Dr. Thomas Michael has been a teacher of management and organizational behavior at Rowan since the inception of the Business Administration program in 1972. He has an A.B. from Wabash College, an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a Ph.D. from Drexel University.

He has written about and consulted on human behavior in organizations for over thirty years. His most recent activities have included participation in a new approach to group therapy and group development using systems-centered theory. Another interest is the use of dreams in groups, communities, and organizations.

He is a member of the A. K. Rice Institute, an organization which sponsors conferences and research on the psychodynamics of groups.
Social Dreaming as a Consulting Tool in Organizations

Thomas A. Michael

Abstract
A recent development in the understanding of dreaming is that individuals share common elements of dreaming about communities and organizations. I attempted to test this idea by using social dreaming sessions as part of a consultation I did with a department of a social service agency. The group was able to use the dream sessions to develop better organizational functioning.

Origins of Dream Interpretation
In Genesis, the Pharaoh of Egypt has a disquieting dream, in which seven fat cattle are devoured by seven lean cattle. It is left to Joseph to interpret the meaning of the dream. The seven fat cattle are seven years of bountiful harvest, and the seven lean cattle are seven years of drought. Joseph not only interprets the dream, but he also gives Pharaoh advice about how to deal with the impending catastrophe. Pharaoh is so impressed that he chooses Joseph as Egypt’s chief administrator—not the last time a consultant was hired to carry out his own recommendations.

Three things were clear to the children of Israel: that God had given the dream to Pharaoh, that the dream was about public matters, and that it was a prediction about the future. Until about two hundred years ago, that view of dreaming
would be the prevailing opinion in Western thought, even among the most educated. Dreams, properly understood, could supply information to the dreamer about the future, both of the individual and the community. There were, to be sure, other uses for dreams. The German chemist Kekule was able to solve the riddle of the structure of the benzene molecule by dreaming of a snake with its tail in its mouth.

Sigmund Freud changed all of that. He proposed that our dreams are more about our personal past than about the future. A dream could help us gain access to the unconscious mind, in which impulses and wishes were locked away. The source of the impulse was the libido, the source of sexuality.

Because dreams were linked with sexuality, they became private; dreams are not shared with others except under carefully controlled circumstances. Children may be encouraged to share dreams at the breakfast table, but the dreams are usually just acknowledged without interpretation.

Therefore, while psychoanalysis has studied group and organizational behavior, the dreams of individuals are usually interpreted in terms of individual dynamics. In this essay, I describe an innovation in which dreams of organizational participants may be used as a consulting tool for organizational development. Sharing dreams, associations with those dreams, and interpretations can help illuminate organizational issues and can guide groups in making changes.

Theories of Social Dreaming

The idea of a “social dream” occurred to Gordon Lawrence while leading Tavistock Group Relations Conferences in 1989. A Tavistock Conference is an event, lasting from three days to two weeks, in which participants study their here-and-now experience. Participants are assisted in this study by consultants who frame the understanding of what is taking place in terms of the psychodynamics of the group or groups. Individual behaviors are interpreted as manifestations of group structures and issues. The “topic” or primary task of the conference is to understand the dynamics of groups as they are
experienced. Individuals often find themselves confused, frightened, and amazed by what is happening. Participation is often an intense emotional experience. As might be expected, participants produce vivid dreams. These dreams often assist participants in understanding and deepening their experience of the underlying dynamics of groups.

The first social dreaming program was held in 1982 as an experiment, with weekly sessions over an eight-week period. There was a lapse of six years until Lawrence was asked to develop an experimental program for therapists and organizational consultants in Israel (Armstrong, 1994). Subsequent programs have been held in Great Britain, Germany, Finland, Ireland, and Australia.

The first American program was held under the auspices of the New York Center of the A. K. Rice Institute in 1991. The working hypothesis of all of these programs is that there is a need to move away from the "politic of salvation" and into a "politic of revelation." Consultants, therapists, and action researchers, according to Lawrence, engage in a politic of salvation. They profess a knowledge or expertise which clients lack, and which they can furnish to clients to help them solve problems. They are able to "save" others from their tribulations, much as Joseph was able to save the Egyptians from starvation.

The politic of revelation, by contrast, allows people to interpret their own experience and "accept the surprise of their revelations," according to 1993's Third US Program of Social Dreaming and Life in Organizations and Communities, sponsored by the New York Center of the A. K. Rice Institute.

Lawrence was not alone in his rediscovery of the use of dreaming for social or public purposes. Psychoanalyst Montague Ullman has conducted and researched dreaming groups for several decades. He views dreaming as an "intensely private and personal experience about public matters" (Ullman & Storm, 1986). He proposes a "vigilance theory" of dreaming, which posits that dreaming occurs to alert the dreamer to sources of tension and conflict in relationships with others.
In an ethnological study of Indians in Guyana, Navet, a French sociologist, found that it is possible to examine social dimensions of dreaming using theories relevant to the cultures of the group being studied. The result is that the unconscious may be understood without recourse to psychoanalysts (1990).

Lawrence discovered a dramatic example of the social nature of dreaming in a book by Beradt, *The Third Reich in Dreams* (1989). Beradt asked physician friends to collect their patients' dreams in 1930s Nazi Germany. She was able to smuggle these records of the dreams out of Germany and compile them in a book. The dreams were categorized into about a dozen themes. (Examples are "I was Hitler's favorite" and "I stood up to the Nazis and stopped them.") The point is that people who had no knowledge of one another were found to have produced similar, and often identical, dreams about living under Nazi oppression.

Proponents of the use of social dreaming agree with Ullman that dreams can be about public matters. Dreams may give the sense of being predictions about the future, but this is more likely because they enable us to become aware of what David Armstrong, an organizational consultant at the Tavistock Institute in London, calls the "unthought known" (1994).

Dreams and memories always begin as visual experiences. Moreover, recent studies suggest that these pictures are not built or stored in one place in the brain, but are continually assembled from several locations (Damasio, 1994). It is only after the "known" is constructed that we can speak of a thought in the mind. Thus, we may "know" long before we think the thought and translate that thought into words.

Freud spoke of himself as an archeologist searching through the past for shards of experience to gain meaning for the present. The approach of social dreaming is closer to the formulation of Spence in his study of the psychoanalytic process, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (1982). Spence holds that the process of analysis and of dream interpretation is actually a mutual construction of a narrative by the patient and the analyst. There is no meaning as such in nature, nor is
there a narrative thread in events. Narrative and meaning are human constructions, not discoveries of a narrative inherent in the events of history. Dreaming can be seen as one of the ways we attempt to bring a sense of meaning and order to events in our lives.

*Applied Social Dreaming*

In “Creating New Cultures: The Contribution of Social Dreaming” (1994), I suggested that social dreaming must be a foundation for the creation of new organizational cultures. However, I was not optimistic that leaders of organizations would soon introduce social dreaming as part of their strategic planning. That assumption has proved to be incorrect. Lawrence (1995) has described the use of social dreaming at a retreat for executives of a French conglomerate. Baird (1994) showed how members of a work team could use associations and connections to their dream images to improve their work culture and resolve some issues regarding gender, space, and authority. Hyppa (1993) has described how dreams, when used with other methods of analysis, can offer valuable assistance in understanding organization development problems. Social dreaming has become a part of the curriculum for training in organizational consultancy at the William Alanson White Institute in New York.

As a result, I undertook to use social dreaming in a consultancy at a non-profit mental health agency in a mostly rural county. The agency provides a range of services, mostly for the poor and those on public assistance. I had been working with upper management to help prepare the organization for the introduction of total quality management and with other parts of the organization to improve employee participation. This department had been viewed as different from other parts of the agency, and members experienced isolation and alienation from the mainstream of the organization. They were searching for ways to improve collaboration and cooperation with the agency.

The director of a department that deals with children and
adolescents arranged to undertake a series of social dreaming sessions in a group of seven. The group consisted of the male director, a female assistant director, and five counselors. The director, who serves as assistant director of the whole agency, is middle-aged, while all the others in the group are younger, in their late twenties to middle thirties. An additional part-time employee did not participate in the sessions.

An Example of a Social Dreaming Session

I began the first session by outlining the ideas behind social dreaming: that its purpose is to gain new information about the working of a unit, that there are no correct dream interpretations, that participants are free to make their own interpretations, that participants may voice any associations that occur to them, that a dream can be an association or interpretation of a previous dream, and that it is better to avoid self-censorship as far as possible. My role was to facilitate the group and to participate in any way I could by trying to be available for any thoughts, associations, or ideas that might help us gain meaning.

At the first session, Gina (I have changed the names of participants to insure anonymity) remarked that she usually does not remember her dreams but could recall a recent dream in which she found a $10 bill in the garbage. “It was in the trash,” she said.

The director said that he dreamed he was in a house on a hill that overlooked a valley and noticed many “ripples” in the valley. Someone in the group said that the ripples were heat lines, but the director said, “I look [at the ripples] and say ‘That’s water!’ I ran upstairs as the water swept through the valley. Then I found myself inside in the kitchen arguing with someone about how to wash dishes.” In the dream, there was the idea that the dishes must be washed.

At this point, members of the group began to pass around a package of doughnuts, and they started to eat them. I asked them about their interest in doughnuts. Did they need to be fed? My question arose out of a partially formed thought that
dream sharing was provoking anxiety and that feeding is considered a way of calming oneself.

The director then described another dream he had two weeks before. He was decorating a room, putting up ornate wood. He was involved in the task when someone walked in and said, "The room looks good, but did you see the hallway?" In the dream, the hallway was in disarray.

(The director remarked that he did not like doughnuts.)

Jan, the assistant director, interpreted the director's dream: that the inside of the room was good, the outside, or hallway, decayed. She continued, "The view is not broad enough; you are concentrating on one area and refusing to look outside."

Jan then recounted a dream in which she was at a carnival, and all the members of the department were there too. The carnival was set up as a maze. In her dream, Jan said she needed to go to the bathroom, and asked Nell, the part-time employee, to help her find the way, but Nell left. She also asked Marge and Gina to help find the bathroom, but they were neither helpful nor unhelpful.

At this point, Gina said, "Next time I'll be there for you."

Marge remarked that it felt as if Jan needed more help. She added that a bathroom at a carnival would not be one you would want to use except in an emergency. Thus, the first session reached its time limit. As is often the case, there were no clear conclusions. We were left to ponder and to await the next session.

The Second Dream Session

The second session was held two weeks later. Louis began by recounting a dream fragment in which he was playing pro baseball. He added that the dream was vague and may have been a result of watching a TV program about Hank Aaron.

Jan related a dream about her cousin, whom she described as a nerd with red hair and glasses. The cousin was in college and needed a date for the prom. He looked at a calendar and decided to ask a certain girl, very pretty, old-fashioned, with hair in ringlets. "She's a Christian," said Jan in the dream,
laughing. "You have to watch out for Gentiles." He said, "What's wrong with Gentiles?" Jan replied that they were a people completely isolated, in the dark, and naive. Then, in the dream, the girl came down the stairs, looking like a character in the film *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

The director associated the dream image of an isolated and naive female Christian with Nell's role as a part-time staff member. He then related a dream which seemed to illuminate Jan's dream. He was aware of being unable to recall much, but in the dream, he revealed, someone was saying "Two, three, six," and the people in the dream put the numbers together. He added that the staff team appeared again to be separated, with one outside member (Nell) thought of as ineffective. In actuality, Nell had been excluded and isolated while the rest of the group worked as pairs and trios.

My interpretation was that the isolated member was experiencing a projective identification, in which the other members of the team projected their feelings of ineffectiveness and isolation onto her. Therefore, Nell identified with those group feelings and acted them out.

Louis commented that the department was isolated and chose to be isolated from the other departments of the organization. (It should be noted that the department was at the back of the building, physically isolated from the others).

The director then asked, "So we are Nell?" Jan added that Nell did have some connection with the group because she created the group calendar. Jan also pointed out that the group did give Nell jobs, but that Nell could not do the jobs because she made them too complex. For her, nothing was simple.

The director next said that his group used more complex organizational behavior techniques—psychodynamics, for instance—than other departments. Although the department had received six or seven commendations, he said, nobody in other parts of the organization mentioned them. He added that part of the trouble may have been because of his own behavior: he is very much involved in the overall operation of the organization.
I suggested that the problem might be about how the department had drawn boundaries between itself and the rest of the organization. I had observed that the whole organization had drawn a boundary between itself and the population it serves. It is located in woods on a country road, midway between two small cities. The buildings cannot be seen from the highway, nor is access easy for the poor, who lack transportation. I hypothesized that members of other parts of the organization may have projected their own feelings of isolation onto the department. Furthermore, it might be helpful for department members to become aware of that and to develop ways to deflect these projections.

The group laughed. They remarked about the intrusiveness of one member of the administrative staff and explained that he was one reason they were inclined to make impermeable boundaries around the department. When I asked the name of the intrusive person, they did not want to say who it was (another impermeable boundary).

Jan then commented that department members were indeed treated as if they were naive and therefore acted this way, for example, by not figuring out how to use the new telephone system. She said she would like to see the intrusive administrator spend a week in their department.

Commentary on the Group Sessions

Two themes that emerged from these sessions appear significant to the work of the department. The first is the struggle to maintain a clean space in which to carry out the group’s activities. The house on the hill was flooded, yet there was an argument about washing dishes. The room was decorated, yet the hallway was in disarray. There was a problem finding a decent bathroom in a maze at a carnival. Part of the struggle involved others who argued about how to clean up, or who would not help with a most basic need.

In the second session, the group developed more clearly the idea that it was isolated from the other departments in the organization. In this session, members began to make their
own associations and interpretations. An element of the department’s isolation was found to be its choice of a more complex treatment modality. One result was that others perceived this department as being unable to complete tasks. So they continue to receive commendations from outside agencies, but these are not mentioned by others in the organization. The department members may be considered naive, unable to master simple tasks like learning to use the new telephone system. The boundary the organization has erected around itself is impermeable.

As mentioned before, the mental health center is physically isolated. Because of a constricted budget, maintenance and upkeep of buildings and grounds are marginal. The staff of the center works hard, but conveys the sense that members are not appreciated by the public. Since the clientele is mainly poor, the staff struggles to maintain its self-esteem. It had been suggested that the remote location enabled the public to put the neediest out of sight, so ironically the purpose of the center could be summed up “out of mind, out of sight.”

By now, the department members and I had constructed a narrative which included a corporate sense of isolation; a lack of appreciation for quality work in shabby surroundings; and an attempt by members of the organization to project the more painful parts of the experience. Some results were the drawing of rigid boundaries around the department and the reputed inability to perform simple tasks. The laughter of the group when this interpretation was made, together with the fact that they were able to make connections with other ideas in the dreams, appears as verification that they were joining in the construction of the meaning.

Later the director said that dream work had a positive effect on the work of the department. It enabled the group to see that it was both the object of projections and that its members were projecting feelings onto others to avoid taking personally thoughts and judgments more properly understood as unconscious needs of the organization. They were also less susceptible to game playing.
Have we found the truth? We could not verify this work with conventional tests of validity. Indeed, Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream could have been a lucky guess.

The test of the work has to be framed in terms of the effect that the insights have on the functioning of the organization and on whether the changes in behavior can be experienced by members the way they wish.

Five months later, the director enthusiastically reported a number of changes in the department’s activities. The group defined several specific actions to improve relationships across boundaries. They prepared newsletter articles to interpret the work of the department and a welcoming letter explaining their philosophy to new clients and their families. The group identified points at which boundaries had been overridden by other parts of the agency and took steps to reestablish and maintain these boundaries. In one case, this amounted to posting signs indicating that counseling sessions were in progress.

Staff members have also undertaken to renegotiate interpersonal boundaries. They have stopped being so ready to turn the other cheek. As a department, they are clarifying their working boundaries with their young clients.

Changing organizational behavior is difficult regardless of the technique you employ. So much of the culture is hidden from the consciousness of its own inhabitants. Social dreaming appears to be one means to identify elements of the culture and to make them available for thought and reflection. We are at the beginning of an extended inquiry.

I would like to examine the effect of social dreaming on the strategic planning of an organization. Recent literature stresses the importance of a corporate vision to inform the organization’s mission. Leaders are constantly urged to create a vision. Leaders themselves often speak of their dreams for an organization, although often the employees of the organization experience themselves as participants in someone else’s nightmare. Perhaps we could dream together at Rowan.
References


Thomas R. Gibson, former Subaru President and Chief Operating Officer, addressed the Management Institute's Scholarship Dinner, fall 1987.