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Employing Values, Silence and Dialogue to Bridge Gaps in Status, Culture, Gender, Age, Role and Purpose

By Nick Foster

Introduction

Is it unique? Perhaps. Is it unusual? Definitely. The Caux Forum creates a space to challenge our daily assumptions and stereotypes and rebuild hope. But how?

Every European summer a constantly evolving living system is established a kilometre above Lake Geneva in an old luxury hotel; the Caux Palace. The purpose that has driven Initiatives of Change to keep inviting people to come to 'conference' across the last 71 years of this activity is to 'inspire, connect and equip' people to become agents of change in their own families, towns, countries and beyond.

The Caux Forum is an annual event run in Caux, Switzerland welcoming 1500+ people from across the world between the end of June and the middle of August. The theme of the Caux Forum 2018 is Developing Human Potential for Global Change. The main events are:

- Ethical leadership for business,
- Just Governance for Human Security,
- Towards an Inclusive Peace,
- Caux Dialogue on Land and Security,
- Addressing Europe's Unfinished Business, and
- Children as Actors for Changing Society

In addition, there is training which includes:

- Caux Scholars Program,
- Caux Peace and Leadership Programme, and
- Caux Artists Program (every other year.)

Sometimes a short video says more than text: [See an introduction to Initiatives of Change](#)

Over the summer period there are six different conferences that each last from about four to seven days and that bring together a varying number of participants – from about 100 to over 250. Each of these conferences is specific to the Caux Forum and most of them have existed for at least five years. In addition, there are other specific programmes such as the Caux Peace and Leadership Programme that enable young adults from many different countries to spend a month learning through workshops and service in Caux how to create positive work environments in diverse and intercultural teams, and how to lead ethically for a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

To function, the system requires multiple dynamic subsystems to work in some kind of harmony, each with different drivers and desired outcomes. The most salient subsystems are not unique to this specific case and are mainly interdependent, but worth identifying as salient features of the landscape in which this activity takes place.

In my experience the success of the main events and training (outlined in the text box above) depends on the strength and well-being of the various teams, the confidence with which current political and environmental issues are being addressed, how sustainable financial and human resource are developing, as well as less obvious systems such as partnership relations with collaborators, local communities and governance structures, indeed with mother nature herself! Some of these subsystems are explored below.

How does it work?

People from across the globe attend the events, serve each other, spend time in reflection, and build alliances and, vitally, deepen their appreciation of the values upon which ‘the other’ functions. Considering each of these ideas separately:

The global view of diversity is shifting. Increasingly in international politics it is tainted and employed to curry voting favour leveraging fear of the unknown, or religious difference. However, the experience of diversity can be intensely strengthening and unifying, when we turn our judgement into curiosity, and explore what is common as well as what is different. This is one value of consciously bringing together groups of people from very different countries, backgrounds, experiences, etc.

Time spent in reflection rather than just action is becoming widely understood to have wide-ranging benefits at an individual and corporate level, yet it is still a rare commodity as most minutes have a price on them. In the Caux Forum there is an emphasis on integrating silent reflection to call upon conscience, the Divine, or to seek stillness (depending on individual interpretation) as a means of amplifying the experience and this supports understanding and thereby meaning-making. Simply put; silence helps make sense of noise and can support profound learning. Those moments are built into the different programmes in ways that are appropriate to the themes and age-groups. They contribute to transcending communication difficulties that come from bringing together people who speak a wide array of languages.

During their stay in Caux all participants of conferences and training programmes contribute to the running of the house, whether it be through service in the dining room, at tea-time, at the reception, etc. Serving alongside someone shoulder-to-shoulder gives quite a refreshing insight into different problem-solving approaches and sharing information. Moreover, providing the opportunity to serve others seems to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility, even a sense of 'belonging'.

Informal dialogue is a key outcome of such exchanges; sharing life experiences and enjoying the practical as well as the cerebral is essential and can establish trust based on more than words. It is here that values are expressed and lived out, awarding credibility to their owner.

Experiencing another's commonalities and differences in 'safe' discourse as well as in service to one another provides an illuminating view of those who can too easily fall foul of stereotyping and labelling. The aim is to facilitate openness that enables a lasting change in perspective. In this short film participants talk about the impact their time at the Caux Forum has had on their local community.

A values-based approach

So, how does a values-based personal approach meet the needs of the current political and social climate? Connecting personal aspirations and experiences to global challenges is another practice that drives the Caux Forum themes as illustrated in this short video.

The underlying principle of everyone caring for the shared environment and serving others in that process is a strong value of the Caux system: looking across the dining hall and realizing that the person serving the meal is the keynote speaker is a very powerful reminder of what we are doing and how the system works.

Addressing the environment and acting environmentally is a test for all international conferences and meetings attempting to tackle sustainable living. There is an inherent degree of conflicting interest in flying people across the world to talk together about sustainable farming, renewable energy and redressing the ecological balance. With increasing capacity to engage remotely using VOIP or other internet-based communication channels, justifying face-to-face gatherings is more than important. However, from our experience over many decades it appears that some processes, particularly those requiring deep levels of trust, should start in person. To find out how some have taken their experience of the Caux Forum and developed inclusive approaches to their agricultural challenges practices click here. Future communication developments may overcome the impersonal nature of remote connection, but for now the personal interaction seems essential for meaningful development. Taking personal steps in the safety of the Caux Forum that can be translated into action when going 'down the mountain' is a common ambition across all the activities of the season.

Understanding history; building the present and the future

History is another important resource when forging a vision for the future. The Swiss people who bought the building and dedicated it to the remaking of Europe after the Second World War (inviting Germans and Japanese to participate in early conferences to start discussions about the future) were setting the stage all those years ago, thus, enabling current problems to be raised and addressed. Unfortunately, the issues which drove the Swiss to purchase the dilapidated building half way up a mountain have not been resolved. Challenges of polarization, mistrust and historic injustice persist; these are some of the reasons to Address Europe's Unfinished Business that are presented in this short video.

Again, here, the benefit of bringing together people from across the globe, adds context and insights that isolation does not enable. Learning from Colombia when talking about peace in Europe or Ireland can be informative. The Initiatives of Change network is active in 60 countries and can provide further exchange on different local and international issues when people return home from the Caux Forum. Every year participants from over 95 countries come to participate in the events. The investment of their time and energies is indicative of how important it is for them to be able to address issues important to them in a special environment where nobody is judged. There are various local and international partners and stakeholders involved in different aspects of training and events at the Caux Forum, who also benefit from engagement with trainees and event participants following their time in Caux; local and international systems feed into each other.

The current fracturing within Europe and stiffening controls and visa access across borders worldwide play against learning. Regulatory changes in Switzerland have also had an impact on the operating practices in the Caux Palace, challenging the original spirit of sacrifice and service with which the Swiss benefactors launched the project; reaching out to friends across the world to come and help restore the former palace following its demise and its second life as a refugee shelter for Jewish families in the Holocaust. Some charming images capture the efforts made to prepare for the first conference in this historic footage. Holding tightly onto the essentials and holding lightly the interpretation of them are principles that have enabled I of C to work across beliefs, cultures and status and supported locally inspired programmes to develop. This short film about the personal impact of the Ethical Leadership in Business event highlights the individual developments that can have wider-reaching impacts.

Building sustainable futures is also about inter-generational transfer, perhaps most creatively described as partnership. Sharing and handing on responsibility and power systemically is a constant feature of lasting organizations. While navigating the needs and expectations of culture and age is not simple, it can be both educational and deeply rewarding. The Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS) event, invests in bringing generations together to showcase working together; doing 'with', not 'to' or 'for' future generation. The video about CATS 2017 captures the seriousness within a joyful atmosphere where everybody's stories are listened to as an important contribution to reaching for a world where everyone can find their place.

Practical challenges

There are considerable difficulties in managing the financial realities of maintaining a historic building, running a Forum that appeals to a current world audience, managing the needs and expectations of a world fellowship (Initiatives of Change). Justifying the costs of bringing people together to 'talk' and explore differences and commonalities when there are competing demands on that finance is not always straightforward or self-evident. There are changing regulatory pressures on hospitality, human resources and access to visas, changing the international voluntary nature of the operation. These kinds of considerations propel the organizational features of the work entailing continuous reflection on how to address the challenges in a way that supports the core of our work. Also engaging with such a varied stakeholder group is challenging, especially when systems are changing at such a rapid pace. Evaluations of the different activities highlight the flourishing of hope, the arresting testimony about life-changing experiences, and the determined carriage of responsibility into the future. These seem to be sufficiently powerful motivators to overcome the challenges facing the organizers of the Caux Forum and the participants themselves, many of whom overcome substantial challenges just to arrive in Caux and participate.

Ultimately, it **is** the search for common values, shared silence, and dialogues that brings about the individual reflection that facilitates new ideas, undermines stereotype, and builds unique, often unlikely, alliances that can create new opportunities for change; individual, corporate and/or systemic. While it is often a profound experience, it is also a joyful one. Having fun together with people who are widely different from yourself can instil a sense of hope which transcends the problems of the day. It can also energize participants to carry on their good works back home. Importantly, it is rare to be provided with an opportunity to weigh up our own sense of purpose in light of the demands of the world and see what it is that we ourselves need to change.

Author

Dr. Nick Foster has been the Caux Forum Director since 2013. He is responsible for setting the schedule and managing the teams who run the events and training through the summer. He studied arts and psychology specializing in the psychology of music. He has lived around the world and worked in education and the not-for-profit sector and run his own manufacturing company in South Africa. He has also worked as a consultant to businesses on topics such as partnership development, staff retention and burnout. Before starting the role in Switzerland Nick worked as the Deputy Academic Director in Open Universities Australia and was responsible for managing relations with the various academic institutions providing content and services via the OUA platform.