SODA is the increased likelihood of ownership of outcomes by the participants because the turnaround can be fast (a point illustrated by the slow turnaround in one project - see Galer 1990)

I assume, possibly incorrectly, that OR groups (readers of OR Insight) will normally be interested in using SODA for work on messy problems (a well known term in the OR literature - Ackoff 1979). While they may have an aspiration to become involved in strategy work they are rarely able to do so. This assumption matches our experiences from training and working with a number of OR groups in Europe.

Editor's note: the following letter from Colin Eden is in reply to the response of Paul Finlay and Chris Marples to the letter from Professor Eden which appeared in the previous issue of OR Insight.

I feel the need to raise the following issues:

1. Their calculations are reasonable but represent a method of calculation which seem a little unusual. My initial letter suggests that "a lengthy" project absorbs 12 facilitator days (process facilitator and content facilitator (see Eden 1989)). The statement by Finlay and Marples uses the word "typical" as if to imply a statistical mode or median, it does not state that the "typical" as is based upon two specific published papers - both single case studies.

By describing the aims and concepts that drive SODA I have tried to indicate that the principles can be applied in a manner that is dependent upon the nature of the task, amount of time the client has got, and the work he or she can afford. It is no use saying it will take 'n' days because that is what either the problem or the method demands - management teams have their own time demands and their own sense of urgency. Our methods must adapt to the needs of the client - OR is above all clients oriented (Eden 1982, Eden 1989).

2. I think it might be helpful if they were to make similar calculations, using the same method, for the other methods they discuss. It seems a little odd to single out SODA to be the only method represented against such a criterion. They may like to consider another article which addresses the issue (although I suspect that the range of "effort involved" for each of the methods they discuss is extremely large).

3. They seem unduly fussed by the distinction I make between "messy problems" and "strategy development". The distinction is made in practice by the papers I have, on the one hand, written for an OR audience and, on the other, for strategic management audience.

I made the distinction in the first letter because I thought it might help to make the point about time spent. It is usual for clients to presume that developing a strategy for their organisation is a lengthy process which will take several person months or even years. Clients have been surprised that significant progress can be made very quickly with the use of a GDSS. Thus strategy development is expected to be a long version of SODA and yet often takes less time than the typical figure quoted by Finlay and Marples. Indeed a significant pay-off from using

4. I have recently spent some time working with Nunamaker and Vogel with "GroupSystems/TeamFocus". It is clear that GroupSystem is not often used within IBM and Boeing (as "TeamFocus") for problem solving but rather for data collection. Indeed Boeing admit that participants will rarely know whether anything resulted from the involvement in a "TeamFocus" session. While such a use is of interest to OR consultants it is clearly not GDesisio-nSS but rather a GSS (the term now used by Nunamaker and Vogel).

There are other well known 'real-world' systems in the US which are GDSS's (such as SAMM and MeetingWare) and use embedded decision modelling methods. Finlay and Marples might have usefully included those rather than "TeamFocus", and then use similar criteria and time statistics to compare problem solving across the range discussed.

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