

# SUSTAINING DIALOGUE: THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE PROBLEM SOLVING AND PLANNING

## ABSTRACT

*The challenges facing experts such as planners, environmental engineers, policy makers, economists and others in creating sustainable solutions are manifest. The current emphasis on integrated approaches requires experts, with often highly divergent areas of technical expertise, to work together. These experts are often primarily focussed on “what” they see needs to be done; however, “how” they talk to and engage with one another can hold the key to whether they are able to effectively achieve significant and useful outcomes. Creating and maintaining an environment conducive to problem-solving is the fundamental first step in reaching comprehensive remedies to the diverse environmental challenges faced today. Yet this “how” or procedural expertise often remains a hidden and unexplored dimension in dialogues about sustainability.*

*This paper explores the essential elements of procedural expertise necessary to build and shape inclusive and dynamic processes that harness the variety of technical expertises in new and synergistic ways. Too often processes are managed by someone who is themselves a technical expert in one of the participating disciplines and who is, therefore, often unable to move beyond their own assumptions as to what is required. The paper argues the need to recognise the difference between the substantive expertise of technical experts and the procedural expertise of those who design and facilitate the dialogue between substantive experts.*

*The paper will draw on the author’s experience as the facilitator of a wide variety of processes such as those aimed at water catchment management including improving water quality in rural and remote communities, developing strategic research agendas for health issues affecting disadvantaged groups and building coalitions between industry, government and Indigenous groups. The paper will conclude by arguing for the particular importance of building relationship and understanding between experts as a precursor to problem solving and as the key to a long term commitment to sustainability.*

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*Despite our faith in technology and our reliance on technological solutions, there are **no** technical solutions to most of the problems confronting human beings. Furthermore, even those technical solutions that can be applied to environmental problems can't be applied rationally until mankind transcends the intellectual limitations imposed by our institutions, our philosophies, and our cultures.<sup>1</sup>*

*Edward T. Hall*

Human beings, particularly in Western countries, tend to place great reliance on and faith in the ability of science and technology to solve the many and growing environmental problems that we are facing. There has also been an increasing awareness that many of these problems are multifaceted, multilayered and require multidisciplinary approaches to develop solutions that work. The recognition that different expertises are required to flesh out a 'truer' understanding of the complex nature of many of the circumstances we face, brings with it its own complications.

This paper seeks to explore the factors that shape and influence the processes that bring technical or substantive experts together and argues that 'procedural expertise' is necessary to optimise the usefulness of such processes. The paper also seeks to highlight that such 'procedural expertise' is often marginalised by the lack of recognition of its fundamental necessity and that this inhibits the likelihood of the success of the technical or substantive experts in reaching truly sustainable outcomes.

The paper explores some examples of how 'procedural expertise' has been employed and how, in so doing, it has significantly changed the scope and effectiveness of technical solutions and approaches. The paper concludes by identifying that scientific and technological expertises need to work hand in glove with robust and critically thought-out and implemented processes.

People have three interdependent aspects that they bring to any communication or problem solving process.<sup>2</sup> They bring a substantive aspect which involves their knowledge and opinions, as to what they believe, constitutes an appropriate course of action or suitable solution. This perspective is shaped by many things, including their area of specialisation or particular expertise, their personal and political beliefs as to what is required, their perceptions of the value of the other disciplines or experts engaged in the process and their involvement in previous processes and approaches.

The second aspect which shapes people's involvement is a procedural one. This aspect involves their perception that the process is appropriate and suitable for dealing with the matters at hand. Procedurally, those involved need to believe that the process is genuine, that it accords the 'necessary' time to deal with issues, that it allows them, personally, time to put forward the issues, perspectives and options that they support and that it is a balanced, fair and rigorous process.

The third aspect involves a much more personal dynamic, which many involved may be loathe to admit is actually influencing their participation, however it is a real and highly influential, albeit highly intangible aspect of the process. It relates to the emotional aspect of how people experience the process. It is how people 'feel' about their involvement in and treatment as part of the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*, p. 1

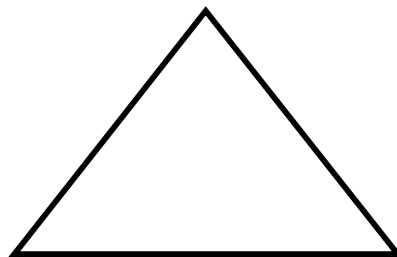
<sup>2</sup> For further information about the nature of these three interdependent aspects or needs refer to the work of C.W. Moore most particularly his work *The Mediation Process* published by Jossey Bass 2003. Moore explores these aspects or needs in the context of dispute resolution, however, they are equally relevant to negotiation or problem solving processes.

Most fundamentally, people will look to feel acknowledged, listened to and respected even when they are not agreed with. This very human aspect, which many of us may feel should not be important, is nonetheless why many people including high profile and internationally renowned experts withdraw from processes every day. More importantly when translated to the context of international negotiations and problem solving exercises, this concept becomes the concept of ‘face’ and its significance can not be overstated. The following diagram seeks to represent these three interdependent aspects.

**Interrelated aspects  
individuals bring to a process**

**Procedural**

- process is genuine
- allows enough time
- develops an agreed information base
- balanced
- fair
- inclusive
- rigorous



**Emotional**

- need to be:
  - acknowledged
  - listened to
  - respected
- concept of ‘face’

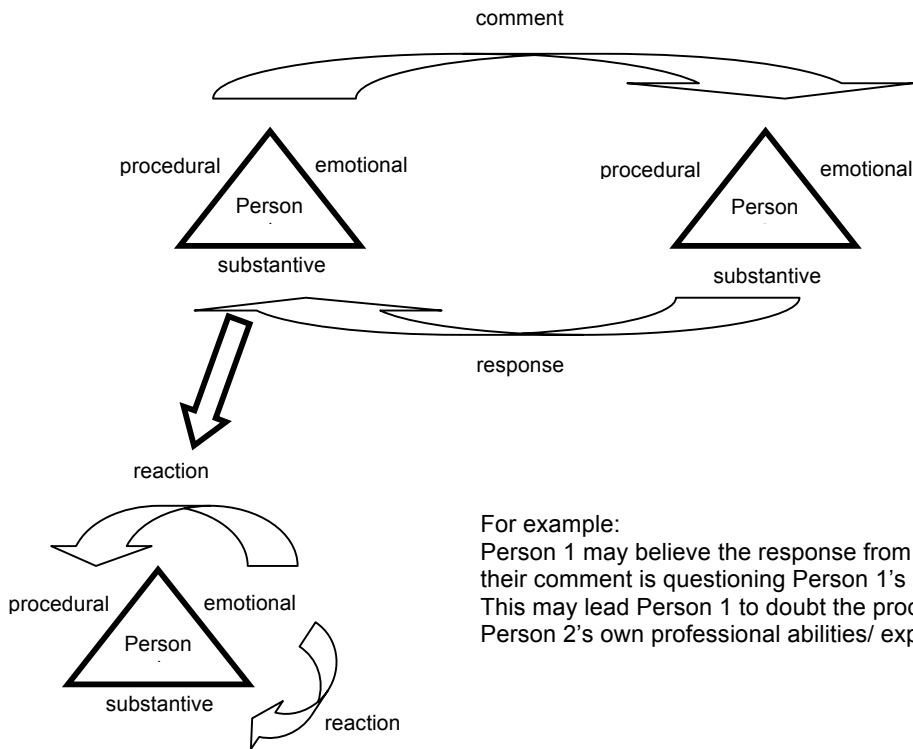
**Substantive**

- knowledge
- expertise
- experience
- opinions

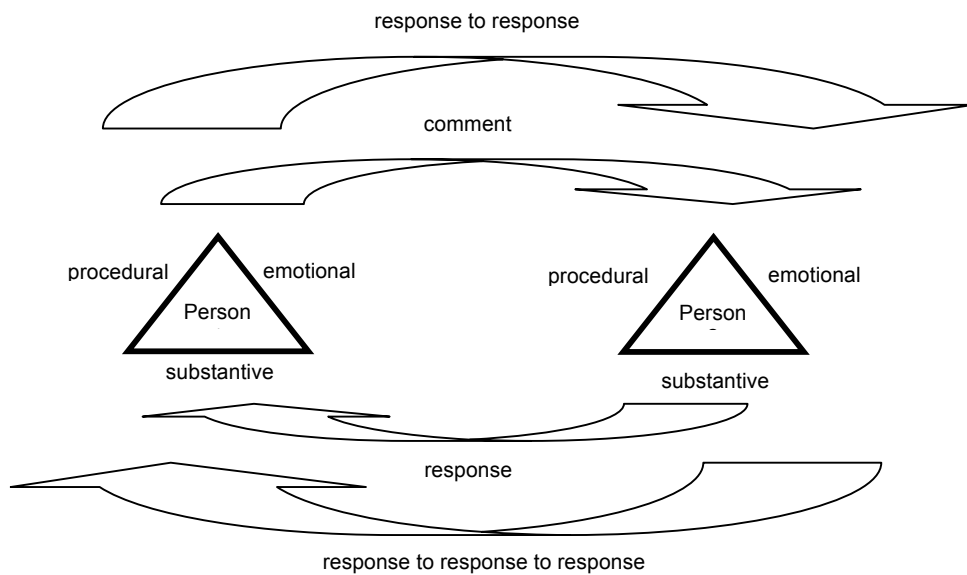
Each person attending the process comes with their own unique ‘bundle’ of these three aspects. There may be overlaps in particular areas and equally there may be areas of enormous divergence. How these overlaps and divergences are managed can give rise to positive or negative perceptions of the process and any outcomes suggested or achieved.

At any given time any individual may be experiencing a response to an idea or opinion that they have put forward that itself triggers an emotional response or a belief about the procedural rigour or substantive validity.

For example:



Further, as communication continues:

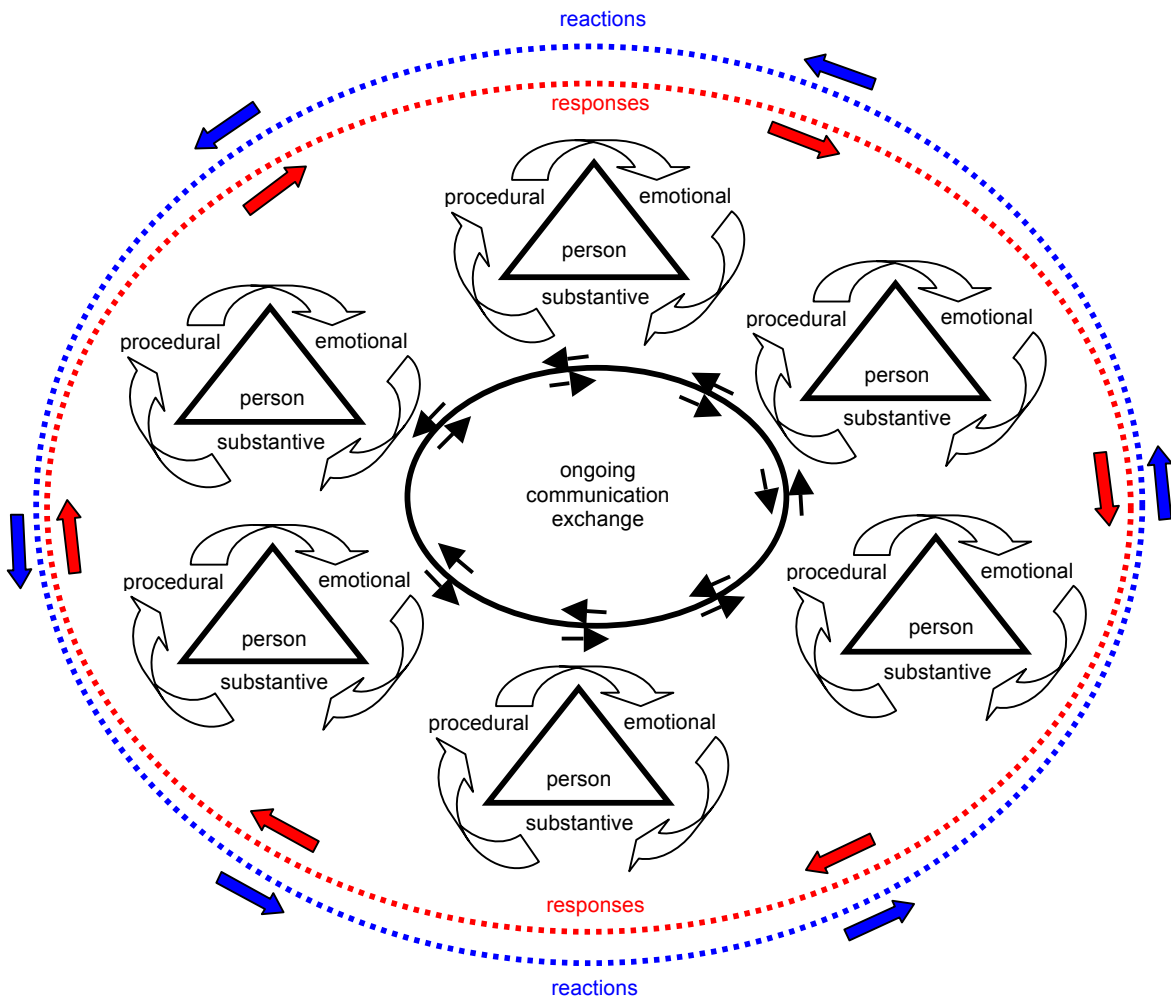


and so on ... ..

As Person 1 responds to the response from Person 2 this in itself generates a reaction within Person 2. Person 2 may believe that Person 1 has responded inappropriately, indeed depending on Person 1's own reaction to the initial response from Person 2 they may respond in a variety of ways. The important thing to recognise is that, however Person 1 and Person 2 react and respond to one another, they are not merely exchanging their respective substantive expertise. They are also reacting and responding to each other both emotionally and procedurally. And sometimes these emotional and procedural responses can themselves get in the way of or completely occlude the possibility of the effective exchange of substantive information.

As the following diagram attempts to represent the complexities and the potential for misunderstanding or ‘missed’ communication increases the more number of people involved.

### Multiple individuals involved



and so on . . . .

Human beings are complex things. They experience a range of personal responses to the processes they are involved in. When they come together in a group, that group itself experiences a range of dynamics that has consequences for how the group will work and how the individuals involved will experience that group. There are many theories of group development and group dynamics.<sup>3</sup> However, the model drawn on in this paper is Tuckman’s model which states that all groups go through five stages of development – forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. At each of these stages, there are specific issues that arise and interact with and influence individuals’ behaviour and experience of the group, this in turn sets up patterns that influence each other individual and subsequent stage of group development.

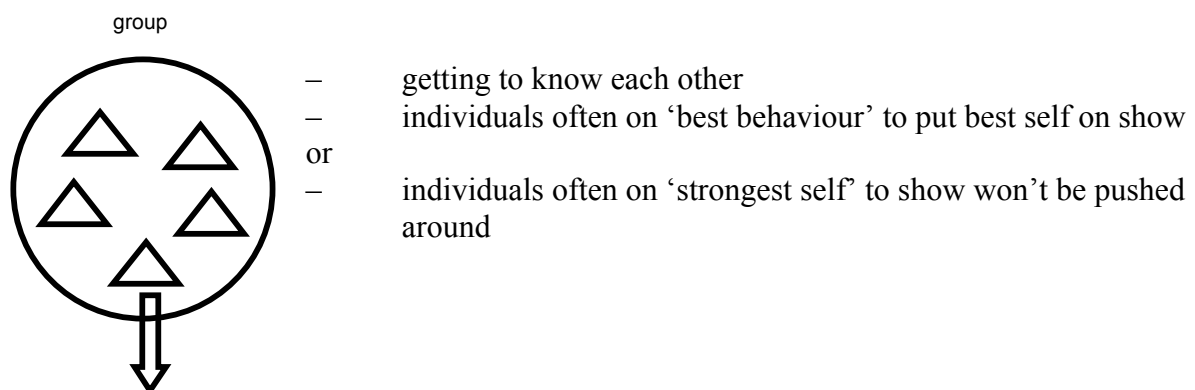
<sup>3</sup> For further reading *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. David W. Johnson, Frank R. Johnson, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1994.

At the forming stage, the group is coming together and the individuals begin to know each other and forge the identity of the group. In the storming stage the group often experiences conflicts as the differences amongst group members begins to assert itself. The norming stage involves the establishment of ‘norms’ or ‘rules’ as to how the group will and can operate. These can be rules group members adopt either consciously or unconsciously and they can be positive or negative in their effect. The performing stage sees the group using its collective experience to deal with the task at hand. This will be shaped by how well the group has formed, how they deal with conflict and how effective their ‘rules’ or norms of operation are. The final stage of adjourning is when the group dissolves either because its task is complete or because it can no longer function.

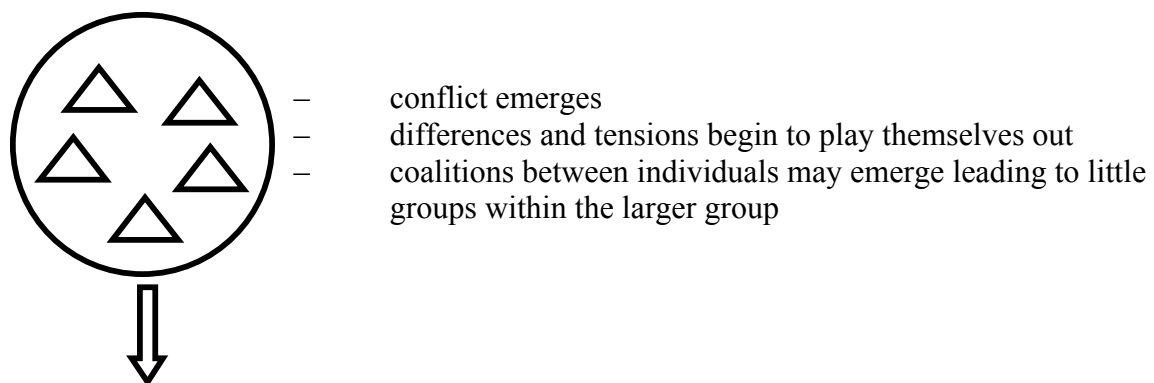
As the following diagram represents the stages of group development influence each subsequent stage – however it is important to note that groups can become stuck in certain stages or return to certain stages, most notably the storming and the norming stages as new issues emerge.

### STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

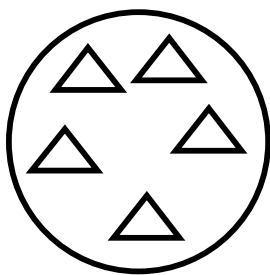
#### Stage 1 Forming – coming together



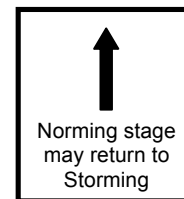
#### Stage 2 Storming



**Stage 3 Norming**

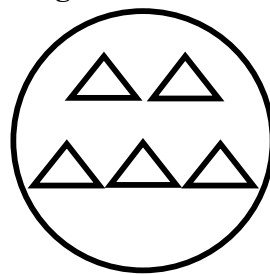


- group adopts rules or norms of operation
- can be positive and conscious  
e.g. listening without interrupting  
asking questions to clarify
- can be negative and conscious  
e.g. one individual allowed to dominate or interrupt  
particular expertise marginalised as not relevant

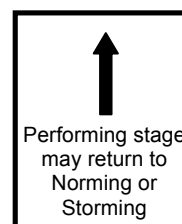


Norms can lead to back to storming if they are negative  
or forward to performing if positive

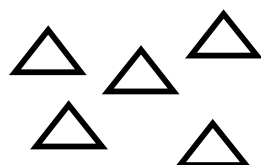
**Stage 4 Performing**



- group works on task convened to do
- conflict handled according to norms
- norms helpful or unhelpful to group achieving task
- group may revisit storming and norming stages in order to improve group performance



**Stage 5 Adjourning**



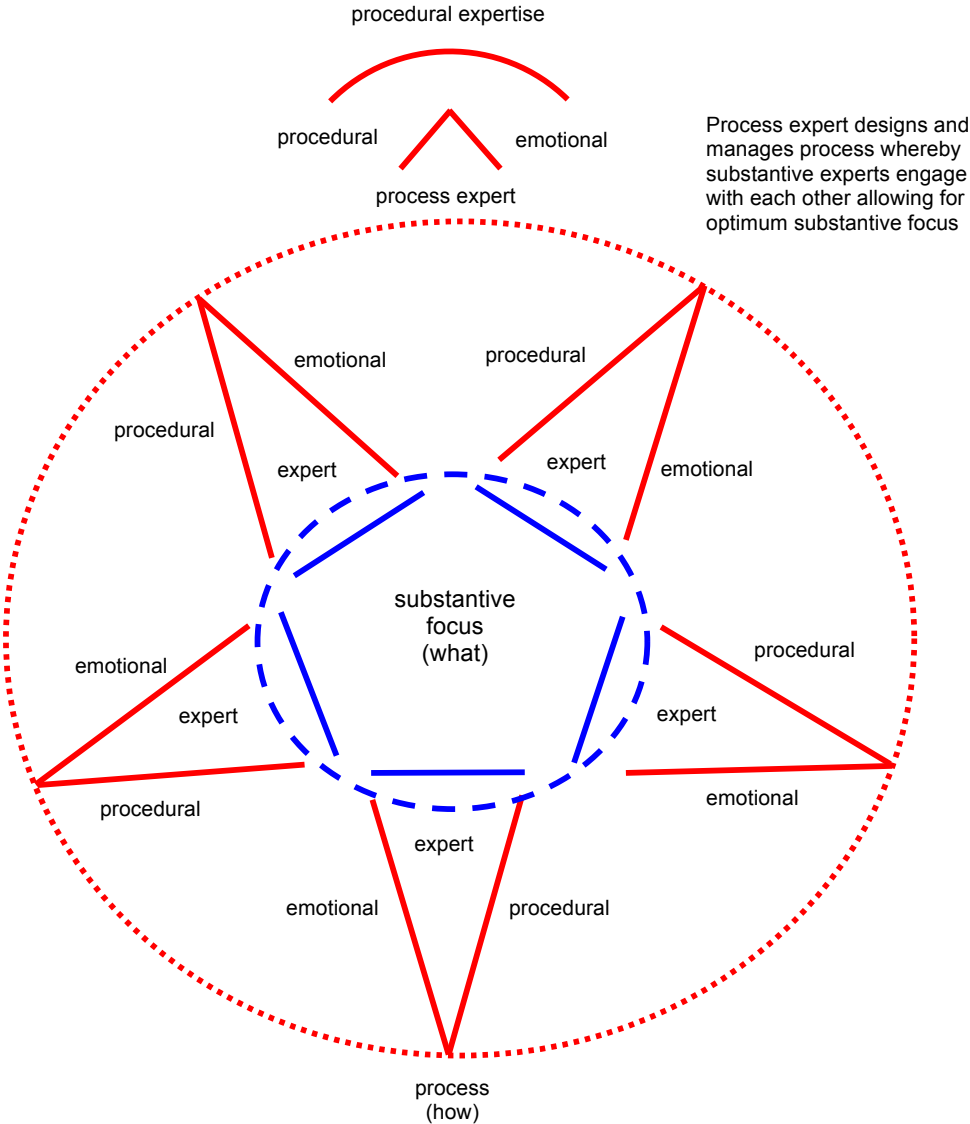
- group disbands
- individual experiences are used to evaluate group process

In short, when a group of individuals meet to discuss a problem in the hopes of finding a solution there is a great deal going on at both an individual and group level. Whilst this may have little directly to do with the actual problem it will have both a direct and indirect impact on the likelihood of a solution being achieved. If you like, the solution is ‘what’ the group needs to get to, yet the ‘how’ of how they get there and how they feel as a result of working together may ultimately hold the key to whether they get there or not. The ‘what’ very clearly relates to the substantive or technical expertise of those engaged in the process. The ‘how’ of how they get there and how they feel, requires what I term ‘procedural expertise’ in order for it to be managed effectively.

Procedural expertise relates to understanding the varying needs individual bring to processes they may be involved in and where those processes involve groups, an understanding of group development and dynamics. This procedural expertise assists in designing processes and managing groups in ways that incorporate competing needs, dynamics and tensions. This in turn, allows individuals or groups to work together to harness their efforts towards achieving their substantive goal.

Procedural expertise is different from substantive expertise. The procedural expert in any process may know absolutely nothing about the substantive matters under discussion. Indeed this may be particularly helpful, as it means they come to the process with no preconceived ideas about the content or possible solutions. They come to the process with procedural expertise which enables them to identify the range of potential needs and trigger points which will need to be included in the design of the process which will bring people together. This procedural expertise relates to the effective management of the procedural and emotional aspects that influence people’s participation in any process, regardless of the substantive or content focus of that process.

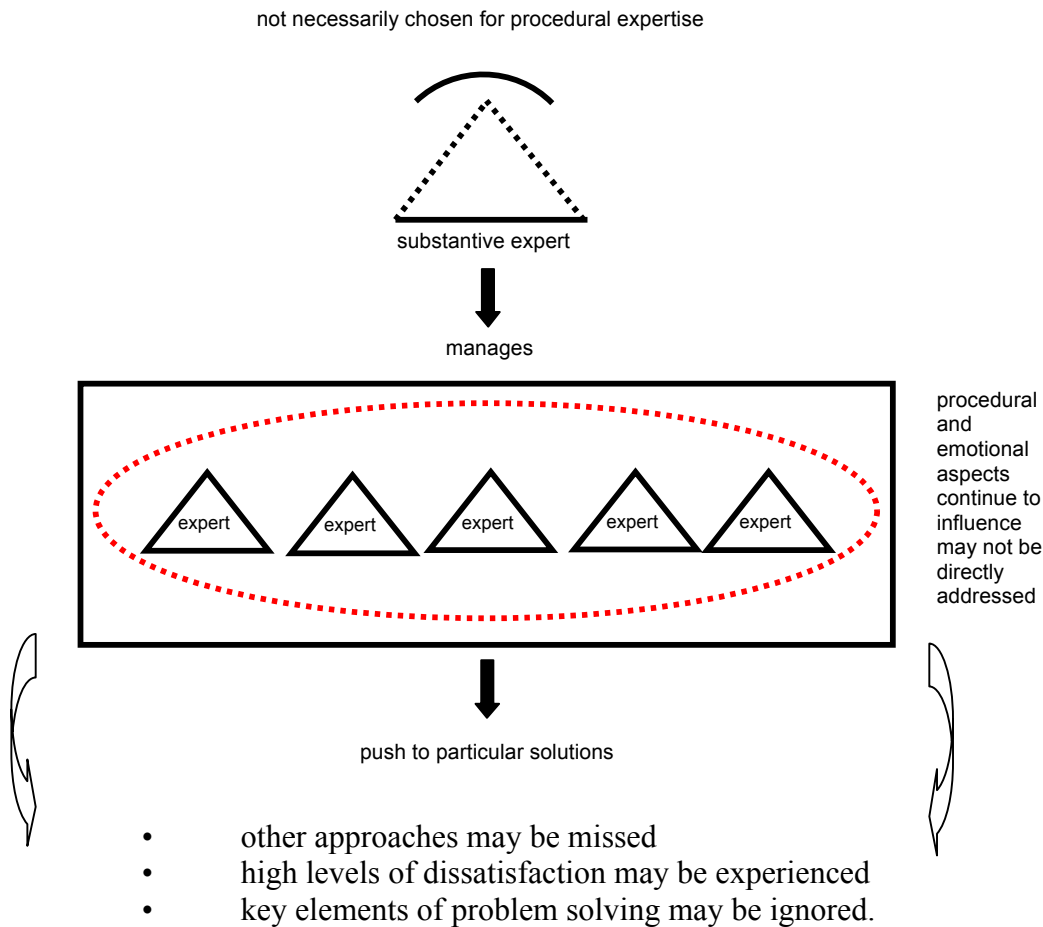
As the following diagram represents the substantive experts come to a process with the previously identified range of interdependent aspects which must also be managed in order to allow them to focus on the substantive issues at hand. It is the role of the process expert to manage these interdependent needs in a way that allows and enables this to happen.



Often the person engaged to manage a process is engaged because of their technical expertise and standing rather than any procedural expertise. This can mean that this person pushes for particular solutions or approaches because they fit their perception of what is required. This is



in marked contrast to the process above where the procedural expert focuses on managing procedural and emotional needs enabling the substantive experts to freely and creatively focus on the substantive issues.



For those seeking to implement expensive and high profile processes in order to find the urgently required solutions to environmental problems, there can be great comfort in engaging a high profile, highly regarded technical expert to manage the problem solving process. However unless this expert is equally well versed in procedural knowledge their best efforts and intentions may very well be counter-productive.

As an example of the power of procedural and emotional aspects over the substantive it is interesting to note that a study from *Psychology Today* identified that a *competent* doctor with poor communication skills stands a far greater chance of being sued than an *incompetent* doctor with good communication skills. That is, if people are satisfied emotionally and procedurally with ‘**how**’ they are communicated with by a medical professional they are more likely to be accepting of an adverse outcome or ‘**what**’.

Equally if they are not satisfied with ‘**how**’ they are communicated with they may believe that an outcome or a ‘**what**’ is adverse even if it may not be. Whilst this may seem somewhat illogical – it is the nature of the human being and we ignore it at our peril, particularly if we wish to enable human beings to work together to find technical solutions to environmental challenges and solutions. In essence, our humanity must be harnessed along with our intelligence, if we are to be more effective in achieving outcomes.

From my own practice as a mediator and facilitator there are a number of examples that I believe highlight the importance of procedural expertise. I have worked with a range of organisations who have been wishing to achieve substantive outcomes and yet found themselves stymied by procedural and emotional dimensions or aspects. Several years ago I worked with a Water Catchment Management Authority in South Australia – which is the driest state in the driest inhabited continent in the world. The Authority needed to engage with the local community and was encountering significant resistance and hostility. It transpired that the local community was feeling very angry about the history of previous dealings with the Authority's predecessor. The staff of the Authority felt that it was not their responsibility to deal with this legacy except to offer reassurances that their process and approach would be different.

My role was to assist them in designing ways of engaging with the community. My advice was that whilst they as an organisation could separate and delineate between the previous and their current organisation, many in the community would probably not draw such distinctions and would merely see them all as 'government people'. Therefore the legacy of mistrust was an ongoing procedural and emotional concern that would need to be managed as part of any process. To do so would need to involve opportunities for the community to 'vent' or 'debrief' their concerns about previous processes.

Furthermore rather than being offered assurances that the Authority's process would be different time would need to be allowed to identify how previous processes had 'failed' and to negotiate jointly how the proposed processes would and should be different in order to meet community expectations. After the initial period of 'venting' as the community began to experience a genuine difference in how the Authority was engaging with them they came on board and substantive outcomes became possible.

Another process that I was engaged to as a process expert was a process auspiced by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) and the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services (OATSIS). The process was aimed at developing a strategic research agenda in the area of Otitis Media (or middle ear infections) and brought together Ear Nose and Throat Surgeons, audiologists, Educationalists, Researchers and Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers.

To Australia's great and enduring shame the health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are significantly poorer in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians. The average life expectancy is on average 20 years less and rates of disease are sometimes ten times higher amongst Indigenous populations, most notably kidney disease, diabetes and heart disease. Yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are amongst the most studied and 'researched' groups of people in the world. Despite this there has been very little discernible improvement in health statistics.

Otitis Media affects 70-80% of Aboriginal children at any one time (rates amongst non-Indigenous children vary from 1.5% to 5%), consequently it is a major cause of hearing loss before the age of one, which in itself leads to language and social development delay and in turn is a major cause of truancy further compounding the difficulties experienced.

The process to agree a research agenda brought together approximately 40 experts. Initially those responsible for the process thought that in order to save time there should be a welcome from an important dignitary and then 3-4 participants should introduce themselves to give the 'flavour' of those attending. My colleague and I as the process experts were very concerned

that this would establish a defacto – unconscious norm that some voices or opinions were more important than others and that in particular it would probably also privilege the non-Indigenous ‘voice’ over the Indigenous ‘voice’.

We accordingly designed a process where everybody was introduced and time was taken to get this right. It led to feedback from those present that they felt right from the start the process was ‘telling’ them that their voice and opinion was important, as was the need to hear from everyone. This was seen as particularly important by the Indigenous participants and in marked contrast to other processes in which they had been involved.

Interestingly the process did not reach an agreed research agenda for Otitis Media. Instead it explored the fundamental problems with the ways research is funded and undertaken and led to the development of a set of criteria which have completely changed the NH&MRC’s approach to doing research in Indigenous communities and into Indigenous health issues. The evaluation of the process was that whilst a very different outcome to the one that had been anticipated was achieved, it was nonetheless a very valuable outcome. The outcome was not the one anticipated by any of the substantive experts involved. Nonetheless the outcome was built by and from the expertises of the substantive experts and I believe this highlights the transformative potential of procedural expertise and the power of procedural expertise freeing substantive expertise to explore its full limits and potential.

A focus on substantive issues and the time urgent environment we all seem to operate in these days can obscure the necessity of building relationships and understandings between people as foundation for effective working relationships. The initial step for any group is to first ‘form’ yet time pressures may seem to place an unreasonable expectation that groups will leap straight to ‘performing’. This is counter productive and many of us are all too familiar with the scenario of the quick solution arrived at hastily, that requires months or sometimes years of mopping up.

It is a far more judicious and considered use of resources, including time, to use them to get it right rather than merely to get it done. Fundamental to this is taking the time to build relationships and understanding between those involved as well as allowing the necessary time to build a clear understanding of the problem itself; only then can responsive and sustainable solutions be achieved.

The importance of building relationships particularly in between scientific experts and the community, when the community is needed to be involved in the implementation of particular solutions is highlighted by approaches to planning for El Nino management in the Pacific. In 1997 there were growing forecasts of a very severe El Nino drought for Pacific nations in the 1998/1999 summer. A number of countries including the Federated State of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau and the Republic of the Marshalls set up what they called El Nino task forces and insisted that their ministries all worked together to prepare for the drought.

Whilst the resulting drop in rainfall was one of the most significant El Ninos in the Pacific, the impacts were far less. The preparation undertaken was significant and one of the key things learnt was the need to build relationships between the scientists who forecast El Nino and the people who are going to use that information so that they trust one another. In one instance forecasters were describing the coming drought whilst standing under a tin roof in pouring rain. The only reason people responded was that they trusted the forecasters and the only reason they trusted them was because relationships had been built up. As one researcher involved put

it it's "... eyeball to eyeball contact: you can't write it in a paper and expect people to believe you; it's got to be a human, individual, person trust relationship."<sup>4</sup>

We are tricky things we people. We have feelings and dignities and we have passions and morals. We often take our own complexities for granted and believe we can operate professionally, rationally and in a realm abstracted from our human self and which is just about our intellect and our abilities. Our ability to delude ourself is enormous. The price of this delusion is too great to pay. We can not allow our processes to founder or fail and solutions to remain beyond our reach. We may want to believe that our procedural and emotional needs should either not be there or should just somehow take care of themselves, but this is not a rational or helpful position. Acknowledging their reality and engaging procedural experts to design and manage processes that include and allow for those needs, ironically can free us to ignore them and focus on the substantive task at hand.

There are many complexities that this paper has not identified or explored. In particular the notion of 'culture' and how when processes involve individuals or organisations from diverse cultural settings, additional levels of complexities are imposed on what can already be a fraught and highly charged environment. I hope however that this paper has alerted the reader to some degree to the complexities and challenges inherent in harnessing both our humanity and our intelligence to the challenges that lay ahead of us.

Ideally we should all have a degree of understanding as to the procedural and emotional aspects that shape both our own and others' involvement in problem solving and negotiation processes. This understanding might caution us to tread more carefully in relation to the sensitivities of others and to monitor and manage our own responses. At the very least it should alert us to the importance of engaging those who are procedurally expert to assist us to get more effectively, more sustainably and perhaps even more quickly to the solutions we and our planet so urgently require.

## REFERENCES

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C.W. Moore, *The Mediation Process*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 2003.

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<sup>4</sup> For more details read the transcript of an interview with Eileen Shea, Climate Project Co-ordinator, East-West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii. Broadcast on The Science Show, 5 April 2003 at [www.abc.net.au/rn](http://www.abc.net.au/rn)