# Eldership and Inner Work: Working with Large Organisations

**An Interview with Max Schupbach**,        June 2006
*by Anup Karia (with Stanya Studentova)*

Max Schupbach is one of the elders and co-founders of Process Work. As a teacher he embodies lightness and a deep connection to spirit and dreaming. Recently he has been meditating on, researching and teaching about the relationship between eldership[1] and leadership (see his website www.maxfacilitation.net). This coupled with his ongoing work with large organisations drew Stanya and myself to the idea to interview him on this subject in connection to Inner Work. We were thrilled when he agreed, given his immensely tight schedule.

Anup: *Max it is great to talk with you across the oceans and time zones (Max is in Portland USA and Anup is in London). Thanks for agreeing to talk about facilitation, organisational systems and dreaming.*

Max: It's a pleasure to. I love Jean-Claude and I love this idea of the book.

Anup: *Could you elucidate on the relationship between organisational work and Inner Work, and how is the Inner Work one does as a facilitator relevant to one's work with the organisation, and what's the underlying belief behind this?*

Max: Field theory in Process Work says that in a given field, your psychology and the psychology of the organisation are organised by the same forces so that the separation between your own inner process and the process of the organisation is arbitrary. The separation between where the individual ends and the organisation begins is a group process by itself. That's one of the points of the quantum mind[2]. Look at it in terms of the Big U. The Big U[3] of the organisation and you in it, your own personal myth[4] and the myth of the organisation are one and the same; they are individual musicians in the same big orchestra, playing a composition that is written by the organisational mind. Listening to it you can clearly differentiate the violin and the cello, but where exactly one ends and the other begins depends on the subjective experience of the listener, because the two instruments combine together for a whole new one. It is your awareness and the process of you and your organisation which will decide where to make the boundary at a given moment. So your Inner Work in that sense is crucial. It is like finding out the musical score by noticing what it is you are playing, or, said with a different metaphor, it is like picking up the phone and joining the conversation between you and the organisation.

Anup: *That's a great analogy, picking up on the telephone connection.*

Max: Any issues or problems that you have before you start your work in an organisation are the telephone ringing from the organisation, the myth of the organisation calling you. You have to pick up the telephone and listen to what they have to say.

Anup: *Max, as you talk about the personal myth and myth of the organisations, what draws you personally to this work?*

Max: I've been excited about organisations for a few years. I have also had a strong interest in politics, starting in

childhood really. I don't know if you're aware of it but, in the beginning years of Process Work - in the early eigthies - I think I was more identified with teaching Process Work and co-creating Process Work communities in different countries in Europe and around the world. And that's been really an amazing learning experience. But then I think that maybe in the last eight years or so I got interested in communities that I had traditionally not so much connection with. I had been more connected to psychological and spiritual groups, and indigenous communities. Mainstream organisations and especially the business world had less of a pull for me. I continued to remain very interested in politics and I believed that the next step in evolution had to happen through expanding individual consciousness. And then with the arrival of worldwork[5] we as a community became much more political. But maybe the classical worldwork community was more interested in social activism, and I think I got curious initially about how to apply worldwork in big organisations, especially within the business setting.

I met some of the business people who inspired me in the way that they thought about the world as a whole. They were, and are, wonderful people and great leaders like Karin Sanvol from Norsk Hydro, Laura Conlon from IBM, and Theo Nkone from Old Mutual in South Africa, who are interested and active in changing the world at large, by supporting the role of business and improving relationships between people. They woke me up to being a worldworker with a more open mind, and applying the global worldwork categories in the business settings. Organisational development is struggling to develop more of a global theory at this point, as you probably know.

Classical organisational development or facilitation is more around a set of technologies, or an assumption about our social behaviour, it focuses on methods and technologies. But there is no consistent global theory that describes

what happens within a social setting in a scientific way. General concepts like chaos theory[6], which imply an invisible order behind seemingly unstructured events, are being used in the absence of a global theory. Complex systems theory never dealt sufficiently with the observer-observed dilemma[7]. Worldwork brings a change there because it has a consistent theory, it spells out global categories, and its phenomenological approach[8] makes it easy for people to find out for themselves whether it works or not, but first and foremost it has an exact theory as to the role and experience of the observer within a system. As you know, it postulates a non-local observer role, in sync with Quantum Mechanics, and therefore implies that awareness and consequently facilitation is an ontological part of nature. So I was interested in how that applies in the business world. We have had very good experiences with business people.

Anup: *When you say there is no consistent theory that makes lots of sense to me. So one of the things that Process Work brings in is how the Inner Work of the facilitator is key.*

Max: Yes. Well it's interesting. For example, most facilitation models claim or hope to use a neutral facilitator. And the neutrality of the facilitator is stressed in many of the technologies that are around.

Anup: *Yes, I get that.*

Max: I think in worldwork we don't have so much the concept of the neutral facilitator. I think of it more as an open facilitator. 'Open' meaning open to the experience that she is having within the group but also open to the experiences that happen inside of oneself. For example, a facilitator describing organisational processes might write about this without mentioning her own experience in it. This is more of a Newtonian concept that says there is an objective organisational reality that can be written about,

that is not directly linked to the personal myth of the facilitator. But then when you talk to mainstream facilitators privately they frequently talk about a lot of emotionnal and spiritual experiences they have while they are in the group and how these have been marginalised.

Now Ellen Schupbach, my partner, has done a lot of work as you know around the spiritual experience of the therapist and the facilitator[9]. Her idea is that your own inner experiences are directly linked to whatever happens in the group and form a deeper spiritual bond if you allow yourself to notice it. They can be tracked and directly used for whatever happens within the group, especially its spiritual development. All groups yearn for spiritual development and are thrilled if it happens, even if they identify with material survival. In that respect, they are like people.

Anup: *So Max, in terms of following this idea of the open facilitator, in Process Work one of the things we work with are edges (limits of our identity). I was wondering how you see a similar phenomenon happening between organisations and facilitators and if there's a way you could expand on that or if you have an example even.*

Max: Actually let me just brainstorm a little bit about it. There are many questions and topics in the background of this question. The edges of the facilitator and organisation are intimately linked. How that was or is true for me, for example, is that I used to struggle with seeing an organisation as a developing unit, where everything was meaningful as it was, and that the development had to be supported and facilitated on its own terms. I felt I had to 'change' the organisation, and frequently, the change agent who contacted me also wanted to 'change' the organisation. I had to learn that this is a great approach, but then you have to follow the process of the organisation, meaning discover

how what is happening is the key to the change everyone is looking for.

As Process Work is growing up now, there are different applications and different parts of applications that are starting to be used, for example, by large organisations. Look up 'deep democracy' in Google on the internet and you will find pages and pages now of different groups and organisations, all of whom use this term. The term was originally coined by Arny Mindell in the 80s. You can see that the term has crossed over. 'Crossed over' meaning that the term is no longer used in the strict sense that it was originally developed; the original definition of deep democracy was that all voices, frameworks and states of consciousness and levels of perception that are present are equally important and need at some point or another to be represented.

However, although many groups might not use this term quite the same way, I get the impression that there's a general feeling that when people talk about deep democracy they have an intuitive sense of what was originally meant. They know it means not just a regular democracy when you vote on content, but where you feel that it goes somewhat deeper. That's why we created www.deepdemocracymovement.net as a site that would network between the various groups.

Anup: *Yes.*

Max: So I think that we're going to see more organisational work where individual aspects like the ghost role[10] will be used or picked up - most organisations that I work with, for example, particularly enjoy spotting the ghost role and find it really helpful. So some organisations, a bit like a client who comes for a session, will pick up a particular aspect of Process Work and that's as far as they'll go. So from that viewpoint, if you work as an organisational facilitator your task is to follow an organisation's process and not think that the organisation should be, 'process

oriented'. That I think is a key issue in working with organisations as it is with working with people.

Anup: *That's really interesting you say that because it makes me think that I have such an attitude - seeing big corporations as needing to change in the direction that I want them to change.*

Max: Yeh – everyone does.

Anup: *What you emphasise is that, as a facilitator, you're working within their structure, not imposing something from the outside.*

Max: Yes - well everybody thinks big is bad these days. The big corporations themselves often privately tell me that they think big is bad.

Anup: *I can believe that.*

Max: You see I think there's a hole – we are not sufficiently aware that we are big corporations ourselves. And that most of us will, for example have a tendency to put our own need for more power in consensual reality[11], before our own dreaming[12]. We project our desire for power out onto the corporations. I think that's just natural. These last couple of decades has, on one level, been the age of business, and many of us see this as a major force behind politics and the shaper of our everyday perception of reality. The West interpreted – in my view partially incorrectly - the collapse of the Iron Curtain as a victory for capitalism, and only now we are starting to see trends that try to find various ways of governance and ethics for businesses and also for the way we do business globally.

Business and social activism that is focused on material rank are in fact in my view very close through that common focus. Look for example, at the basic approach of the United States towards terrorism and religious debate – it's not just in the United States but an attitude in the West. It's still largely a view point or a philosophy that says, if we help

'these people' to be materially more developed, give them more things and more access to today's twenty first century world and tools – this will change. It's like, once we alleviate economic differences those things will be worked out. The whole economic thinking is much deeper in our psychology than most of us seem to realise or would like to realise. Equating social justice with the fair distribution of material resources and seeing business as a group who hoards and monopolizes resources is the other side of the coin, where a business feels it needs to expand or beat or buy the competition in order to survive in a tough and unfair market. These values, which in many ways are very similar, are much closer to many cultures' mainstream view of what life is than many of us would like to think.

Anup: *So Max what you're saying is that even our view of social justice is based on a business way of thinking. I wonder if, as there is a 'one world' tendency in social justice movements there is a similar tendency in big businesses?*

Max: The thing is that the large fusions and mergers that create these super-organisations are, not only, but also a positive development because in the background I sense a new way of looking at competition. The corporations haven't yet figured out the fun way to do this but they're trying to by getting together and starting to think how they can collaborate instead of competing with each other. The principle of least action is constantly looking for a more fun and effortless way to live, but if you have no concepts of levels of awareness, then it is chasing your own tail. Frequently when I work with a facilitator who hasn't had much experience yet with businesses, I hear that they feel working with a business is a fundamentally different (eg in comparison with a grassroots group) experience. Certainly businesses do have different boundary conditions but otherwise it's an organisation with a myth and with people and, in that sense, it's nothing that special.

Anup: *(laughing )...makes me think how I don't identify with business and how much I project out – all these people in suits.*

Max: Yes, the dress code! We have a dress code in the Process Work community too! Our dress code (in a way) is to look as if we don't care too much about how we look. I like how Carlos Castaneda meets Don Juan[13] in a suit in a bank and he is shocked – Don Juan is wearing silk socks! Don Juan tells Castaneda – it's all about shape shifting. I love the Process oriented dress code which signals that it's important what's inside a person and that we like to be loose and informal. We find that's in the business world too, where the dress code signals that you are powerful, have a vision, and are willing to put yourself out there and make it happen.

Anup: *I want to ask you about the link between Inner Work and the self -organising principle in working with organisations.*

Max: The self-organising principle is an acceptable way of talking about 'dreaming'. Self-organisation is a term that has come out of complex systems theory. It's a euphemism because what does it mean to self-organise? It organises itself – it means, it's not organised by you – it's out of control; it doesn't necessarily dissociate. Prigogine[14] observed the principle of self-organisation as he was running up the stairs and he stumbled; as he stumbled, he saw that his feet were doing all sorts of weird things to make him balance so he didn't fall. It helped him not to fall, and he used this insight for a new understanding of the chemistry problem he was working on. That's how he came up with the concept of a self-organising principle that can bring higher degrees of order into systems, but without putting work into it as classical thermo-dynamics suggests. It means our legs coordinate themselves or are organised by something that we call dreaming. I love to remember that

when I stumble all over the place. Non-equilibrium thermo-dynamics is trying to explain how this happens in detail, but this is not the point of this interview.

So when we talk about self-organising tendencies in organisations, what we're saying is the organisations themselves have a basic direction in which they are moving and that the organisations have a myth or a BIG U – which is the same. The Big U is not a higher self – but it's a direction which has its own song-line[15]. We have to discover that and then can follow it with more fun and creativity. My Inner Work as a facilitator is like listening to the music, which binds me into the dance with the organisation that hears the same music. The concept of Inner Work suggests that there is an individual inside me – working on my personal history[16] including my prejudices around whether I like or don't like business. That's true, but it is only half the truth. In addition to that it's like checking with yourself - am I hearing inside the same rhythm that others in the organisation are hearing and can we dance together with that?

Anup: *That's beautiful.*

Max: The original idea of business was relationship and communion, expressed in exchange and barter; one brought something to the other group and exchanged with what they had. First of all it was fun getting stuff which we didn't have. But it was also basic curiosity – the exchange of ideas. For example, the European colonizers in America picked up many ideas, and also many foods like corn and potatoes came from the native peoples and form now the core of staples in Europe. Because of our Euro-centric views, this never gets fully acknowledged. An African proverb says that well: 'Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt with glorify only the hunter'.

Anup: *Also the American constitution has been influenced by Iroquois (Native American tribe) ideas.*

Max: Yes, exactly, the five Iroquois Nations, called the League of Peace and Power, were based on a concept of spiritual union of different communities and had a central influence on the American Constitution. Many European democratic ideas were expanded and rejuvenated by Native American democratic ideas.

Anup: *Now Max, one more question to ask you; in your view what is the difference between an elder and a leader?*

Max: Yes, this is what I'm passionate about at the moment, for me the next step in the leadership theory is, what eldership is and what it means. To use an example, the USA, like it or not, have an enormous amount of consensus reality rank, meaning access to material resources and military power. The sheer potential would give them a regulatory effect on the world, even if they never use it. Some people consider this a problem. But in my view, this alone is not an issue. The problem arises when it comes to awareness of this power and communicating to the rest of the world why and how it is being used and with what goal. Also, socio-economic rank is not the only rank a nation has.

The USA, to stay with this example, have for example also multiversity rank by being a society that is largely made up of immigrants from the whole world. I envision for example a mega event between Arabic American, Israeli American, Jewish American and Muslim American groups, and everyone else who is called to be part of it, working on their relationships and televising it. Notice that all these groups have a common bond, the word 'American' and also many of the differences of the Middle Eastern group. I think something like that would help.

Anup: *This demonstrates that we need to embody the leader we want the Government to be.*

151

Max: In my vision I also see business doing something similar. You know the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation have just given twenty two billion dollars for health care in Africa. That's great! But I would like to see an even bigger vision from them. I would, especially, expect Bill Gates to understand that the world needs a different operating system. He has after all created the most popular computer operating system in the world. Twenty two billion dollars is a great start, it can alleviate a lot of suffering, but we also need a different way of thinking about eldership and relationships. If you have windows, you want it to open every file that is on your hard disk. If some files wouldn't open, or were all having problems, you would not spend all your money on changing those files, but also work on the operating system that can't access them. Some of the money should go into studying mindsets and attitudes of the 'helpers' and how to process them; they are the equivalent of operating systems, so to speak.

Anup: *This example really illustrates the difference between elder and leader. Talking with you feels like such a feast!*

Max: I like your questions because they help me in trying to organise my own thinking about it.

Anup: *Thank you. I would like to go back to the question about edges. We were talking about edges of the facilitator and the organisation. I wonder if you could explain how this dynamic happens in terms of shared edges.*

Max: A shared edge with a client that means that you are on the edge and the client may be on the same edge, so your work can't go further, till one or the other of you notices that. Would you agree?

Anup*: Yes.*

Max: Yes, that is why working in teams is often useful, it helps us notice our edges and once we notice them, the

edge of the organisation becomes visible also. But I think that the biggest edge that I see, is to think that you can go and actually help large groups, and to believe that a shift of the mindset can truly give you the leverage to change reality. I know for myself, that I think changing the mindset is the easiest but making it happen, the practical application, is the biggest problem, but I also know from experience, that it is in fact most often the other way round.

Anup: *Yeah, what would you say is the best way to change this mindset; what do I as a facilitator need to do?*

Max: The best way to develop yourself, in my view, is to like what you do and be interested in your client, her community and background and her ideas and experiences. That is true for working with organisations also, and also the business community. I think that is the biggest issue, that the more you start to work with mainstream organisations and in the background feel 'business is not good, government is no good', they will feel it, and that's the edge that you need to work on; but none of that is any different from what everybody already knows when they work with an individual client.

Anup: *Yes, that's the same principle; that really helps Max, thank you so much.*

Thanks to Andy Smith for helping in formulating some of the questions; and to Gina Clayton for her help with transcribing.

**Max Schupbach,** Ph.D.

is a co-founder of Process Work Centres in many countries. Max coaches leaders and executive teams from diverse organisations and countries, and develops and implements organisationwide change management processes. He conducts open forums, and has facilitated leadership trainings in the Australian Aboriginal and indigenous American Communities. He is the founder and director of the Lava Rock Clinic.

www.maxfacilitation.net

[1]  Eldership - doesn't relate so much to age, but to the complex ability of a leader to communicate across hierarchies, and to influence across communities. An elder understands and values human development on this earth, and sees her or himself, nature, and others, bound together in learning and growing. See: Schupbach M. Glossary http://www.maxfacilitation.net/glossary_topic.asp?glo_id=23 (accessed July 22, 2006). See also: Audergon A. 2005. *The War Hotel. Psychological Dynamics of Violent Conflict.* London: Whurr/Whiley. P. 255

[2]  See: Mindell A. 2000. *Quantum Mind. The Edge between Physics and Psychology.* Portland. Oregon: LaoTse Press. p. 585

[3]  See: Mindell A. 2000. *Dreaming While Awake. Techniques for 24-hour Lucid Dreaming.* Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing. P. 199-209

[4]  See: Diamond J and Jones L S. 2004. *A Path made by Walking: Process Work in Practice.* Portland. Oregon: LaoTse Pres. p. 148-149

[5]  Worldwork is a new paradigm for working with change within the complete spectrum of organisational and communal life. At the centre of worldwork's philosophical framework are awareness and the study of consciousness. See: Schupbach M. *Worldwork – Transformation in Organisations, Communities, Business, and the Public Space.* http://www.maxfacilitation.net/ov.pdf (accessed July 23. 2006)

[6]  Gleick J. 1998. *Chaos: The Amazing Science of the Unpredictable.* London: Vintage.

[7]  See: Mindell A. 2000. *Quantum Mind.* p. 234-235 (n 2 above)

[8]  Phenomenological approach means describing what is happening rather then explaining and interpreting it. See also: Lester S. 1999. *An*

*Introduction to Phenomenological Research.*
http://www.devmts.demon.co.uk/resmethy.htm (accessed July 22, 2006)

⁹   Schupbach E. 2004. *The Gold at the End of the Rainbow: A Hermeneutic Study of Therapist Spiritual Experience.* Dissertation. PW Center in Portland, Oregon.

¹⁰   A ghost role is a role in the group that is not directly spoken for but whose effects are nonetheless felt in the group atmosphere and can be seen in the behaviour of group members who react to the ghost role. See: http://www.maxfacilitation.net/glossary_topic.asp?glo_id=21(accessed July 22, 2006). See also: Mindell A. 2002. *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums. Practical Steps to Conflict Prevention and Resolution for Family, Workplace, and World.*  Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing. p.37

¹¹   Consensus Reality is the reality that is agreed upon by the majority as being valid and true within a specific culture or group. See:

http://www.maxfacilitation.net/glossary_topic.asp?glo_id=6 (accessed July 22, 2006). See also: Mindell A. 2000. *Dreaming While Awake. Techniques for 24-hour Lucid Dreaming* p.46-52 (n 3 above)

¹²   Dreaming is a term used to define any experience that is outside of a person's conscious control. Process Work views dreaming in a way that is similar to the Australian Aboriginal concept. See: http://www.maxfacilitation.net/glossary_topic.asp?glo_id=7 (accessed July 22, 2006). See also: Mindell A. 2002. *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums*. p.117 (n.10 above)

¹³   Castaneda C. 1974. *Tales of Power.* New York: Simon and Schuster. p 103.

¹⁴   Prigogine I. and Stengers I. 1984. *Order out of Chaos.* New York: Bantam Books.

¹⁵    Songlines emerge as invisible pathways connecting all over Australia, made of songs which tell of the creation of the land. A key concept of aboriginal culture is that they and the land are one. See also: Songlines. Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Songlines (accessed July 23. 2006)

¹⁶   See: Mindell A. 2004 *The Quantum Mind and Healing*. Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing. p 188-190