves of doing so.

JOSH NUMBER THREE: STRUCTURAL FACTOR

Organizational complexity is a myth. Most organizations—having more than a handful of participants—are so transparently simple in their hierarchical and functional form that even a child could cope nicely with their oversight. This assertion applies particularly to educational organizations. It follows, therefore, that planning in public school districts, colleges and universities could—if it has not already happened by the time of this reading—be reduced to child's play.

If this were not dealing with an enterprise having such serious implications and consequences it would be hilariously funny. For those among us who need comic relief it is unfortunate, indeed, that planning *does* have serious consequences and implications. It is no laughing—or joking—matter. Complexity is a fact of organizational life. Complexity—the number and similarity (or lack of it) of elements comprising the organization (Hoy and Miskel, 1987)—renders the tasks of planners and other organizational participants difficult. When one is reminded of the existence or *co*-existence of informal organization within and alongside the formally defined organization, such awareness may be sufficient to drive planners to seek other, less-hazardous lines of employment.

Educational institutions are complex. They have many related parts, some of which may be relatively transparent to the probes of planners, but many of which will be impervious to the most sophisticated analyses. When knowledge of the illustrative examples discussed under Social and Psychological Factors is added to complexity, what do the *real* prospects of cooperative planning appear to be? Taken in combination, the factors present a daunting prospect for the educational planner. Perhaps it would be more productive to restrict our efforts to short-term, within-unit, surefire planning activities. How can planners realistically hope to overcome the intransigent effects of complexity, competition, particularistic incentives and affection for simple solutions in social groups? How is the poor, misbegotten planner to cope with the diversity of incentive preference, willingness (insistence, perhaps) of individuals to accept appearance rather than substance, to reach out eagerly for something "new," and to prefer the "simple" solution? How is the final psychological factor—*individual* willingness to accept/have affection for simple solutions to be addressed? How are we ever to have a realistic hope of dealing effectively with structural complexity?

If these concerns by themselves are not sufficient to instigate a controversy, consider what Beer (1981) has suggested:

> The reward and penalty structure in management heavily disfavors innovation: it is a fact which demands fresh thinking if our institutions are to survive (from the preface).
>
> and:
>
> "This is how we do it here" has become the basic slogan all over again (p. 5).

Note that in the first quotation Beer cites *innovation*—not *novelty*.

Finally, in a discussion of underground construction in New York City, we find the following comments which—if you were not already convinced—may bring you around to the reasonable conclusion that cooperative planning is a chimera:

> It doesn't matter how carefully you plan, you're still never sure what you're going to find . . . On the surface, short of a hurricane, you're not going to run into any surprises. But underground it's a surprise when there are no surprises. The records will show a sewer or an electrical conduit under a street, . . . but they won't give the specific horizontal or vertical location. A manhole tells you where a line is but not which way it goes. A lot of the time you're working by feel and intuition (Jackson, 1987, 41). . . .
>
> The city's restless growth and constant change explain the absence of an overall master plan for subterranean construction. "You can make master plans in a dream world," Arnold Vollmer says, "but in the real world you fight for space and put a new facility where you can." Thus the engineers who continually rearrange Manhattan's innards must work piecemeal, attacking problems as they arise (Jackson, 1987, 46).

What may be said, then, by way of attempting to provide concluding remarks for this not-so-funny attempt to josh on the critical topic of cooperative planning? It seems appropriate to comment first on the harmful outcomes realized when reality is confused with games, and *vice versa*.

A game, according to definition, is a "way of amusing oneself; diversion." Specified rules, competition, and "winning" are important criterial attributes of games. Is life a "game," truly? Is Education a "game?" Is Politics a "game?" Is there something wrong, perhaps, in a culture in which one hears a prominent *coach* speak, not of winning a competition, but of "crushing" the opponent? Is there anything to be alarmed about in the discourse of a presidential aspirant who suggests that peace will not be a part of his campaign vocabulary? Is the planning process which is vitally important to providing excellent, equitable education to the students of a nation something which is done solely for the amusement and diversion of planners?

The United States, it may be suggested, has permitted itself to be lulled too long into a kind of somnolent complacency in the face of benign assurances that things are somehow "better," when close scrutiny suggests that—in many instances—they are not. One possible explanation for this curious state of affairs is apparent in the interesting tension which exists between elected and appointed leaders' voracious commitment to tenure in office, on the one hand, and their fear, on the other, that accurate, candid specification of *real* problems may be at odds with tenure interests. Fairness requires that a similar speculative query be directed toward private sector interests and much of public education in our country. Have we become so engrossed with short-run profit, the achievement of quick-fix "effectiveness," and maintenance of "competitive edge" that we've lost sight of some of the more important, salient hallmarks of quality? One would hope not, of course. We can also hope that the more benevolent, philanthropic elements of human behavior will once again become evidently influential in the discourse and actions of all our leaders and in our collective achievements.

Through a collective act of will we may yet be able to label problems accurately, and then—only then—begin to devise cooperatively planned solutions which have some real promise of working over something other than the short term. In the meantime, if we persist in our uncooperative ways, we may take some small comfort in the words of a final josh. They come for the congratulatory introductory remarks enclosed with a timekeeping device: "(This watch) . . . incorporates the marvelous advances of space-age computer circuitry to bring you convenience, efficiency, and reliability to suit your everyday lifestyle needs." Curious, isn't it? Space-age circuitry to suit your everyday needs. Does it help you understand our problem when I tell you that I bought one? Is any further clarification added by my telling you that I had a devil of a time figuring out how to make it work?

### References


**Educational Planning**. (1987, Spring). The Journal of the International Society for Educational Planning, 6(1).

Peterson, P.G. (1987, October). "The Morning After:" **The Atlantic**.

Hoy, W.K. and Miskel, C.G. (1987). **Educational administration: Theory, Research and Practice** (3rd ed.). New York: Random House.

Beer, S. (1981). **Brain of the Firm: The Managerial Cybernetics of Organization.** New York: Wiley.

Jackson, D.J. (1987, August). "It Takes a 'Sixth Sense' to Operate Underneath the Streets of New York." **Smithsonian**, August, 1987.