



The Solutions in our Midst
—Peter Senge

Real transformative change is led by people – generally on the periphery – who are relentlessly practical and deeply connected to spiritual practice. It is our task to notice, support, leverage and disseminate these efforts.



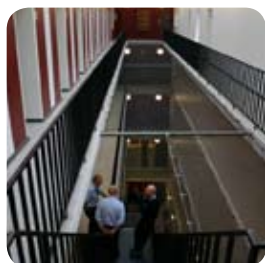
Appreciative Inquiry is not (Just) About the Positive
—Gervase Bushe

Generative questions, generative conversations and generative actions form the backbone of Appreciative Inquiry, not just a mere focus on the positive.



Facilitative Leadership through Positive Deviance
—Jane Lewis

Positive Deviance assumes that any problematic situation includes people who surmount the problem and can share something with the rest of the affected community.



Wicked Challenges
—Lars Thuesen

Even in the highly regarded Danish prison system, there are problems of stress, absenteeism, recidivism. Here is a case study which offers early evidence of the success of Positive Deviance in addressing some of these challenges.



In Pursuit of Elegance
—Matthew May

Across many disciplines, elegant solutions are recognised as economical, with lasting effect. Here are four key attributes of an elegant solution: symmetry, seduction, subtraction, and sustainability.



Emerging Worldviews
—Carol Mase

From a nonlinear systems perspective, transformative change often entails instability and under-performance before the new patterns stabilize outcomes at a new, and higher level. Welcome to the cauldron.



A Hidden Lever of Leadership – Supporting Meeting Interactivity
—Lenny Lind & Karl Danskin

Meetings can be deadly – presentations followed by go-nowhere breakout sessions. Here is an elegant technological solution to all that.

Do we have what we need?

Many years ago, when my wife was expecting our first child, I resolved to be ready. It seemed prudent to anticipate a long period of sleep deprivation, a lot of medium-to-heavy lifting, and an on-going demand on my time the likes of which I had not yet known. So during the pregnancy, I stepped up my exercise routine figuring that being in good shape was the best preparation I could make for being a father. That was my thinking at the time, anyway.

Of course, fatherhood didn't turn out exactly as expected. Yes, the demand on my time and energy was – and still is – significant. But the sleep deprivation was negligible, and as far as the heavy lifting is concerned, Mother Nature doesn't give you a 25-kilo child to pick up without a few years of graduated training in advance.

So, all in all, it worked out, and I'm not sure how useful my pre-delivery training was.

Just last week, I read some more news about the global climate crisis. It seems that, in the summer of 2010, the Arctic ice cap was the third smallest in recorded history. (The first and second smallest ice caps occurred in the last four years.) I'm sure many

of you receive news like this almost every week. A couple of weeks ago, for example, I read that the toxic levels in dolphins are now so high that it is necessary and commonplace for the female to detoxify herself by nursing her first calf. This first born often does not survive, but the mother is now rid of much of the fat-soluble toxins so that subsequent offspring can be nursed more safely. I don't know whether to be more alarmed or horrified.

Moreover, it seems likely to me that, over the next couple of decades, we will see a series of alarms and record-breakers – this year it's the polar ice cap, maybe next year is the hottest, the year after could bring bad news from the Greenland ice shelf or a platoon of hurricanes.

Faced with this kind of news week in and week out, we have in essence two sane responses: (1) "what can we do to slow, mitigate or stop this self-destruction?" and (2) "What do we need to do now to prepare for the kinds of collapse and failure that now seem likely?" These questions are not mutually exclusive, and both can be understood as questions of technology, economy, politics, community or leadership.

While all of these are clearly critical, I am most interested in the community and leadership dimensions. Specifically, how do we shift the trajectory of our systems (question 1) and how do we prepare for incredible change and uncertainty (question 2)? It seems that the leaders over the foreseeable future need to be flexible people who can synthesize the technical and the social, who can understand and articulate the complexities we face, and who can look in unlikely places for transformative solutions. Our future and present require people of tremendous sophistication, integrity and courage. The good news is that many such people already exist. The bad news is we really don't know if they/we are strong and numerous enough to turn this thing around.

I hope and trust that this issue of the Oxford Leadership Journal may contribute in some small way to your own leadership sophistication, integrity and courage. You may want to exercise more, as well.

Robert Ziegler, editor



The Solutions in our Midst

Peter Senge

PETER SENGE is a Senior Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Founding Chair of the Society for Organizational Learning, a global community of corporations, researchers and consultants dedicated to the interdependent development of people and their institutions. Peter is author or co-author of several books including *The Fifth Discipline* (1990, revised 2006), *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (1994), *The Dance of Change* (1999), *Presence* (2004), and *The Necessary Revolution* (2008). *The Journal of Business Strategy* named Senge as one of the 24 people who had the greatest influence on business strategy in the 20th century. *The Financial Times* (2000) named him as one of the world's "top management gurus," and *Business Week* (2001) also rated Peter as one of The Top (ten) Management Gurus.

PETER SENGE: As you may know, I've been involved in a lot of change efforts over a long time and a lot of systems-transformation projects. And this spring, we did something a little bit different. I've had an idea for quite a few years but finally with the help of a couple of good friends, we pulled it off. It was a very simple thing—to bring together eight different groups or sites from around the world, who were living embodiments of the types of human systems—in education, community development, and business—that might emerge.

So I'd like to tell you a few stories to present these people and their work, because obviously what I said

just now is very abstract, and I want to give you a little feeling for it.

URDT

In 1985 or so, I met a man from Uganda, Mwalimu Musheshe, and he and a colleague were starting a program which eventually would be called Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT). They chose to work in the poorest region of what was a chaotic country at the time. In addition to these two men, there were one or two other people who were trying to raise money to support their efforts. Those supporters

This article is based on the final talk given at the tenth Summer Institute of Authentic Leadership in Action (ALIA) in June 2010 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Over the Institute's ten-year history, it has brought together systems-oriented tools and perspectives with the values and practices of authentic leadership, creating a unique and powerful support for leaders, managers and consultants from around the world. Since the Institute's inception, Dr. Senge has been an advisor, friend and, on several occasions, guest speaker.

asked, “Why do you start in the poorest and the most backward part of the country?” Musheshe and his colleague said that it just seemed like the right place to start. In my first conversation with Musheshe I was really struck by his clarity. He said something that I have never forgotten which I first took to be a statement about Africa but have since seen to be much more general. He said, “The biggest limit on development in Africa is fatalism.” When people do not believe they can alter their future, they do not believe they have efficacy in their life, and it doesn’t matter what you do to help them. Anything you do will just reinforce that belief. That’s why all aid efforts, no matter how enlightened, ultimately have within them the seeds of their own limitation.”

Over the next three or four years, each year, we’d have a group of three or four young Ugandans who had come for about two months of training. We had a three-day leadership course; it used to be called *Leadership and Mastery* long ago. In fact a lot of the ideas that found their way into *The Fifth Discipline* were incubated in that course, starting around 1979. The Ugandans would come every year, and they’d do that program, and they would do a lot of work in personal mastery and systems thinking. Each year, it would be about three people, typically mid- to late-

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twenties. They were “field workers,” working in the villages in this region of Uganda, doing things like helping people dig better wells, establish better granaries, and construct better composting toilets – very basic improvements, but ones that people could undertake and continue themselves, where they did not need further outside assistance. They’d come for about two months and then go back, and of course, we didn’t see them after they went back. They were always wonderful young people, so much so that those of us leading those programs always felt we were really fortunate to be there when the Ugandans were attending.

After a couple years, they’d start to bring us photographs. I’ll never forget the first one I saw of someone who had written their vision on their hut. It was at that moment that I got the feeling that something was really happening. The clarity that the organizers had was shifting the underlying mindset, and then doing things that would reinforce that shift in mindset. You don’t shift a mindset in the abstract. It’s in the day-to-day; it’s in the moment by moment; it’s in the doing; all learning is in the doing.

To make a long story short, today this is the most prosperous region of Uganda. URDT’s work has led to sustained economic development, micro credit, lots of small-enterprise creation, and a lot of emphasis on organic agriculture. In fact, Musheshe was recently asked by the President of Uganda to be a special advisor in their agriculture policy because URDT has been so successful at building a rural economy around organic agriculture. After 25 years, today URDT is probably one of the best success stories of rural development in central Africa.

About twelve or thirteen years ago, as a lot of these basics were starting to fall into place, and something was really happening in the whole region, they shifted and began a focus very specifically in one area. They decided that what was most important was the educa-

THE TALK UPON WHICH THIS ARTICLE IS BASED IS AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE IN SEVEN SEGMENTS, SUBTITLED AS FOLLOWS. CLICK ON EACH TO VIEW:

- 1: [Introduction](#)
- 2: [Transforming Rural Uganda \(URDT\)](#)
- 3: [The Wisdom of Urban Youth \(Roca\)](#)
- 4: [Working in the Favelas \(CDI\)](#)
- 5: [Unlikely Bedfellows \(Oxfam and Unilever\)](#)
- 6: [Systems Thinking in Early Education](#)
- 7: [Sharing the Insights](#)

tion of girls. How many of you have ever seen the video, *The Girl Effect*? It is quite remarkable and has been very influential around the world. When it first came out about two years ago it was one of the five most watched YouTube videos in the world for a good while. It's remarkable. It probably packs more systems-insight-per-minute, in its 2 minutes and 25 seconds, than anything I've yet seen.

Well, these people, without ever having seen this little video, were living it. In a poor country, most people have to pay for their children's education, and when there's not enough money to pay for all the kids' educations, families generally pay for the boys' education. That's a fairly common pattern, so URDT started opening secondary schools for girls because typically girls will discontinue school around the age of ten, eleven or twelve. Three years ago they opened the first rural women's university in Africa. Along the way, they came up with this brilliant model, what they call the "Two-Level Education Model." Educate the girls, and the girls educate their parents. A lot of their parents don't read, or don't have a lot of the basic skills they need to be effective in a modern society. The girls call themselves "rural transformers."



There's nothing more powerful than two or three minutes of listening to one of these young girls talk – certainly my words are very weak by comparison.

So, URDT was one of the eight "exemplars" of systemic change we brought together in March, in Yucatan, Mexico. In the last two or three months it's

become very apparent to me that miracles like URDT are happening all around us.

Roca

Another one of the organizations that came to this meeting was one I've also known for about twenty years. It's twenty-three or four years old, and it has been achieving similar miracles – this time in inner city environment in this country. [Roca](#) is an organization composed mostly of former gang members who become what they call "youth workers." These are young people, boys and girls, recruited off the streets, who in turn work with others on the streets to escape the street life of gangs, drugs and violence. They do this through an extraordinary process they have developed, primarily using Native American methods.



It is an interesting reflection on how learning is now occurring in this world of ours, that the primary method for the work that goes on with these young Cambodians and Vietnamese and Gabonians and Puerto Ricans comes from the Tlingit Indians in the Yukon, from whom Roca learned what they call "Peacekeeping Circles." When everything is awry, when everything is out of balance, they form a circle. It's quite an experience; to sit down with a group like this, young people who are Latinos or Southeast Asians or Central Africans, the typical polyglot immigrant community you find in cities in North America, and start with "smudging," circulating a bit of burning incense with cleansing smoke and watching these young people pray for guidance that their words and actions can serve their community. I cannot tell you how many young people I have gotten to know at Roca who would now be in jail or dead had it not been for their work.

Today, one of the most eloquent spokespeople



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for Roca – in an incredible juxtaposition of histories and images – is a retired Irish cop, the former police chief where Roca operates in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Chelsea is just across the harbour from Boston, so it's literally about three miles from the financial district of Boston. It is a totally different universe, one that is typical in US cities, where extreme poverty exists cheek-to-jowl with great wealth. I've gotten to know Frank, the retired Irish police chief. He says, "I'm really grateful that in the last ten years of my career I met Roca, because it was the first time in my life I felt like I could actually do something. All my life, all I've been able to do is arrest people, to try to stop crime after the fact. Now for the first time, I feel like we're dealing with the sources of violence in our communities."

So, there, you see again Musheshe's theme about fatalism. I believe most people in America don't believe there is anything we can do about the violence and hopelessness of our inner cities. Speaking as a citizen of the United States, it is one of our dirty little secrets that, for over a decade, it's been more likely that the young African-American man growing up in an American city will go to jail than to go to any form of tertiary education. The largest growing segment of our jail population in America is young African-American women. The United States has around five

percent of the world's population and about 28% of the world's prison inmates. And it's a phenomenal business, much of which has been privatized over the past decade. So our meeting in Mexico also included Roca, which represents an antidote to this fatalism in the U.S., just as URDT does in Africa.

Centre for Digital Inclusion

The meeting also included an amazing group, [CDI, the Centre for Digital Inclusion](#), probably the most successful "digital inclusion" network in the world. There has been a lot of hubbub, and a lot of self-promotion by the computer industry, around how digital inclusion can be a key to solving poverty in the world. And there is an inescapable element in truth in this. If people don't have access to the Internet, they don't have access to being effective participants in their society. But the idea that technology is going to solve these problems seems, at least to me, at best a little naïve and superficial.

CDI is based in Rio de Janeiro, founded by a remarkable young man, Rodrigo Baggio. Rodrigo was a successful IT entrepreneur when, at the age of 25 he said, "I've made plenty of money, I don't need any more money. I want to do something." I met Rodrigo at a meeting in England about two years ago, and then coincidentally I happened to be in Rio about a month later. So I asked if I could visit one of their CDI centres.

How many of you have ever seen the movie, *City of God*? It's a very difficult movie, but it's quite remarkable. I went to the *favela* where that was filmed. Now, the *favelas* in Rio are very interesting because literally the city is designed and planned around these areas that are kind of roped off. You could call it an apartheid type system, but maybe that is a little extreme. It's not that there is limited movement, but there are places where poor people live, very poor people. The *favelas* are very violent. The police do not go into a lot of them.

This particular *favela* the police do not go in. But I went in with Rodrigo and a couple of other people one afternoon about a year and a half ago and sat down with a woman named Dona Anna and a group of young people. I'm guessing that Donna Anna is about 70 years old and was the director of a CDI Community Centre where they have Internet access. Now, this is a

bizarre image, this older “Madre” figure directing an internet facility that draws all these young people, but it is a fitting one for CDI as community builders.

By the way, CDI is now in every *favela* in Latin America, and more than million young people have completed their basic Internet Course. It’s an amazing success story, and now they’re establishing CDI centres in the Middle East, starting in Jordan.



RODRIGO HAS CREATED AN AMAZING SYSTEM THAT SOMEHOW USES THE INTERNET TO ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK, CONNECT THEM, BUT THEN HELP THEM REFLECT ON HOW THEY WANT TO MAKE THEIR COMMUNITY A BETTER PLACE

Digital, Microsoft, and Dell love CDI because this is what they’ve saying all along, i.e. that the Internet and computers solve poverty, which is, as I say, at best a little simplistic. In Rodrigo’s view, it’s kind of like honey; internet access attracts kids because they want to get on line. But CDI does something very different. It’s really quite simple: they offer an introductory training on the Internet, but to complete the training, you must also do a project; it can be anything you want, but it just has to be for the benefit of your community, and you have to use the Internet for the project. That’s it, so that’s the first ten-hour training that they offer for anybody who’s interested. Then they have a social enterprise fund that they’ve set up, so then they can fund people to start businesses that use the Internet for the benefit of their community.

Rodrigo has created an amazing system that somehow uses the Internet to attract young people at risk, connect them, but then help them reflect on how

they want to make their community a better place, and he has gotten a lot of attention for this, including many awards for being a leading “social entrepreneur” and even being on the cover of Time magazine in Brazil.

I’ve been in a lot of intense conversations in my life, but this one in the CDI Centre in Rio will always stand out. There are occasions – I’ve had this experience before – where I’m in the middle of one of these energetically intense conversations and time really does work in a different way. When I went to this *favela*, we were sitting there with Dona Anna and this 25- or 26-year-old younger woman, and the younger woman was telling me about her father. He had been in jail for much of his life. These are obviously places of intense violence, and she was talking about her father’s transformation through his engagement with this Centre. I have to tell you, even before she told that story, I had an overwhelming emotional reaction, even though she had said little. It was like I had already heard the whole story. Don’t ask me how. I kind of knew where the conversation was going; it became incredibly quiet in that circle, and time was not moving in a linear fashion. There was an energy in that circle of about ten people that was very special, as the young girl talked about her father who, after being in prison for 25 years, came back and got involved with this Centre and whose life has been totally transformed. I found out later he was the lead character in that movie the *City of God*. He had been a very violent man.

The Global Sustainable Food Laboratory

In the gathering we had in Mexico, we also had a project I had been very close to. For it, we made an exception to our one of our participation criteria — that everybody had to have been at it for fifteen to twenty years. [The Global Sustainable Food Lab](#) has only been at it for about nine years; Adam Kahane, someone well known in ALIA, was very instrumental with a few other people in getting it established. I have stayed very closely involved as the Food Lab has developed over the past eight years or so. It now involves about 60 or 70 organizations – including many of the largest food companies in the world and the largest NGOs in the world – working together on how we create a truly sustainable system of agriculture. This involves the largest food companies, not just little organics businesses, and



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not just buying some food from a local farmer here and there. What would it take for a sustainable food system to become the mainstream system?

So here was a group from *business*, a remarkable group, which has given rise to similar collaborations around the world. Today many things have happened which I would have previously considered completely impossible. This network was originally established by Oxfam and Unilever, two very unlikely bedfellows. Ten years ago, we did a little pilot project and managed to get them working together. Now, ten years later, they have a board-to-board strategic agreement to collaborate. Unilever is one of the biggest multinational food companies in the world with all the problems that go along with that. A lot of Americans don't necessarily know Unilever, but you know their brands: you know Lipton Tea, you know Bird's Eye, and you know Ben and Jerry's. Oxfam is one of the most respected and well-known social justice NGOs in the world, particularly in Europe, where their campaigns around poverty have had a big impact. The whole Fair Trade movement really got its lift from Oxfam. This new board-to-board strategic agreement with Unilever is focused on

demonstrating the viability of "small-holder models" in global agriculture, that is, how could the global sourcing of food no longer be a relentless process that drives farmers into poverty, as it has been worldwide for half a century?

While local sourcing of food is great, it's a fantasy to think we're all going back to having all our food come from 50 miles from where we live. We do not live in Tuscany. It would be nice if it was Tuscany, but it's not Tuscany. Moreover, the economies of many countries in the developing world are now very dependent on export markets for their agriculture. So for all kinds of reasons, it's silly to think that the future is only local food. Probably there should be and could be a lot more of it, but there's also going to be global food sourcing.

But how could you have global food chains that did not drive farmers into poverty? Instead, can there be global food chains based on networks of small farmers who can be successful in innovating to the standards of global multinational businesses? That is the focus of this new board-to-board agreement to collaborate, which would have been unthinkable five years ago. No one would have thought that there would be anything like that.

Unilever recently announced on their website the intention to source all inputs to all products sustainably by 2020. Unilever does not have a history of being a particularly innovative company. It's changed totally in the last ten years in large part because of the partnership with Oxfam, and because of efforts of people like Adam Kahane to get people actually working together doing this.

Systems thinking in primary and secondary education

The last story I'll tell you is about kids, younger kids, because the third cluster that we brought together were people transforming primary and secondary education, one using art and the other "systems thinking." The second group is also one I have known for over two decades.

I believe human beings are systems thinkers; I believe we're *born* systems thinkers. I believe as young children we demonstrate unbelievable insight into how the system called a family works. Right? Think about it, how is it that the two-year-old controls the family?



**I BELIEVE HUMAN BEINGS ARE SYSTEMS THINKERS;
I BELIEVE WE'RE BORN SYSTEMS THINKERS.**

But, then, something happens to us when we go to school, and our innate ability to understand interdependence and change, our innate ability to be in a state of awareness of the unfolding of things, our innate ability to really sense how systems around us are functioning, is no longer cultivated. The best analogy I can use is to imagine a world where no kid ever had a musical instrument. There would not be a lot of musicians, even though we have enormous innate potential – every one of us – for music and many of us are really gifted. But if you never had an instrument, none of that latent ability would ever develop. Children are natural systems thinkers, but with no instruments, the ability does not develop. When you see them with their instruments, it's astounding. I've seen high school kids do work that's more sophisticated than doctoral students. I've seen many small-scale examples of this potential; they are key now, like all the exemplars, in getting this work to a scale that can matter more broadly.

Today, that scale is forming in a small group of schools, particularly in Tucson, Arizona, where there is a critical mass of schools based on continuing the natural process of human beings growing up with an awareness of the interdependency of their world and themselves as the person being aware.

The two are actually inseparable. This is always one

of the subtleties of the systems perspective. It's not just about seeing systems out there, it's about seeing myself as inevitably a part of that system. That's what Humberto Maturana, the famous Chilean biologist, calls the "systemic systemic" shift. So "systemic systemic" means the world around us is an interplay and continual dance of interdependence that we're also part of. You cannot be a systems thinker without being a thinker, of being aware of your own thinking.

And by the way, Maturana's institute, called [Matriztic School](#) of Santiago Chile, was one of the co-hosts of this gathering, along with Otto Scharmer and the [Presencing Institute](#), and SoL, the [Society for Organizational Learning](#).

In the Department of Education today, there's a wonderful group of people, who really care about fostering innovation in public schools, even though it's really hard to bring about these kinds of changes when you're sitting in a place like Washington, DC. Recently, I invited the woman who's responsible for what they call early childhood education (birth through second grade) to visit a young kids' school in Tucson. She happened to have a trip out West so she said she would do it. When I saw her about two weeks later, she was glowing.

Coincidentally, one of this woman's mentors happens to live in Tucson and happens to have worked with this school. (I find that when you're doing things that are working, there are all these weird coincidences happening all the time. I've been living in that intensely now for the last three or four months since we had this meeting in Mexico.) So they went together to this K-2 school, where the kids are five to seven years old. The school is in an old building. It's built around a little courtyard, so it's really lovely with nothing fancy about it at all.

When I saw her, I asked, "How was your visit to the Borton School?" And she said, "Ahhh, I never knew that a six year old could reflect!" She said, "You know what I saw? At the end of every day the kids – six year olds! – would get together and stand in a circle. Then they go hour by hour through the day, and if they were learning a lot they stand really tall. If they didn't learn anything they get down on the ground, and if they were in between they kind of hunched over. Then they talk about what was going on with them from 9 to 10 or from 11 to 12 that caused them

to learn like that.” She was incredulous. “These kids are learning to reflect on their learning day-by-day, minute-by-minute, and that’s how they learn.” What really struck me about this story is that this is a lady who’s not unsophisticated regarding children and their development. She’s responsible for early learning in the entire country, and it was shocking to her to see how naturally and deeply young children can reflect on their own learning.

I had visited this same school two or three weeks earlier. I brought a little group with me including a woman who had hosted our meeting in March in Mexico. She runs an amazing program that’s now in about two-thirds of the schools in Mexico, which are very traditional in their style. The teacher is the authority, kids are mostly passive. This woman, Claudia Madrazo, has introduced a program where, for one hour a week, the kids get to ponder a work of art. That’s it! It is a sort of Trojan horse program – because the real goal is to train teachers to be different. The teachers are trained in a very elegant way to simply step out of the way, put up a work of art, and just be there with the kids. The Trojan horse aspect is that this exercise is teaching the teachers how to be in a totally different way with the kids. Of course, to ponder a work of art is one of the simplest reflective practices possible because the whole point is: what does it evoke in you? What are your feelings, what are your thoughts? What are the stories? And that happens for one hour a week, that’s all. This program now operates in a great many schools in Mexico (80,000 teachers have been trained); the Minister of Education has just said it should be in all the schools. So this program, DIA, Developing Intelligence through Art, is also one of the exemplars.

So Claudia, who is herself a pretty amazing educational innovator, and I were visiting the schools in Tucson. In one classroom, we were with young children who had visited an archaeological dig, and they had done a system diagram of what causes an archaeological dig to “have value or not.” It was very elaborate; it had about 25 different variables all laid out in a very orderly way. The children were explaining about how the value of the site is affected by what happened there historically, by whether or not the site is well protected, and so on. One woman with us was a philanthropist who funds a lot of archaeologi-

WHAT IF BECOMING AWARE OF OURSELVES AS A LEARNER WAS THE FOUNDATION FOR OUR LEARNING, FOR OUR SCHOOLING? WHAT IF BECOMING AWARE OF OURSELVES AS A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY WAS A FOUNDATION OF OUR SCHOOLING? THAT’S WHAT THEY MEAN WHEN THEY SAY “SYSTEMS THINKING.”

cal digs, and she says, with her jaw dropped, “I spent twenty years learning what these three six-year-olds have just explained to me in ten minutes! How do they understand this?” By the way, although the educators call what they do “systems thinking,” you could also call this reflective thinking. What if becoming aware of ourselves as a learner was the foundation for our learning, for our schooling? What if becoming aware of ourselves as a member of a community was a foundation of our schooling? That’s what they mean when they say “systems thinking.”

Just a little later three boys said, “We have a problem because we’ve been having fights on the playground.” So they quickly sat down and did a little system diagram of what causes them to get angry. And they identified three or four places they had been trying to intervene in this system. They said, “We tried just saying ‘I’m sorry.’ That works a little, but we’re not convinced it works very well.” Keep in mind; these are six year-old boys. They’ve got a diagram of what causes them to have spats on the playground, and they’re sitting there reflecting on the different things they could be doing to not have that happen. They suggested two or three other interventions, which they said they’re going to be trying the next time it happens. Those of us visiting felt like we had seen something very special – the beginnings of Maturana’s “systemic systemic” shift in education.

I’m telling you these stories because I know of no other way to quickly get to the heart of this, and I hope this has succeeded in doing that.

Insights

Marianne Knuth: Peter, you’ve got about four minutes left. And I’ve loved listening to your stories about how you brought these people together. I was wondering if you would end by sharing some of the insight that came out of knitting all those stories together?

Peter Senge: Yes. There are two, maybe three, basic insights.

First, I have no doubt that the changes needed in the world are happening. I have no doubt. Over the past several years, I've been involved in initiating a lot of stuff. It's really clear to me now that I don't have to bother with that any more. It doesn't mean I'm sanguine that our world is going to be transformed. I'm just saying the changes needed are happening. They're emerging all around us.

Second, Otto Scharmer was the first person I heard state a kind of a proto-principle, certainly something worth pondering. He said, "Fundamental changes always emerge from the periphery; they don't emerge from the centre." You're in a business or an organization, and you're waiting for the CEO to lead the change. But the real changes are occurring out in the field. They're initiated by people doing something really different. The Borton School is a 90% free and reduced lunch school; these are not upper-middle-class kids. These are Hispanic and Native American kids. That school had the lowest performance ranking possible for a K-to-2 school; it now has the highest three years later.

So, the changes are occurring. Look to the periphery. Look away from the centres of power. For me personally, the obvious thing is that it now is the time to look, to watch what's emerging, to leverage it, and to disseminate it.

SO, THE CHANGES ARE OCCURRING. LOOK TO THE PERIPHERY. LOOK AWAY FROM THE CENTRES OF POWER.



We brought the people together for them to meet each other, feeling that there were deep similarities in how they do what they do. None of those people had ever met each other, and you can imagine what it's like when you get a group like that together. You know, they almost didn't need to speak. Molly Baldwin brought her Tlingit training, and we started every morning with smudging and a circle. Everybody felt very natural with that, even though many of them had never done it before. It didn't matter. Because for each of them, there is real clarity concerning the connection between their deep spiritual practice and what they were able to manifest in the world. Of course their spiritual practices differ a lot. They have different heritages, different traditions – it doesn't really matter. But they know that they're doing what they're doing because something is being unleashed in the depth of who they are and how they connect with each other. And they are *extremely* pragmatic people.

You can imagine if you worked in these settings – this is not a nice little romantic adventure. You really focus, focus, focus on what produces results. When people visit Boston, I've said, go hang out with Roca. Don't listen to me, just go be there. Listen to one of those 17-year-old kids who would probably be dead today talking to you about his or her purpose in life. You'll get it very quickly. You'll understand what it takes to transform systems.

So, I think the knowledge is all around us today. But we have to pay attention to it, and we have to know where to look, and how to look. As Otto says, look in the periphery. And look to the connection between the deep inner changes and new disciplines for how to translate inner work into manifest results. And when we find real living embodiments – people being the change they seek to produce - of this know-how, then we have to find how to support it, connect it, leverage it, and disseminate it. This is the focus of the new Academy for Systemic Change, the joint project that has emerged from the Yucatan Meeting.

We're just at the beginning of the beginning. In the world as a whole, things are getting much better, and things are getting much worse. Welcome to the era of transformation. ◆◆

Appreciative Inquiry Is Not (Just) About the Positive

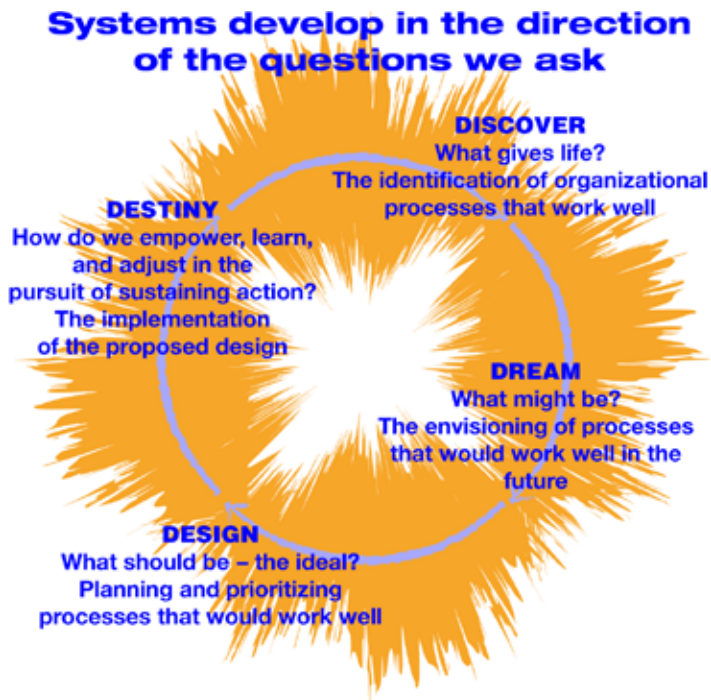
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ONE THING THAT CONCERNS ME about the current excitement and interest in appreciative inquiry (AI) is that many of the consultants and managers I speak with who claim to be doing AI don't seem to understand the importance of *generativity*, as an input and an outcome, of AI. Many people seem to be blinded by the "positive stuff." After years of focusing on problems, deficits and dysfunction they become entranced with "focusing on the positive" and equate this with AI, but I do not believe that is the core of appreciative inquiry. Instead, the core of AI is *generativity* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

One of the central sources that influenced the creation of AI was Kenneth Gergen's (1978) paper "Toward Generative Theory" where he argued that the most important thing social science can do is give us new ways to think about social structures and institutions that lead to new options for action. AI can be generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous,



unsupervised, individual, group and organisational action toward better futures. My research suggests that when AI is transformational it has two qualities: it leads to new ideas, and it leads people to choose new actions (Bushe, in press; Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Maybe we should start calling it Generative Inquiry.

There are many considerations, beside a focus on the positive, that go into crafting an effective appreciative inquiry. In this article I will explore what “the positive” is actually about and what is required for an appreciative inquiry to be generative and therefore, transformational – something quite different from the image that has been perpetuated of AI as action research with a positive question. First, I’ll give an example of what I mean by transformational change and contrast that with another AI intervention that was a dismal failure, making the point that simply getting people to tell their “best of” stories may not accomplish much. Then I’ll look at what a focus on the positive can do for AI: 1) it can support generative thinking, 2) it can support the change process, and 3) it can make “planned” culture change possible. Next I’ll describe some things I’ve learned help make AI generative: 1) generative questions, 2) generative conversations and 3) generative actions. I’ll conclude by pointing out that many of the same consulting issues and contingencies that affect traditional OD affect Appreciative Inquiry

too. AI does not magically overcome poor sponsorship, poor communications, insensitive facilitation or un-addressed organizational politics.

Effective and ineffective AI

AI’s distinctive competence is as an intervention into the social construction of reality. If successful, the organization’s culture changes and stays changed. For example, principals from one high school and four of its elementary feeder schools wanted to change the decades-old separation of elementary and high school teachers to better manage the learning experience of students. Few of either group had ever talked to each other. They even belonged to their own, separate unions. The five principals, in conjunction with a district-wide AI initiative, launched an inquiry into “creating confident math learners,” focusing on the transition experience from elementary to high school. They collected stories of peak learning experiences from all stakeholders, engaged teachers, students, and a few parents as interviewers and interviewees, and used my synergogenesis method (described below) to create a “Discovery Document” – combinations of stories and answers to their key questions that was widely distributed. Close to one hundred members of the schools then attended a two-day AI Summit (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003) that concentrated on the Dream and Design phases of AI. They left the summit with a set of eight design statements (sometimes called provocative propositions) and individual, personal commitments to take action on 3X5 cards which they attached to a “roadmap to the future.” A year later at least two transformational changes could be identified.

❖ Conversations among teachers in the high school showed a heightened awareness of the importance of relationships for learning (which had been identified in most people’s stories) and a new focus on fostering student confidence, not just in math but in all classes. This was transformational for a group known to say “I teach subjects, not students” and resulted in a number

AI DOES NOT MAGICALLY OVERCOME POOR SPONSORSHIP, POOR COMMUNICATIONS, INSENSITIVE FACILITATION OR UN-ADDRESSED ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS.

of innovations. For example, the high school began holding student forums every 6 or so weeks – a large gathering where they would ask the students an appreciative question and listen to and learn from the stories that emerged.

❖ The boundary between elementary and high school teachers and administrators was fully breached. A year after the summit, principals continue to meet regularly to plan activities and coordinate change. Emails go back and forth between elementary and high school teachers. They attend joint professional development days. Most significantly, in the past year almost every elementary staff member involved in the AI was reassigned to other jobs and was replaced with people who were not involved in the AI. Yet the transformation of this boundary continues, not just on the strength of new relationships forged at the summit but from a deeper change in the culture of these schools.



So often traditional, action-research organisational development has no impact at this level. Even though it might aim for transformation (variously labelled cultural, developmental, or break-through change) and might have been transformational in organizations a few decades ago, today engaging people in collective problem-solving tends to leave the current organisational culture intact. When AI is used this way, as action research with a positive question, it is unlikely to create transformational change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Sometimes it can even be quite “flat.”

For example, about ten years ago I spent a day with a group of construction managers telling stories of their best experiences of leadership. It was one of my worst consulting experiences ever. In response to their very

first employee opinion survey, some senior managers decided they needed to better train managers in leadership. I spent one day with the head of HR and a C-suite member devising this attempt to identify a common leadership model. We planned to do Discovery, Dream and Design in one day, beginning by having them pair up to tell stories of the best leader they had ever seen. During the day I discovered that this session was part of an influence struggle among senior management factions. The CEO displayed a somewhat interested demeanour through the first two thirds of the day and less interest thereafter – symbiotically influenced by and influencing the slowly declining energy as the day wore on. These men (and they were virtually all men) had never thought much about leadership and did not have much in the way of personal stories of inspiring leadership. The “best of” stories that were selected in small groups to be told to the large (45-person) group were pathetic. Nothing generative emerged to power the rest of the process, and it painfully ground on – I don’t even remember how it ended. Simply focusing on the positive and telling stories of it does not guarantee a successful intervention!

Why is it useful to focus on the positive?

David Cooperrider (1990) first wrote about “the positive” by describing how positive images can generate and direct action. Cooperrider & Whitney (2001) later described the “positive principle” mainly as the utility of positive feelings for building and sustaining momentum for change. But the image of the positive arises in AI in many more ways than that. There are many useful ways in which “the positive” can help OD interventions become more generative, and support the process of change in general. In this section I will review how positive emotions, the ratio of positive to negative talk, positive stories, hope, the power from having a “positive attitude,” and how focusing on what you want more of (not what you want less of) can be used in the service of transformational change.

1. A focus on the positive can support generativity

Isen’s (2000) research shows that people experiencing positive feelings are more flexible, creative, integra-

tive, open to information and efficient in their thinking. They have an increased preference for variety and accept a broader array of behavioural options. In addition, numerous, recent studies show that the ratio of positive to negative talk is related to the quality of relationships, cohesion, decision-making, creativity and overall success of various social systems (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). One explanation for this is Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden and build" theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, 2006). Her studies show that not only do positive emotions make people more resilient and able to cope with occasional adversity, they increase people's openness to ideas, creativity and capacity for creative action. The focus on the positive in AI can increase positive feelings, the positive talk ratio, and make generative thinking and acting more likely.

A different way of talking about the positive in AI is linked not to feeling but to intent. From this perspective,



THE DISCOVERY AND DREAM PHASES OF AI CAN LEAD PEOPLE TO REPLACE CYNICISM WITH HOPE AND WHEN THAT HAPPENS, AMAZING GENERATIVITY COMES ON LINE.

the positive in AI is about focusing on what you want more of (Bushe, 1995). It comes from cultivating an "appreciative mindset" (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2001a, 2001b). Those who operate out of an appreciative mind-set are oriented to see what they want more of as already being there, if only in small amounts, and use that to get more of it. Thatchenkary & Metzker (2006) have recently offered a theory of "appreciative intelligence," the capacity to see the potential that is trying to emerge in people and processes. This more expansive orientation to what is, and what is possible, goes hand in hand with generativity.

Another way in which "the positive" shows up in AI is in the notion of "hope," the relationship between hope and generative images, and the necessity of having hope for generative action (Ludema, 2000). Many people have pointed out that it is impossible to engage people to collectively act to change the future if they do not have hope and that to some extent hope is born out of discovering that we share common images of a better team, organization or world. The Discovery and Dream phases of AI can lead people to replace cynicism with hope and when that happens amazing generativity comes on line.

2. A focus on the positive can support change in general

What entrances so many people about AI, I think, is the ability of a well-crafted appreciative question to build rapport and energy (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2000). In an era of harried schedules and technologically mediated communication, events that quickly build energized relationships are prized. Change, like most things, gets managed through relationships and strong relationships can overcome bad designs and plans while good designs and plans usually cannot overcome bad relationships.

Listening to an adversary's stories humanizes them and builds bridges. Sometimes adversaries discover they value very similar things, and can relate to each other – this itself is one transformational potential of appreciative inquiry. That state, however, can be attained through both uplifting stories and through sad or tragic stories. For example, the Citizens' Coalition prejudice-reduction process works by having a member of every social identity group in the room

tell their worst story of being “done to” because of their social identity group membership. Their theory is “break a heart, change a prejudice” and I can attest from personal experience how powerful that can be; after all, misery loves company.



AI's popularity shows that consultants and managers, in general, prefer talking about the positive, but that is not always appropriate. When the motivation underlying “keep the focus on the positive” is to avoid the anxiety of dealing with real concerns, or to suppress the expression of dissent, AI can, as it critics suggest, become a form of repression dressed up as something else (Fineman, 2006). When used appropriately, however, the experience of many consultants is that positive stories have a “spread effect” that negative ones do not. Instead of finding fellowship in mutual pain or sense of injustice, during an AI process they find it in their mutual aspirations. Listening to and telling each other uplifting stories about the best of their meaningful experiences leads people to uncover their similarities, soothes tensions, and creates a willingness to cooperate. It also requires much less skill and facilitator competence to execute this part of AI and build bridges between conflicting groups, than to surface and work with the conflicts and tensions in the system to a generative resolution. This is a major benefit of AI.

QUESTIONS ARE FATEFUL. AND THE INITIAL QUESTIONS CAN PROFOUNDLY AFFECT THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF THE ENTIRE INTERVENTION.

Finally, it has been found that an appreciative mindset not only increases generativity, it increases people's influence and therefore, their ability to create change. An interesting study by Baker, Cross and Wooten (2003) found that having a “positive attitude” gave people more informal influence in organizations than the things traditionally associated with influence, such as control of resources or information.

3. You can't control culture change but a focus on the positive can usually be trusted to make things better

It is unlikely that leaders can “implement” cultural change. Attempts to install a preferred culture generally have unintended consequences and often make things worse (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ogbonna, 1993). Note the current situation in Iraq. The most I think managers can do is unleash culture change and hope for the best. There are a number of things you can do to make it more likely you will be pleased with the result. Collectively focusing on what you want more of and inquiring into the best of what people know and care about appears to be one of them.

What can make appreciative inquiry generative?

A focus on the positive is useful for appreciative inquiry but it is not the purpose. The purpose is to generate a new and better future. To design and facilitate appreciative inquiry effectively, you need to build generativity into every activity. I will briefly review three here: generative questions, generative conversations, and generative action.

Generative Questions

Questions are fateful, and the initial questions can profoundly affect the success or failure of the entire intervention. Most people doing AI begin by having people focus on some personal peak experience. That's good, but it is not enough. I have found that generative questions have at least the following four qualities:

1. They are surprising;
2. They touch people's heart and spirit;
3. Talking about and listening to these stories and answers will build relationships; and
4. The questions force us to view reality a little

Generative Questions

Eliciting Conversations that Challenge the Status Quo



differently, either because of how they ask us to think or because of who we are listening to.

In addition, when, where and how people are interviewed affects the generativity of the interview process. For example, having a handful of people conduct all the interviews reduces the generativity of the Discovery Phase. The more people involved in interviewing, the better because the relationships that get built during the interviews contributes to changing people's thinking and acting. Our beliefs about "what is" can be profoundly changed when we hear a completely different perspective, first hand. Sometimes it is during the collection and discussion of stories that new ideas and images enter the organisation's narrative, and as I have described before, this is another transformational potential of AI (Bushe, 2001a).

Generative conversations

There are many ways to increase the generativity of the Discovery, Dream and Design phases left to be discovered. It does not require an unflinching focus on the positive. If someone wants to talk about what they do not like in their organization, telling them "no, we can't talk about that; this is an appreciative inquiry" is likely to turn people off. Instead of asking them to elaborate on and explore what they don't like, however, we can ask them what is missing. What do they want more of? What is their image of what the organization

ought to be is that is creating this gap between what they want and what they see? This line of questioning is much more likely to be generative. It is unwise to try and banish discussion of what people don't like during appreciative inquiry, especially if there is a lot of emotional charge around it. Instead, let's try to be thoughtful in how we make a space for inquiry into hurt, anger, injustice, despair – doing that in a way that contributes to the group's ability to understand, and bring into being, its collective aspirations. Often, when we do not acknowledge and create a productive space for "negative" feelings, they show up in ways that aren't helpful. Pamela Johnson (in press) has written a beautiful paper on just this topic, looking at how an appreciation of the "shadow" in our clients and ourselves increases the generative power and potential of AI.



OFTEN, WHEN WE DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE AND CREATE A PRODUCTIVE SPACE FOR "NEGATIVE" FEELINGS, THEY SHOW UP IN WAYS THAT AREN'T HELPFUL.

We need to think about how to design the interview process, about what happens with the stories, and how a collective inquiry into the affirmative topic takes place generatively. Synergenesis (first described as synergalysis – Bushe, 1995) has proven to be a generative way to stimulate Discovery during an appreciative process. Synergenesis is very simple. Stories from Discovery are written up, and small groups meet where everyone in the group reads the same story together. Then they

discuss what images and ideas the story provoked in them, related to the purpose of the inquiry. It is a kind of stimulated brain storming. When the conversation runs out of steam, the group moves on to read another story. The group continues to do this until reading more stories does not create any more new ideas. Not only does synergogenesis help to generate new ideas, it can generate a shift in the ongoing organizational narrative. This is a third transformative potential of AI. The ongoing narrative is altered by new images and ideas, and sometimes important new relationships are built among the people who participate.

Consultants need to consider how to maximize the generativity of the Dream phase and use that to power highly generative design statements. The purpose of the Dream phase is to surface the common values and aspirations that enliven the system. A generative Dream phase will help people uncover values and aspirations they might not have been aware of. The Design phase is about the social architecture that will actualize those values and aspirations. A generative Design phase will produce a blueprint for a house so beautiful and so functional people will be excited to build it and move in. How do we ensure discussion and buy-in to design statements without long, laborious meetings that sap the energy and generativity from the group? We need better ideas about how to avoid the paralysis of consensus seeking while still creating a high level of agreement and alignment with the ultimate design.

Generative action

A few years ago I studied 20 cases of successful AI where only seven cases were transformational while the other 13 described incremental changes (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Eleven of the thirteen incremental cases used the everyday sort of action phase: Get either consensually or centrally agreed upon goals – or in these cases, design statements. Set up action teams. Try to implement something. But in six of seven transformational cases they did not use action teams or try to manage implementation from the top. Instead they adopted an “improvisational approach” to the action phase. The specifics varied from case to case but in every case new ideas emerged that were widely accepted. Authorities sanctioned people to do whatever made sense to them to move the organization toward

its dreams and designs. Rather than trying to implement something, leaders looked for where people were innovating and helped them along when they could. This approach seemed far more generative – much more change occurred much more quickly.

Here is my current recipe for a generative Destiny (Delivery) phase:

1. Create collective agreement on what you are trying to accomplish (the result of the first three D's). This is why the AI Summit (Ludema et al, 2003) has emerged as the most popular form of engagement for AI. By having as many people as possible involved in the process, in a contained space over a few days, widespread understanding and ownership of the Dream and Design are much higher.

2. Ensure that people believe they are authorized to take actions that will move the organization in the direction of the Design. They don't need permission to act. They shouldn't wait around for some committee or plan. Leaders should clarify what is out of bounds and then get out of the way

3. As soon as the design is set, get as many people as possible to personally promise to do something (a first step) that supports the new design. Salancik (1978) argues that commitment gets created when people take actions that are voluntary, visible, and relatively irreversible, and those are good things to think about when constructing events to launch an improvisational Destiny phase.

Improvisational Destiny *Creating conditions for rapid, positive change*



4. Rather than planning and controlling, leadership needs to look for any and all acts that move the organization in the desired direction and find ways to support and amplify those efforts. I call this tracking (looking where what you want more of already exists) and fanning (adding oxygen to a small fire to create a blaze) and have described this leadership style in more detail elsewhere (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2001b).

AI is still affected by all the traditional change variables

Appreciative inquiry has often been described by contrasting it with traditional OD. I've done it here – contrasting the generative potential of AI with traditional action research. This seems to have led at least some people to think that AI is so positive that it will almost run itself. Recently I was asked if I knew of research contrasting the success rate of AI with traditional OD. I believe that is the wrong question to ask.

Positive questions and generative designs do not create change without the wisdom of “traditional OD,” applied competently. In a current study of the AI process in 30+ schools some early findings are obvious (Bushe, 2007). One is that the quality of school leadership is the best predictor of the success of the AI project. We have seen good summits not produce much change and less generative summits produce more change. It seems the competence, legitimacy, and passion of the people charged at each school with leading the AI effort makes

the difference. Communicating and engaging those not personally involved in the initial AI activities is just as important and difficult as any other change project. Inter-group conflicts, politics and competing agendas still need to be managed. AI events like summits need competent facilitation skills no different from any other large-group facilitation.

It is another cliché that AI is different because it focuses on the positive instead of on problems, but my research (Bushe, in press) shows that is not correct. Actually, AI is different because it focuses on generativity instead of problem-solving. Without common problems and issues people do not engage in transformational change. Instead of trying to solve the problem, AI generates a collective agreement about what people want to do together and enough structure and energy to mobilize action in the service of those agreements. When that happens, many “problems” get “solved.” ■■■

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Facilitative Leadership through Positive Deviance

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Synopsis: Amplifying positive deviance (PD) offers a novel take on asset-based approaches to change, in that it focuses on sharing, discovering and acting on what already exists and what works. This article sets out the basics of the approach, discusses a case study and looks at how to make it work.



POSITIVE DEVIANCE IS A GROUP COACHING APPROACH that models sustainable engagement and active inclusion; it empowers teams and ignites action. Internationally tested on 'difficult' issues such as female circumcision in Egypt and gang culture in Pennsylvania, it has been used increasingly in organisations, most recently for delivering impressive reductions in MRSA infections in US hospitals and in discovering more efficient working practices in adult care services in the UK.

PD uses an asset-, or strengths-based approach, but unlike appreciative inquiry or solutions-focused brief therapy, PD recognises and clearly defines the problem to be tackled.

Skilled facilitators support the community affected by the problem – which may seem intractable at the outset – to discover locally practised, but hidden, solutions. The process is organic and unpredictable each time it is used, but it has a high success rate in

addressing embedded behavioural issues. Managers employing PD need to let go of favoured processes and instead focus on outcomes while giving those affected by the problem (the community, in PD terms) the space to learn.



Facilitation takes community members on a journey of discovery that starts with defining the problem and desired outcome. They often find that their perception of the problem is not the same as the actual problem. The facilitator then helps the community to use data, observation, enquiry and an inclusive approach to find people who perform better than the norm (the “positive deviants”). Community members then look into the fine detail of the positive deviants’ coping practices and help others in the community to learn these practices and practise them until they are fully comfortable with them. A progress-monitoring process is designed by the community to sustain improvements.

The benefits to the people who have the original problem – the “community” – are that:

1. the exercise is entirely owned and driven by community members, so there is a shared purpose and solving the problem will clearly make their working life better,

2. the process is not expert driven, i.e. it is non-intellectual and highly practical, reducing resistance,

3. the process of invitation and inclusion strengthens and builds the community, and

4. overall, it creates a sense of self-determination and hope, which releases creativity and innovation.

The benefits to the organisation are:

- the community improves performance to benefit

both community and organisation even though the community defines the problem in its own terms,

- the approach facilitates a heightened understanding of community nuances and networks,

- sustainable change happens within existing resources,

- the approach, being driven by the community, is always culturally appropriate, and

- it harnesses and builds on diversity and the latent knowledge of the workforce.

Case study – Hertfordshire Adult Care Services

This important area of the Hertfordshire County Council provides support for infirm and elderly adults, as well as adults with sensory deprivation and learning difficulties.

There had been a long history of failing to complete paperwork, which led to the need for the creation of data quality teams. Morale was low, and there was a big variation in performance among social workers despite having a large service/quality improvement team, new systems and detailed process mapping. Senior management and front-line perceptions of the issues were very different: managers were frustrated that the teams weren’t completing records on the system, creating problems in handling clients, whilst the social workers felt that they were spending all their time on paperwork and record-keeping.

Having heard about PD from a colleague, the Assistant Director of Performance agreed to give it a try, and assembled a team which represented all levels, with a light-touch approach to supervision by the deputy area manager.

What the team delivered

In three months:

- Generated up to 30% in time savings per day for social workers,

- In addition, delivered efficiencies of £50,000 and £110,400 a year, created by saving between one and two hours per social worker per week for a team of 60 social workers (based on a social worker salary of £34,000 and no on-costs),

- Cut out an unnecessary stage of the adaptations process for Council tenants,

- Enabled team to cope with more referrals during a flu epidemic, and
- Discovered lots of “latent solutions” – e.g. letters to service users and route map through pathway.

How they did it

- By focusing on Eva’s nan (the grandmother of one of the PD team members who was a service user) to serve as a point of inspiration,
- By collecting data that highlighted some problems that were not visible and that disproved some myths,
- By the efforts of middle management to oil the wheels and keep the team focused, and
- By the efforts of top management to create space, allowing access to teams, and not being involved in the PD enquiry and observation.

The exercise unpacked the real issues and worked in the middle of other significant changes such as relocation. Solutions discovered included:

- Changing call handling to free up social worker time and to get the right answer to callers the first time,
- Hyper-linking documents within the two systems in use to stop duplication of input, and
- Cutting out process stages and an unnecessary waiting list.

Front-line staff and middle managers were empowered and discovered new capabilities and the process opened up mature discussions on change and systems development. The impact of not completing the paperwork was demonstrated by the data collection – those people who failed to complete case records created time-management problems for their colleagues, who had to spend time finding missing information. Making this visible created behaviour change.

Conclusions

- The programme started slowly but improvements were real and sustainable – and cheap.
- In line with the PD principle “Nothing about me without me” everyone involved in working with service users was engaged.
- Making the invisible, visible – the successful practices were there all the time.
- Working with possibility - delivered a more positive culture in short space of time.



An outcome of the PD process is that organisations become more collaborative: People start working with parts of the organisation they had never talked to before, as could be seen in the MRSA case study, where the social network diagrams they used showed clusters of relationships before PD, then extended networks after. Particularly in corporate environments and organisations with strong silo mentalities, PD reinforces a sense of community and shared learning.

The PD model delivers community change without actually attempting to change the community. This goes against Western/northern thinking, which is strongly focused on the role of experts and which assumes that the community knows little. Likewise, peer-to-peer sharing makes information visible, a process that is at odds with the usual thinking about intellectual capital. However such sharing is a proven way of unlocking social capital.

Creating a contract of trust is central to the task of transferring the PD approach to new settings. One

essential part of PD is that communities form around their problems – to define the problem is one of the most difficult issues for the community, and indeed for PD. It could be seen as dangerous, in that everything that happens can challenge the status quo.

THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE IN A CORPORATION MAY RESIST THE RISKY AND ‘UNCONTROLLABLE’ PD APPROACH – IN SPITE OF EVIDENCE THAT THE ‘STANDARD MODEL’ CANNOT SOLVE ADAPTIVE PROBLEMS.



PD exercises have a structure but are difficult to plan, in the same way as individual coaching is difficult to plan. Learning happens at the pace of the group, and the community has to be allowed within reason to learn from its own mistakes. The community also decides how much time they can allocate to the exercise and where and how it will work. This can make the process feel messy, but reinforces the sense of ownership and the community feels confident to work within the boundaries they have set for themselves. Once a few breakthroughs happen, groups typically become more ambitious.

The issue within a PD setting is that it connects very strongly with a set of values, around how the community should be transformed and who has the power. Giving people the opportunity for a voice creates dignity and respect in the community. PD seems to have a set of values which creates a more emancipated agenda than Lean or Six Sigma, although both encourage stakeholder participation in process redesign.

Implications for leaders

The principle of PD is that it replaces normal practice or known technical solutions (i.e. the standard model) when a community is faced with a “wicked” problem requiring an adaptive solution. However, the authority structure in a corporation may resist the risky and ‘uncontrollable’ PD approach – in spite of evidence that the ‘standard model’ cannot solve adaptive problems. Heifetz’s adaptive leadership research has attempted to demonstrate a new role for those ‘in charge’ for such adaptive problems, but the concepts of facilitative leadership may not suit all organisational cultures.

A key issue is how to engage stakeholders in the conversation to question established cultural norms, particularly in the corporate environment, where the normal expectation is compliance.

However, the experience of using PD in organisations in the UK indicates that if leaders allow communities to form around problems, with the aim of solving them, they gain their own momentum. However, if leaders try to force the pace, for example by setting the timetable, as happened in a recent exercise we did, it immediately disenfranchises the community, which reverts to a more passive mode, or worse, creates resistance.

Recommendations for a successful PD exercise are:

- ♦ Start with an independent, skilled facilitator.
- ♦ Involve leaders and managers in all stages and discover how they can best contribute whilst still allowing front-line staff to undertake the journey of discovery.
- ♦ Ensure managers do not articulate patronizing feelings such as “I could have told you that” – what the team or community discovers may well be known to managers, but it is the journey that matters.
- ♦ Ensure that leaders and managers allow the community members to have the authority to collect and use data, to conduct investigations, to make observations, and to have a platform to feed back findings to senior management.
- ♦ Understand that you have to start slowly to go quickly – getting the set-up right; understanding networks, stakeholder maps and relationships is critical.
- ♦ Remember that gains will be sustained without further recourse to external resources.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

More information can be gained from the Positive Deviance Initiative at Tufts University in Boston, Mass., www.positivedeviance.org. Their mission is to spread the use of PD for vulnerable populations. Further reading includes the recently-published *"The Power of Positive Deviance - how unlikely innovators solve the world's toughest problems"* by Richard Pascale (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *"Switch - how to change things when change is hard"* - Chip and Dan Heath, Random House Business Books, 2010. Other resources are available at [Woodward Lewis](#).



Wicked Challenges

Lars Thuesen

LARS THUESEN is a change practitioner in the Danish Prison and Probation Service. This article is based on work done by an internal change-facilitation team with inmates and front-line staff using the Positive Deviance methodology since the beginning of 2009.



IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT PAST, the Danish Prison and Probation Service suffered a set of really complicated and wicked problems. Many things indicated a tough and stressful environment – for both inmates and front-line staff alike. Though most of the inmates and guards stuck to the common, daily routines – which perpetuated the stress – there were a few hidden exceptions. Some inmates and guards managed to behave differently, thereby succeeding in coping with and overcoming the challenges of the environment. These exceptional individuals led lives that were more meaningful, thus avoiding stress, burn-out and alienation. Though the complicated and wicked problems are not solved, an emerging and very powerful process has started

and some really interesting results are seen.

This is the story of those hidden heroes, their successful behaviours and coping mechanisms, and how we all – finally – began to learn from them.

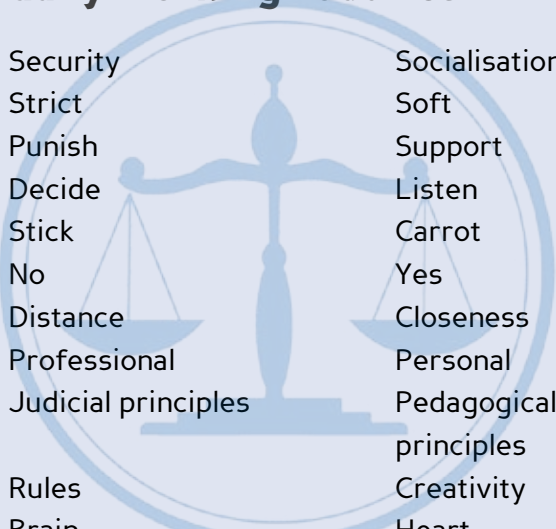
Strict and soft

The Danish prison system is acknowledged worldwide for its low rates of recidivism, high numbers of inmate re-socialisation, high security standards, and healthy working environment. Nevertheless severe social challenges exist. The overall goal of reducing criminality is not an easy one, even in a system that seeks to achieve a balance between tough and soft approaches. The nature of the challenges is often

systemic, complicated, and rife with dilemmas in the daily working routine. It is a system that, on one hand, entails a lot of control and regulatory mechanisms and, on the other, requires a lot of flexibility and individual judgement in order to function effectively.

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Balancing dilemmas in daily working routines



Security	Socialisation
Strict	Soft
Punish	Support
Decide	Listen
Stick	Carrot
No	Yes
Distance	Closeness
Professional	Personal
Judicial principles	Pedagogical principles
Rules	Creativity
Brain	Heart

officers feel a lack of meaningful work, and they often fear and sometimes experience threats and violent incidents. Furthermore the culture among staff and in relation to inmates can be harsh, and one out of five employees has recently experienced some kind of harassment from either colleagues or immediate managers. The front-line staff also experience that management do not handle conflicts adequately.

In short, the system lacks the needed social capital, trust and confidence to create better working and living conditions. Too often the result is stress and burn-out among guards who have an average rate of absenteeism of over one month per year, and whose average retirement age is 48. These are alarming statistics, particularly when compared to Danish norms.

Secret local heroes

I first started planning the Positive Deviance intervention in 2008 with Jerry Sternin and later with Mark Munger. It had a slow start and is a long journey, and senior management including myself have been impatient and eager to see results. But the slowness of the process is perhaps one of its strengths. As Jerry put it: “You have to go slow to go fast.”

Only over the last six months have we seen distinct individual behaviours among what we call our secret local heroes, i.e. the front-line staff working daily in several facilities with inmates and clients. Through them we have discovered some interesting patterns among staff and inmates that others just like them can learn from.

At one maximum security prison, for example, we started a user-driven process where inmates together with guards began discovering the secrets of meaningful daily routines. Overall, both inmates and staff were bored, but we noticed a few inmates and guards who were more active than others. These individuals managed to cope and get by despite systemic barriers. Based on these exceptional examples, other inmates and guards began applying and developing new behavioural routines and activities that created more life and

The dual purpose of the prison service mission makes it complicated to manoeuvre at the operational level. The staff constantly needs to balance strict and soft approaches in tackling their work with inmates. Accordingly, the inmates need to adopt and accept a variety of behaviours from guards that might seem conflicting, though necessary, to pursue the overall goals. Over the last decade there has been a “tough on crime” policy due to government decisions. Within the context of reducing recidivism, these political mandates complicate the balance between strict and soft approaches even more.

At the same time the nature of crime has changed dramatically, as has the profile of the inmate population. Previously, prisoners could be characterised as relatively homogenous which is no longer the case, mainly due to the globalisation of crime and a rise in gang-related criminality. Alternatives to sentencing have also been introduced, further adding to the complexity.

Human-resource issues are also complex and deeply connected to the system’s dynamics. Many front-line

energy in the prison. For example, a 12-week health and nutrition programme was piloted, and it included physical exercise – with guards and inmates participating together. Though this might seem banal or simplistic, it was never done before on a wide scale for large groups of inmates and staff.

The programme has created new energy and meaningfulness for inmates and staff alike. People within our system from other facilities are now beginning to question their practices and want to learn from the initiative.

Another maximum security facility facing high rates of harassment identified the behaviours of “looseners” and “tighteners” among the guards. They found out that the “looseners” had distinct communicative behaviours that were very different from the “tighteners.” Interestingly, “looseners” experience fewer incidents or threats of violence – social proof that their behaviour is successful in coping with the difficulties of the system. Now the others are learning how to apply their techniques.

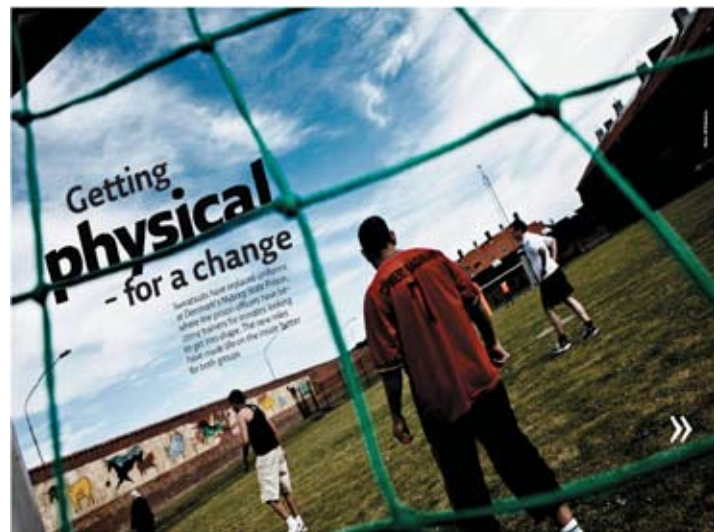
A third prison with similar challenges as well as a high inmate turnover rate has been working on lowering stress, burn-out and the absenteeism among guards. They began a process of identifying staff with less than five days of absenteeism over the last two years. The behaviour of these guards turned out to be very interesting. Three distinct behavioural patterns emerged. Firstly they all have a propensity and motivation to help. They are warm-hearted people, who want to help others in establishing a better life beyond criminality. At the same time, they are able to manage

PEOPLE WITHIN OUR SYSTEM FROM OTHER FACILITIES ARE NOW BEGINNING TO QUESTION THEIR PRACTICES AND WANT TO LEARN FROM THE INITIATIVE.

and control their desire to help in order to keep the right professional distance. In their spare time, they are socially active, involved in sports, volunteering for NGO's etc. This helps them survive the system dynamics that might result in stress, burn-out and higher absenteeism. An unexpected deviant behaviour came to light: some guards stopped reading inmate dossiers in order to meet the inmate as an equal human being and without prejudice. This behaviour is closely related to human respect and is named “kill your curiosity.” Finally, the deviants are able to ask for help in stressful situations so problems are seen as shared, rather than individual. This pattern is called “swallow your pride.”

Reflections and learning

- Positive Deviance is an emerging process, and while the Prison Service still has a long way to go, some interesting evidence is emerging. The deviant behaviour patterns are now being analysed and the process of teaching others how to act differently has started.
- Framing and defining the right problem is an art and very difficult. It requires a lot of facilitation skills, active listening, being quiet and asking good questions.
- The process of identifying individuals with distinctly positive behavioural patterns takes a lot of time and effort. Therefore the approach should be used only



where other approaches have failed. If easy and accessible solutions already exist, why not implement them instead?

- The process creates a lot of energy and frustration among the inmates and staff. It is about acting your way into a new way of thinking, which is new and unfamiliar. In these circumstances, human beings often want to jump to conclusions quickly.
- Leaders and middle managers need to change their mental models by loosening control and living with the fact that traditional hierarchies are turned upside down. When things get tough they have a tendency to reassert themselves as experts and “fix” instead of letting the change process emerge. The real experts are the local problem owners.
- Finding the right evidence is a hard nut to crack too. The goal is social proof: “somebody just like me is doing it, therefore so can I.”
- Formulating an inspiring invitation that makes people join the process is crucial. It is crucial that the processes are engaging and demand-driven. It should not be driven, only facilitated from the central office.
- Finding the right data is crucial. Skilled facilitation helps, but does not entirely do it. The community needs good data, and facilitators can help to organise and structure it, so social proof can be presented and discussed.
- The approach propagates. Managers responsible for other challenging areas are becoming aware of the positive-deviance approach. For example it is now being considered for use in one maximum security prison in relation to gang-related crime.
- A lot of social challenges move across “silos”, both within the prison system and across boundaries to other institutions, private companies and NGO’s. It is challenging to engage people outside the smaller community because the financial, cultural, and managerial inducements are not present.

Positive deviance in brief

According to Sternin and others (2010), Positive Deviance (PD) can be summed up as follows:

“The basic premise is this: 1) Solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, 2) they have been discovered by members of the community itself, and 3) these innovators (individual positive deviants) have

AN UNEXPECTED DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR CAME TO LIGHT: SOME GUARDS STOPPED READING INMATE DOSSIERS IN ORDER TO MEET THE INMATE AS AN EQUAL HUMAN BEING AND WITHOUT PREJUDICE.

succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others.”

In other words PD tries to discover uncommon, successful coping strategies that individuals use to survive under conditions which would generally be seen as impossible by traditional experts. The approach seeks out the latent behaviour and design interventions that enable others to practice the behavioural strategies as well. It is different from traditional problem solving, where you move from problem analysis towards solutions. In PD you flow from problem identification and analysis of successful solutions to solving the problem. It is suitable for complex adaptive change, which means it is not suitable for technical changes where best practices are useful and applicable. Also it is suitable when problems are intractable and need new approaches. The problems and solutions are rooted in the local community, which means that solutions are to be found among local community members.

Positive Deviance has been applied all over the world within various fields, e.g. Vietnamese child nutrition, HIV in Thailand, MRSA in the USA, and gang-related crime in the USA.

Thus, PD differentiates itself from traditional, best-practice, expert-driven approaches, where externally imposed solutions often meet with resistance or rejection. Traditionally it is argued that knowledge will change behaviour, but such an approach often produces poor results. In PD the solution is born in the community and behavioural patterns are analysed and then trained and spread to others in the group. It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting. In other words there should be a change in behaviour then values, instead of trying to change values and attitudes first. PD is therefore practice oriented rather than knowledge oriented.

Another important factor is that the deviant practice one identifies must be transferable to others or in other words a resource that is available to everyone.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH
Leadership as a Path Breaker. Top-down approach	Leadership as Inquiry. Community takes ownership of the quest for change – bottom up
Outside in. Expert and best-practise driven	Inside out. Community identifies pre-existing solutions
Deficit Based. Deconstruction of problems and design of best practice solutions. Implication: “Why aren’t you as good as your peers?”	Asset based. Community leverage pre-existing solutions practised by those who succeed against odds
Logic driven. Think, then act	Learning driven. Act into new thinking
Vulnerable to Transplant Rejection. Resistance to imported ideas	Open to Self-replication. Latent wisdom is tapped
Flows from Problem Solving to Solution Identification. Best practice applied to problems within the context of existing parameters	Flows from Solution Identification to Problem Solving. Solution space is expanded through the discovery of new parameters
Focused on Protagonists. Engages stakeholders who would be conventionally associated with the problem	Focused on Enlarging the Network. Identifies stakeholders beyond those directly involved with the problem

Design of the positive deviance initiative

It is crucial to design the positive deviance processes the right way. We did three things at a general level.

First, we trained internal PD facilitators. They participated in a programme that was a mixture of theory and practice. Their role is to facilitate rather than attempt to be experts – the real experts are the people in the facilities that own the problems. This has been crucial in the progress of our initiative because internally trained staff have much more street credibility than external consultants.

Second, we designed and initiated Living Universities, where facilitators and practitioners could meet and share experiences of all kinds. We have had five half-day sessions during the process, where reflections, knowledge sharing and burning questions were on the agenda. External practitioners and other interested partners have been invited to participate throughout the process. We named these sessions “kitchen table” discussions, because you usually have

good and useful discussion, while you eat together. Often we asked ourselves “who else should be at the kitchen table” with the result of enlarging the group and enriching the knowledge sharing.

Third, we decided not to manage the initiative in a traditional top-down manner from the central office. We decided to develop a framework and a set of processes that could facilitate local initiatives instead of coming up with solutions to their problems. This change in mental model has proven very effective but was a bit frightening because prison systems are acculturated to the central level coming up with solutions to problems.

Conclusion

From our initial experience of PD, it is clear that deep systemic and sustainable change is possible and within reach even in a complex and challenging environment like the prison system. Success depends, however, on careful attention to the community of people who “own” the problem – from this group will come insight

SUCCESS DEPENDS, HOWEVER, ON CAREFUL ATTENTION TO THE COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO “OWN” THE PROBLEM – FROM THIS GROUP WILL COME INSIGHT INTO WHO ARE THE POSITIVE DEVIANTS, WHAT BEHAVIOURS SET THEM APART, AND HOW THAT KNOWLEDGE IS BEST SHARED AND DISSEMINATED.



into who are the positive deviants, what behaviours set them apart, and how that knowledge is best shared and disseminated. ■

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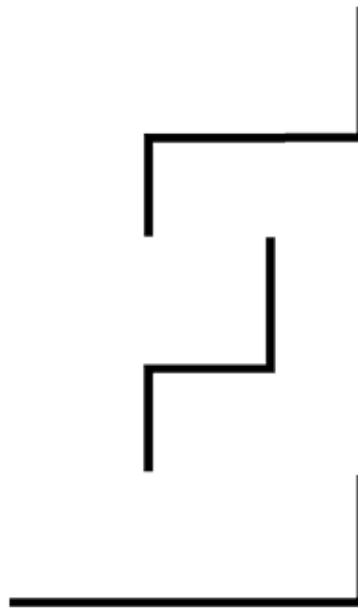


IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE

Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing

Matthew May

MATTHEW E. MAY is an international speaker and author of *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing*. His previous book, *The Elegant Solution*, won the Shingo Research Prize for Excellence.



ELEGANCE IS AN ELUSIVE TARGET, which explains why it's so rare, and in turn so desirable. Experiencing elegance is nearly always profound. The unusually simple yet surprisingly powerful nature of any elegant this-or-that gives us pause, and the impact changes our view of things, often forever. Elegance delivers the power to cut through the noise. It can shake markets. It can change minds and mindsets.

Gaze at the image above for a moment. The three sets of right-angled lines depict something so ubiqui-

tous that you'd be hard-pressed to make it through the day without it. Can you identify it?

If you can't, it's because a key piece of information is missing. Once that information is shared, however, you will likely never be able to see the image in quite the

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PROFOUND ... IT CAN SHAKE MARKETS.
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same way again. *You are looking at the upper case version of the most widely used letter in the English language.* It is the letter E. My guess is that from now on, you'll have difficulty not seeing it.

What you've just experienced is the power of "the missing piece." It's not a parlour trick. It's an example of the transformative idea that lies at the heart of elegance: what *isn't* there can often trump what *is*.

No "complete" E, no matter how elaborately or ornately rendered, could have engaged you as fully and had the same kind of indelible impact on you. Once you were given a clue, your brain created the image for you, changing your mindset, without your having much say in the matter. The incomplete E took on a new form, a life of its own – one with real staying power.

What is important to take away from this quick demonstration is that the full power of elegance is achieved when the *maximum* impact is exacted with the *minimum* input. *Adding* anything to the figure would have actually *detracted* from the desired effect: the surprise you likely experienced when the E became visible. The E is obvious only in retrospect, but it is the unusually simple yet thoughtful construction of what *is* there that gives the missing piece its surprising power.

Elegance is not, in other words, a matter of simple erasure.

On Sunday, June 10, 2007, nearly twelve million television viewers experienced the very same effect. David Chase, creator of the hit HBO series *The Sopranos*, used



the method to achieve what many critics now hail as the most innovative hour of viewing in recent episodic television history. Fans of the show waited with anticipation to find out the fate of Mafioso Tony Soprano, the main character from whose viewpoint the story is told. *Would he or wouldn't he be killed, mob-fashion?* Debates had been raging for the 22 months since Chase had announced the final airdate. But instead of a concrete finale, television screens suddenly went black seemingly in mid-scene during the final seconds. Credits rolled within a few more seconds, and *The Sopranos* series came to an end.

What is so fascinating about the abrupt ending is not the decision itself although it was unprecedented and broke new ground artistically. Rather, it is the aftermath that is intriguing. Just as no fully drawn E could have the same lasting impact on the brain, no fully-developed conclusion would have engaged viewers with nearly the same lingering depth and intensity.

The most immediate reaction had nothing to do with the storyline: *What just happened to my television signal?* What is interesting there is not the reaction itself, for that might have been predictable in this age of satellite and cable TV, but that everyone had the *same* reaction in that no one saw it for what it was, as *the ending*. They saw it as something gone wrong. And that made them stop and think. So it's what occurred over the course of the next 48 hours or so that is worth noting.

The initial disappointment at being left hanging with a clearly missing conclusion was quickly replaced by an unparalleled level of post-show scrutiny coupled with a fresh appreciation for "the genius of David Chase," spurred by his semi-cryptic public comment that "Anybody who wants to watch it, it's all there."

Realizing that every frame was carefully crafted by Chase, who both wrote and directed the episode, viewers re-examined scene after scene, noting both blatant and subtle visual clues, soundtrack hints, veiled dialogue, past-show references, even camera angles, colour palettes and lighting effects. Theory after theory popped up in both online and traditional media. The debate took on a life of its own. Viewers crafted their own endings, filling in the missing piece with the trail of code Chase had provided. To most, Tony Soprano's fate became quite obvious, albeit only



through a full retrospective.

That is exactly what happened with the letter E. And like the letter E exercise, *The Sopranos* episode is quite indelible.

David Chase did what more of the best innovators and most prolific individuals are doing in many different domains: creatively engaging people's imaginations by leaving out the right things.

The value of what *isn't* there dawned on bestselling business author and self-employed professor Jim Collins when, in the throes of his early post-Stanford Business School career at Hewlett-Packard, his favourite former professor redressed him for a lack of discipline. An expert in creativity and innovation, she told him his hard-wired energy level was riding herd over his mental clarity, enabling a busy yet unfocused life. Her words rang true: at the time, Jim was aggressively chasing his carefully-set stretch goals for the year, confident in his ability to accomplish them. Still, his life was crowded with the commotion of a fast-tracking career. Her comment made him pull up short and re-examine what he was doing. To help, she did what

great teachers do, constructing a lesson in the form of an assignment she called "20-10": *Imagine that you've just inherited \$20 million free and clear, but you only have 10 years to live. What would you do differently – and specifically, what would you stop doing?*

The exercise did precisely what it was intended to do – make Jim stop and think about what mattered most to him. It was a true turning point. He realized he'd been racing down the wrong track, spending enormous energy on the wrong things. In fact, he woke up to the fact that he hated his job. He promptly quit and headed back to Stanford to launch a new career of research, teaching, and writing. The assignment became a constant reminder of just how important and precious his time is. He now starts each year by choosing what *not* to do, and each of his to-do lists always includes "stop-doing" items. Collins preaches his practice, impressing upon his audiences that they absolutely must have a "stop-doing" list to accompany their to-do lists. As a practical matter, he advises developing a strong discipline around first giving careful thought to prioritizing goals and objectives, then eliminating the bottom twenty percent of the list – forever.

Collins made the "stop doing" argument in his eloquent 2003 year-end essay appearing in *USA Today*:

"A great piece of art is composed not just of what is in the final piece, but equally what is not. It is the discipline to discard what does not fit – to cut out what might have already cost days or even years of effort – that distinguishes the truly exceptional artist and marks the ideal piece of work, be it a symphony, a novel, a painting, a company, or most important of all, a life."

It turns out that if you know where to look and what to look for, the letter E-type strategy at the heart of elegance can be found in a wide universe of fields: from the arts to athletics, from industry to architecture, from science to society. The point is to answer a single question: *What can we discover and learn that might allow us to bring more elegance into our own endeavours?*

The search will be exemplary rather than exhaustive – for as Henry David Thoreau once observed, if you're familiar with a principle you don't have to be familiar with all of its applications. The concept of elegance cannot be reduced to a stepwise prescription. There is no magic elixir; there are no secret ingredients –

because there is no single recipe for elegance.

Why is elegance so surprisingly powerful? The reasons aren't readily apparent, but if we can somehow decode them, we can hope to understand the thinking required to give the phenomenon genuine utility. In other words, it's about the bigger picture, the bigger idea.

But why, you might still be wondering, is this so important? Because a world in which *not doing* can be more powerful than *doing* is a different world than the one we are used to, with important implications. Because the most pressing challenges facing society are in urgent need of sustainable solutions – *elegant* ones. Because without a new way of viewing the world we will most assuredly succumb to employing the same kind of thinking that created so many of our problems in the first place. Because precious resources such as land, labour and capital are at all-time premiums, and in some cases rapidly shrinking or being depleted. Because by nature we tend to add when we should subtract, and act when we should stop and think. Because we need some way to consistently replace value-destroying complexity with value-creating simplicity. Because we need to know how to make room for more of what matters by eliminating what doesn't.

We all reach for elegance at some level, and yet it so often exceeds our grasp. Just why that's so is the interesting story.

Elements of Elegance

Elegance is a rather elevated term, and it must be brought down from the rafters a bit to make it useful. At first it may seem curious to label something other than fashion or people as elegant. So when did we start using the term to mean something else? There is in fact a concrete point of departure.

When you enter the office of retired professor Donald Knuth in the Stanford University Computer Sciences Department, several things strike you immediately as somewhat odd: he prefers pad and pencil over a keyboard, he works standing up, and he doesn't use email. It's peculiar because Donald Knuth is none other than the father of computer science, revered by those in the know for his contributions to the field.

Author of *The Art of Computer Programming*, a multi-volume tome that many consider to be the

THE CONCEPT OF ELEGANCE CANNOT BE REDUCED TO A STEPWISE PRESCRIPTION. THERE IS NO MAGIC ELIXIR; THERE ARE NO SECRET INGREDIENTS – BECAUSE THERE IS NO SINGLE RECIPE FOR ELEGANCE.

masterwork of the field, Knuth introduced, as one University of California professor put it, “elegance into programming,” believing that computer programmers should view lines of computer code more as literature, so that people (and not simply other computers) could easily read and understand them. According to Knuth, elegant software requires programming in such a transparent way that not only can other programmers learn from it, but also enjoy reading it in front of the fire, “like good prose.”

One of Knuth's favourite lecture topics is “solving puzzling problems.” He knows he's ready to solve a problem elegantly when he can hold the answer in his head without having to write it down. Even with all of the advancement in software coding in the last fifty years, his programs remain the *de facto* standard for scientific publishing today.

What is Donald Knuth's definition of elegance? “Symmetrical, pleasingly memorable, spare – with the ease and immortal ring of an $E=mc^2$.” Those criteria are a bit cryptic, which perhaps isn't so surprising, given that Knuth's world revolves around a code, something that is by definition mysterious.

So what exactly does he mean?

In 1783 a Swiss mathematician by the name of Leonhard Euhlers invented an array he called Latin Squares. Latin Squares were symmetrical grids with an equal number (n) of rows and columns. The only rule was that every number from 1 to n had to appear exactly once in each row and column. In other words, if there were seven rows and seven columns, the numbers 1 through 7 would appear exactly once in each row and column.

Fast-forward nearly two hundred years to 1979, when Dell puzzle magazines published a numerical brainteaser they called “Number Place.” Indianapolis architect Howard Garns had, in his spare time, tinkered with Euhler's Latin Squares to design a 9-by-9 Latin Square with a new twist. He added nine 3-by-3 sub-grids. Each could contain exactly one occurrence of

all the numbers 1 through 9, in addition to the rows and columns requirement. The goal, of course, was to fill in the matrix completely. A few clues were given in the form of numbers already in place in one of the 81 boxes.

Shortly thereafter, in 1984, the Japanese publisher Nikoli introduced the game in its newspaper, adding yet a further twist. No more than thirty clues or “givens” were permitted, and they had to be distributed with exact mirror symmetry. Nikoli renamed the game *Sudoku*. It became a nationwide obsession in Japan within a few years.

In 2004, retired Hong Kong judge and puzzle fanatic Wayne Gould made a trip to London in a successful effort to persuade *The Times* editors to print Sudoku puzzles in their paper. *The Times* introduced Sudoku as a daily feature on November 12, 2004. By the end of 2005, the World Puzzle Federation had declared Sudoku the number one logic puzzle in the world. Today there are online versions, Sudoku radio and television shows and games, Sudoku clubs, strategy books, videos, card games, and competitions. In 2006, Italy hosted the first World Sudoku Championship, with teams from around the world participating. Being the champion in one’s own country is tough enough, but the competition in these international games is even fiercer.

Will Shortz, the famed crossword puzzle editor for *The New York Times* and the only person in the world

with a degree in enigmatology (the study of codes and puzzles), describes himself as a Sudoku “addict.” By the end of 2006, Sudoku was a worldwide craze, with millions playing it daily.

So what is the connection between Sudoku and Knuth? I would argue that it is the elements of elegance. In keeping with Knuth’s criteria, Sudoku can help us to arrive at a concise working definition of the concept.

First, in keeping with Knuth’s first dimension, Sudoku is *symmetrical*, with its squares inside of squares, and mirrored distribution of clues. Second, it is *seductive*—to the point of being irresistible and craze-worthy — another way to couch Knuth’s “pleasingly memorable.” Will Shortz confirms that his Sudoku addiction stems from the seductive appeal of the empty squares to be filled in. It is intentionally spare, in keeping with Knuth’s third dimension, through a process best described as *subtractive*. The Sudoku puzzle designer crafts a complete solution and then symmetrically subtracts filled-in squares to arrive at the starting grid, which is predominantly empty. Finally, and as a result of these first three, the game is *sustainable* in terms of both the infinite number of games that can be constructed, as well as players’ interest in the game. In other words, there is an “ease and immortal ring” to it. In fact, Sudoku could not be easier to learn or have fewer rules: you don’t even need to know how to count (the numbers are simply symbols), and its one rule can be explained in a single sentence. It takes but a minute to learn, and it is universal in nature (unlike crossword puzzles which are knowledge-based as well as language-specific). And yet, the underlying complexity behind the logic needed to solve a Sudoku puzzle can be incredibly challenging.

Symmetry. Seduction. Subtraction. Sustainability. These are the key elements of elegance—the laws that can help us harness the power of the missing piece. Together they provide a solid framework for understanding how these elements work in the pursuit of elegance. But while each plays a part, it is the *collective* execution of all four elements that determines the uncommon simplicity and surprising power we seek. Symmetry, for example, doesn’t necessarily require or even imply a corresponding subtractive, spare quality. That something is subtractive or spare need not mean it’s seductive. And simply because something is seductive in

							1	
		2					3	4
				5	1			
					6	5		
	7		3				8	
		3						
				8				
5	8					9		
6	9							

**SYMMETRY. SEDUCTION. SUBTRACTION.
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some way does not automatically render it sustainable; it may be turn out to be a fleeting fancy. In fact, the elements of elegance can easily conflict with one another. That's what makes it so difficult to achieve. Elegance is *at once* symmetrical, seductive, subtractive, and sustainable. It takes a blend of logic and creativity to understand how to balance the four.

Symmetry

The best way to think about symmetry may be the way mathematician Hermann Weyl defined it in his seminal 1952 book, *Symmetry*: “A thing is symmetrical if there is something you can do to it so that after you have finished doing it, it looks the same as before.”

For Brian Greene, Columbia University physics professor and author of the 1999 bestselling book *The Elegant Universe*, symmetry is the air he breathes. Physicists like Greene talk in terms of the “beautiful symmetries” of nature and dedicate their lives to explaining how these laws work through theories and equations and formulas that attempt to distil the essence of the world into terms the everyman can grasp. To be elegant, a theory must be symmetrical from the standpoint that as a proposed physical law it does not change from place to place or time to time. It must work everywhere and “everywhen.” It cannot, in other words, be *situational*.

Theoretical physicists have for the last decade come under the spell of superstring theory (string theory for short), which offers both a unifying beauty and the symmetry Knuth advocates. String theory is a way to reconcile the laws of the large – Einstein's theory of *general relativity* – with the laws of the small – *quantum mechanics*. For decades the proponents of each haven't been able to share a sandwich. Now they can tentatively shake hands. String theory potentially explains the most complex of complexities: the universe, both big *and* small. And it does so in a grand unified way using

a term we all know and understand: *string*.

But not just any string. A string so small that we will most certainly never be able to see it – a hundred billion billion (10^{20}) times smaller than the nucleus of an atom. A string so small we can only guess at its properties because we would need a particle accelerator a million billion times more powerful than exists today to determine them. (Note: physicists like to slam things together at unbelievable speeds because you can tell an awful lot about something from what happens when you do.) Strings that are more like vibrating rubber bands, vibrating like the musical string on a violin. Those vibrations are many and varied, and are thought to actually *be* the assortment of other subatomic particles we observe. In other words, what looks like different particles are in reality just different “notes” on a fundamental string. Greene explains to us that “the universe – being composed of an enormous number of these vibrating strings – is akin to a cosmic symphony.”

The theory is that, much like a letter of the alphabet in language, there is nothing smaller, more fundamental than these vibrating musical strings. String is string, and it can't be described as containing any other material.

But if you can't see it, and can't directly determine its actual particular properties, how can you be confident the theory holds water? Enter the power of symmetry: you can approximate the properties of something even if you only have partial information. Greene uses the example of the police artist's ability to draw a fairly accurate sketch of a crime suspect even



if a witness has only seen the right side of the perpetrator's face. While differences certainly exist between the two sides of anyone's face, most are symmetrical *enough* to enable the rendering of a good likeness. The same indirect method is used all the time in science. You don't have to actually travel to distant stars and galaxies to understand their dynamics.

And this is where the power of the missing piece meets up with symmetry. Just knowing that the law of symmetry is in play makes the job of description possible. To use Greene's illustration, suppose I tell you that a sequence of letters has been written on a slip of paper, that the sequence has exactly three occurrences of the letter "y," and that the paper has been hidden within a sealed envelope. If I give you no more clues, there's no way for you to guess the sequence unless you have a pair of those super-cool x-ray glasses you could buy from the back of comic books in the good old days. The sequence of letters could be most anything. *Hjuiydfgybvcczywerfjgplk* would work just fine, as would an infinite number of other possibilities.

But now suppose that I give you two further hints. First, the hidden sequence of letters is an actual word in the English language; second, that it contains the smallest number of letters consistent with the first clue (having three y's). There's only one possibility, the shortest English word containing three y's: *syzygy*.

By now you don't need me to bang you on the head in order to realize that this is exactly what I did with the letter E exercise, and what David Chase did in the last episode of *The Sopranos*.

Seduction

On the morning of January 9, 2007, Apple CEO Steve Jobs took centre stage at San Francisco's Moscone Center to deliver his keynote address kicking off the 2007 MacWorld Conference. Dressed in his signature mock turtleneck and jeans, he demonstrated the latest and greatest gizmo in Apple's product line. It was called the iPhone, and it was scheduled to go on sale five months hence at the end of June. As he ticked through the features of the phone, the audience sat mesmerized by what they saw. Or, more accurately, what they *didn't* see.

What they saw was a new gadget of remarkably sleek design, which they had come to expect from Apple. The iPhone was a "smart" phone, Apple's entry



TO HYPE SOMETHING MEANS TO PUSH IT HEAVILY THROUGH THE USE OF VARIOUS SALES AND MEDIA TACTICS. BUT THAT'S EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT APPLE DID. IN FACT, THEY ACTUALLY STOPPED DOING SOME THINGS ... IT WAS A WELL-EXECUTED "STOP DOING" STRATEGY.

into the market for mobile marvels that combined cell phone, email, web browsing, music, photos, and video. Unlike the competitive models using limited or "light" versions of operating systems and web browsers, the iPhone had the systems of full-size Apple computers. In fact, it had full functionality across the board, including full-fledged iPod features. "Pleasingly memorable" didn't quite capture the iPhone. By all accounts, it was a thing of beauty.

What they *didn't see* took them by surprise. Now, Apple loyalists are accustomed to Jobs' flare for the spare. They know that minimalism, especially relating to buttons, is his watchword. The keyboard for original Macintosh had no direction keys for the cursor. Until 2005, the Mac mouse had a single button, as Mr. Jobs had long criticized multi-button computer mice as "inelegant." He had removed on/off power buttons on desktop units. He had removed buttons from elevators in multi-level Apple retail stores. Rarely if ever could he be seen wearing a shirt with buttons.

But for the iPhone, Mr. Jobs had removed the single biggest physical feature of every phone in the world: the keypad. It was completely missing. No thumbwheel. No stylus. No buttons to punch, dial, click, or scroll, save a single, elegant "Home" button. Even by Apple design standards, long known to be about clean and aesthetically pleasing lines, the iPhone had the sparest design ever conceived. With a flick of a finger across

a device the surface of which was almost entirely touchscreen, you could access vivid, three-dimensional displays of your music, photos, contacts, and movies. The keyboard was virtual, a soft-wired feature.

And what followed was a study in seduction. The conventional thinkers weighed in immediately, much like they did just after *The Sopranos* finale. Critics took shots at the lack of a keyboard, and Apple's choice to select a single service provider, AT&T. They criticized AT&T's slower network, choosing instead to minimize the fluid ability of the iPhone to automatically switch to faster Wi-Fi networks. Two things then happened almost simultaneously.

First, critical comments served only to embolden the vast number of Apple loyalists by giving them something to react to and defend. The blog world was fully ignited. Support became exponentially greater every day.

Second, Steve Jobs easily quashed the critics concerns. When the *Wall Street Journal's* technology columnist Walt Mossberg asked Mr. Jobs to defend his decision to omit a physical keyboard, Jobs responded: "The iPhone's keyboard lets us use far more sophisticated software to improve accuracy, customize the keyboard for specific applications, and of course remove the keyboard when it's not needed, freeing iPhone's entire large screen for reading email, browsing the Web, looking at maps, enjoying photos and movies, and doing things we haven't yet invented. We think the iPhone's keyboard is one of its greatest assets and competitive advantages."

It wasn't long before the iPhone was being hailed as one of the most-hyped products ever to hit the market. To hype something means to push it heavily through the use of various sales and media tactics. But that's exactly the opposite of what Apple did. In fact, they actually *stopped* doing some things.

Along with missing buttons came missing marketing. There was no multi-channel, multi-million dollar campaign. Steve Jobs' MacWorld demonstration was essentially it. So the spare design was coupled with an equally spare strategy: announce once and do nothing. No clever advertising. No planned information leaks to entice the media. No appearances by Mr. Jobs on television. No sweeping demo model program for technology journalists. No advance reviews. No evangelistic outreach to the Apple cult. No special intro-

ductory offer or handset rebate – in fact the entry level price tag was triple the normal price for a new device: \$499. No pre-ordering. In fact, Apple limited distribution to in-store sales only, and all stores would begin synchronized selling at the predetermined time of 6 p.m. the evening of June 29. It was a well-executed "stop doing" strategy.

By the time the iPhone finally went on sale, well over half the U.S. and British mobile phone market was aware of it, and nearly 20 million Americans had expressed interest in buying one, regardless of the price or potential wait time. The iPhone "hit a tipping point" before it hit the market.

The iPhone phenomenon is a good example of the essential duality of *unusual* simplicity and *surprising power*; the impact of elegance in a business setting, and the seductive power of the missing piece.

Subtraction

The Renaissance artist Michelangelo was once asked how he sculpted his marble masterpiece, the statue of David, considered to be the image of the perfect man, to which he replied: "I saw David through the stone, and I simply chipped away everything that was not David." Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, picked up on Michelangelo's implication by observing that "perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

The laws under which elegance can be achieved are *subtractive*. But therein lies the conundrum. The very same penchant we have to "fill in" – to *add* – is exactly why elegance is so elusive. By nature we add, push, collect, hoard and consume. The key to understanding this rather intriguing paradox lies in seeing that the true enemy of elegance is not complexity. In fact, elegance requires the presence of complexity. In much the same way light requires darkness and trust requires risk, without complexity there is no need to talk about elegance. The true enemy of elegance is *excess* because it can almost always be eliminated or reduced, where complexity, although we can manage or hide it, often

THE VERY SAME PENCHANT WE HAVE TO
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Kurt Schwitters, *Das Unbild*, (1919)

can't. And whether you're talking about a market, a product, a career, a skill, or a life, excess comes in three distinct forms: *inconsistency*, *overload*, and *waste*. We all face these types of problems, and it is the means by which we handle them that enables or prevents elegance. Understanding what piece to make missing is the trick.

There is nothing "in and out" about In-N-Out Burger. The lines are always long, but well worth the wait. In-N-Out Burger is a Southern California institution with a cult-like following not unlike that of Apple Computer or Starbucks. Its reputation extends beyond the West Coast, and indulging in a Double-Double is on the to-do list of many tourists. The company was founded by Harry and Esther Snyder in 1948 in a Los Angeles suburb. It was Harry's innovation to start a drive-through burger stand where customers could order through a two-way speaker box. Back then, carhops and big canopied burger joints were the norm. In-N-Out Burger is known for its consistent quality, freshness (potatoes are hand-cut daily for the fries), and

simple menu. But most important, In-N-Out Burger understands the power of the missing piece.

To begin with, the menu has only four food items. You can order a Hamburger, a Cheeseburger, a Double-Double, and French Fries. The fifth item is a beverage. You can partake in the standard array of Coca-Cola products, or order one of three flavors of milkshake: chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry. *That's it*. Or is it?

The reason for the cultish phenomenon is the "secret menu." You have to be in the know to be privy to it. The most interesting thing about the secret menu is that not only do the items on it far outnumber those on the published menu, but they are unique products, universally prepared according to a cross-company formula, and well beyond the Starbucks approach of allowing tweaks to an already extensive menu. When you order, say, a "tall non-fat, no-whip mocha" at Starbucks, your receipt simply reads "tall mocha." When you order, for example, a Flying Dutchman off the secret menu at any In-N-Out Burger, it will appear on the receipt just as you ordered it.

There are about a dozen "standard" off-menu items: a 2X2, 2X4, 4X4, a 3-by-Meat, Animal Style, Protein Style (no bun, wrapped in lettuce!), Grilled Cheese, Flying Dutchman, Fried Mustard, Double-Meat, Veggie, and Extra Toast. That's just the burgers. Fries can be Animal Style, Light, or Well-Done. Shakes can be Swirl or Neapolitan.

In-N-Out has never changed their menu. *The customers have*. By resisting formal menu expansion they've avoided self-defeating overkill seen elsewhere as "feature creep." They understand the "filling in" desire, and they simply flow with it, keeping their wares pared back but enabling their patrons to add their personal touch. They understand the completely *intangible* value of the tailored touch, so the only rule they have is "to do whatever the customer wants done to a burger." They understand how seduction works, so they maintain the mystique. They understand that expanding the formal menu only detracts from the very reason they are so popular. At In-N-Out, doing nothing is a powerfully elegant strategy.

The laws of subtraction are quite simply these. First, it is important to distinguish an ingenious subtraction from a simplistic incision. The goal of elegance is to *add* value and impact for the receiver, not to simply pump up a bottom line. Certainly it takes no genius to

cut a cost or pare a budget.

Second, when it comes to solving challenging problems with elegant solutions, *doing* something isn't always better than not doing something. Elegance is often found in a not-so-big idea that changes everything – a small step back, an intelligent edit, an insightful abstinence of some sort.

The motivating questions behind the power of the missing piece must be these: What would customers love for you to eliminate or reduce, or stop adding? What is it that your competitors would struggle with if you were to cease? What would those who matter most love for you to stop doing?

There are some who will declare elegance to be nothing more than glorified simplicity. There are those who will deem it a luxury. What they won't do is admit that they lack the discipline required to achieve it. And that brings us to the last leg of the journey.

Sustainability

Like symmetry, sustainability is easier to describe than to define. Most people think of sustainability in the context of the rising environmental awareness and corporate social responsibility efforts, which focus on ways to make better use of limited, shrinking, and in some cases already scarce raw planetary resources. But this is simply one application of the sustainability principle.

Sustainability can be defined broadly as the ability to maintain something at a certain level, indefinitely. While the definition is easy to grasp, more subtle are two important implications. The first is that to be sustainable, any given asset, no matter what it is, must be kept whole, without making significant trade-offs that undermine the capital used to generate and maintain it. The second follows from the first: sustainability hinges on the ability to see finite resources as the very source of innovation. This insight brings to the fore the creative tension at the centre of elegance: achieving the maximum effect with the minimum effort.

The foregoing examples highlighting the various facets of symmetry, seduction, and subtraction have all had an element of sustainability to them: from the lasting impact of *The Sopranos'* non-ending to the indelible effect of the letter E exercise, and from the absentee iPhone marketing to the long-secret menu at In-N-Out Burger. It is the ability to simultaneously

achieve all four factors that makes the surprising ingenuity behind these stories worth exploring.

On a weekend fishing expedition to Transkei, on the east coast of South Africa known as the Wild Coast, advertising executive Trevor Field observes a number of women standing next to a windmill, waiting for the wind to blow. Curious, he investigates the situation to discover that the concrete reservoir at the bottom of the windmill is cracked, so it will not hold water. When he passes by the windmill two days later, the women are still there waiting. The troubling scene stays with him.

He discovers how serious the world's water problem is: over one billion people do not have access to clean water, water-related illnesses are the single largest cause of disease worldwide, and nearly 6,000 people each day die due to water-related disease. Moreover, abundant safe water is a little more than a hundred feet below the surface, but the resources do not exist to extract, store, and purify it.

At the same time Ronnie Stuiver, who drills boreholes for wells in remote areas of South Africa, is bothered by another observation. When he rolls his drilling rig into a village, the children gather to watch him work, fascinated. Without swing sets or playgrounds, their boundless energy has limited outlet. He designs a small-scale model of something he thinks will delight them: a pump with a merry-go-round fitted on top that can be powered by play. As the children spin the merry-go-round, water is pumped from deep in the ground. He puts his prototype on display at an agricultural fair in Johannesburg.

On that particular day, Trevor Field is attending the fair with his father-in-law. He spies Stuiver's pump and instantly sees it not just as a merry-go-round that pumps water, but as a cleverly sustainable way to help people like the women he saw waiting for the wind. He envisions a self-contained, self-sustaining water system, complete with a high-capacity water tank with four large spaces for billboard advertising and public service messages – the revenue from which will pay for maintenance – all powered by children's play. He licenses the idea from Stuiver and forms PlayPumps

**SUSTAINABILITY HINGES ON THE ABILITY TO
SEE FINITE RESOURCES AS THE VERY SOURCE
OF INNOVATION.**



International to allow the systems to be donated to communities and schools in rural Africa. Today, over 1,000 PlayPumps have been installed in the sub-Saharan, with commitments for 4,000 by the end of 2010.

Conclusion

Whether it's a personal or professional pursuit, we each face the challenge of sustainability at some point, for the simple reason that each day we have more to do and less to do it with. There is little choice but to become more resourceful. Achieving elegance demands that we meet that challenge in a way that avoids causing further complications. But that can be fiendishly difficult, which helps explain why so many well-intentioned solutions are plagued by unwanted side effects or unintended consequences. So while it is this enduring quality that consummates elegance, it can be the most elusive.

There is hope, however, in the simple notion that a sustainable idea is the visible outcome of viewing finite resources as scarce and precious – an opportunity to think anew – and exploiting the one eternal source of creativity and innovation: *observation*.

You see, elegance is not a matter of superior intelligence. And while the ability to solve problems elegantly does not require the genius of Albert Einstein or Leonardo da Vinci, it does require the scientist's diligence and obsessive attention to detail, coupled with the artist's ingenuity in pursuing possibilities within the clear confines of a chosen medium – the painter's canvas edge, the sculptor's block of marble, the composer's octave, or the writer's alphabet.

The awareness of this requirement is growing, and as Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, states, "Millions of people are beginning to work and live the way creative people like artists and scientists always have."

It is keen observation that is at the heart of the examples of elegance explored here. It seems that if we stop, look, think long enough to ask the right questions and fight our natural tendency to arrive at an immediate answer, we will find ourselves in a better position to see the elegant solution.

For many of us, though, it is *answers* that have consumed our thoughts since we were first-graders. Perhaps it is worth revisiting Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The Elephant's Child":

*I keep six honest serving men;
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Where and When
And How and Why and Who.*



Emerging Worldviews

Carol Mase

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WE HAVE ENTERED AN ERA OF GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY in which networks predominate and our interdependence determines the direction and consequences of our actions. This interdependence requires human organisations and systems (HOS) – the independent public and private institutions of our culture, such as our schools, businesses, financial systems, and governments – to function as ecosystems do. While we are all familiar with these organisations and systems, we are

Change agents continue to struggle with outmoded models, tools, and techniques – ones that were sufficient in slower and simpler times, but that are counter-productive when complex adaptation is the only viable survival strategy.

*– Edwin Olson and Glenda Eoyang
Facilitating Organisational Change*

not so familiar with the connections that hold them together, and this will be vital in this new era.

No longer can our systems operate as independent machines following the linear laws of Newtonian physics because in reality they are networked *communities* – complex, emergent, and nonlinear. This realisation reveals what environmentalist-author Paul Hawken calls a “design problem” in our current systems: assumptions about how our institutions of society and commerce best function have become outdated and need to be transformed. To do this requires that we rethink our paradigm of change – because change is what we obviously are facing at this critical point in human history.

Facing adaptive strain

Until recently, the world has experienced rapid but turbulent technology-driven growth – the outcome of a worldview that has designed HOS to be highly efficient machines of production and commerce that convert human and natural resources into products and services. Mechanistic organisations function well during periods of relative stability and limitless resources, but they become dysfunctional in highly networked and interdependent environments with limited resources. Rigid, slow, and wasteful, today’s mechanistic organisations, and the systems they spawn,

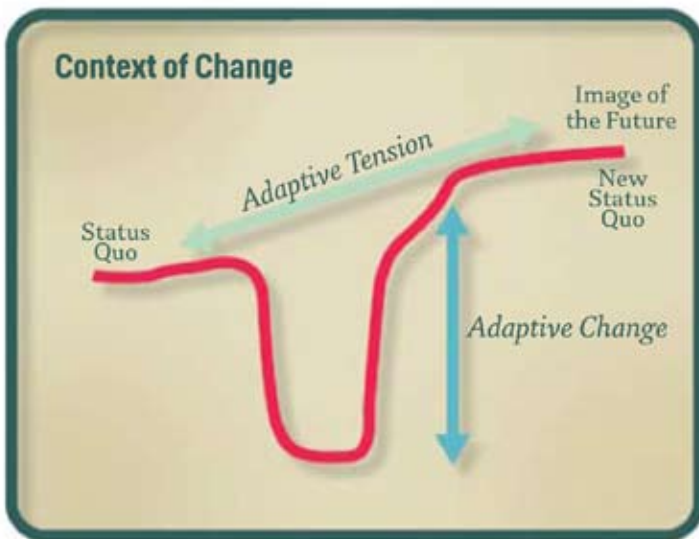


FIGURE 1. A VISUAL METAPHOR OF CHANGE IN HUMAN AND ORGANISATIONAL SYSTEM (HOS): ADAPTIVE TENSION, PRODUCED BY DESTABILIZING EVENTS, GENERATES THE NEED FOR A NEW STATUS QUO THROUGH A PROCESS OF ADAPTIVE CHANGE.

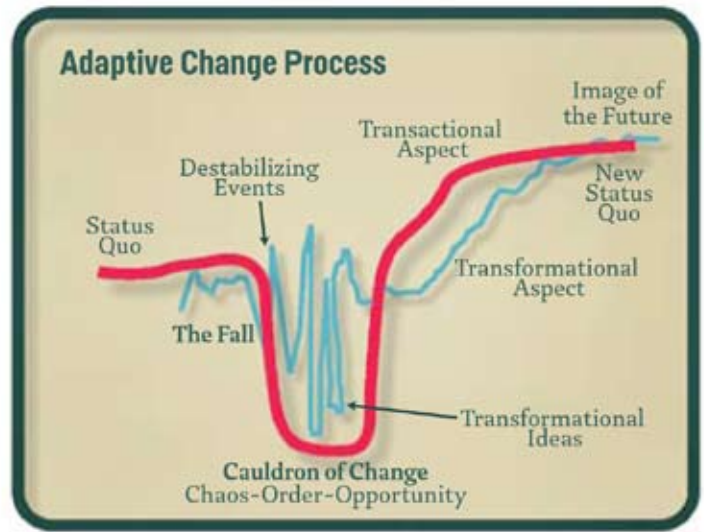


FIGURE 2. THE PROCESS OF ADAPTIVE CHANGE CONTAINS TWO COMPONENTS: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE (IN BLUE) AND THE PROCEDURAL OR STRUCTURAL TRAJECTORY OF TRANSACTIONAL CHANGE (IN RED).

FOR BOTH, DESTABILIZING INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL EVENTS GENERATE ADAPTIVE STRAIN AND MOVE THE SYSTEM AWAY FROM THE EXISTING STATUS QUO, INTRODUCING A PERIOD OF TURBULENCE AND DISENGAGEMENT. THIS CREATES A CONTAINER, OR CAULDRON, IN WHICH THE SYSTEM CAN SELF-ORGANIZE BY PRODUCING INNOVATIVE IDEAS THAT GENERATE PSYCHOLOGICAL/IDEOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL/FUNCTIONAL CHANGE. NEW PATTERNS OF ACTION, BEHAVIOUR, AND THOUGHT EMERGE AS THE SYSTEM REINTEGRATES BACK INTO THE LARGER ECOSPHERE.

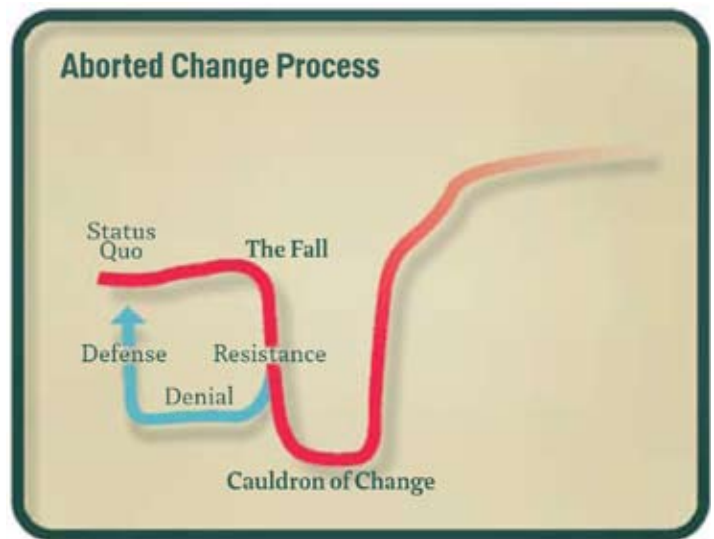


FIGURE 3. ABORTED CHANGE IN HOS IS OFTEN THE RESULT OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERN DURING THE FALL WHEN PARTICIPANTS ARE UNABLE TO DISCONNECT FROM THE EXISTING STATUS QUO AND RETURN TO IT THROUGH A CYCLE OF RESIST-DENY-DEFEND.

produce continuous waves of regional and even global destabilization. Consider the negative fallout from an antiquated U.S. automobile industry, or a justice system that favors incarceration over rehabilitation, or an educational policy based on old models of teaching and learning. Out of necessity, our worldview is shifting beyond the principles of “industrial ecology” popularized in a 1989 *Scientific American* article by Robert Frosch and Nicholas E. Gallopoulos and toward an “ecology of human systems,” defined as a global web of *unique and inseparable* cultural, commercial, and environmental ecosystems that co-create an interdependent ecosphere.

Unfortunately, faced with the need for widespread institutional change, we resist – either consciously or unconsciously – and prefer to wait until destabilizing external forces beyond our control impose change upon us. We hold tight to the existing status quo, continually reinforcing what isn’t working. In so doing, we ignore a level of organisational and systemic dysfunction that sickens the earth and produces human disengagement, cynicism, loss of trust, and, ultimately, resource and ecological depletion and a world on the brink of destruction. Resolving this global dilemma requires us to leave behind a mechanistic paradigm of change which assumes that change is a painful action of last resort, always externally imposed rather than systemically generated and only necessary when social, economic, or business systems start breaking down.

As outdated models are ripped off the moorings of their mechanistic worldview, a model of change that generates hope *and* opportunity is beginning to emerge (see Figure 1). It has the potential to empower us to meet today’s global challenges and improve human well-being, organisational longevity, and resource sustainability. We can use this model, which mimics nature’s ability to harness the creative tension between an existing status quo and an emerging future, to redesign our social and commercial systems in a way that allows all participants of the human ecosphere to contribute and prosper.

Based on a worldview in which HOS operate more like our bodies or a prairie ecosystem than a well-designed machine, a multidisciplinary paradigm of adaptive change in sync with the processes of the natural world has developed at the intersection of physics, complexity theory, biology, psychology, ecology, neuroscience,

MECHANISTIC ORGANISATIONS FUNCTION WELL DURING PERIODS OF RELATIVE STABILITY AND LIMITLESS RESOURCES, BUT THEY BECOME DYSFUNCTIONAL IN HIGHLY NETWORKED AND INTERDEPENDENT ENVIRONMENTS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES.

and cosmology. Many thought leaders are authoring this new story of change. Margaret Wheatley, Fritjof Capra, and Peter Senge have described its leadership and processes. Daniel Quinn, Paul Davies, and the late Gregory Bateson have brought a cultural and cosmological perspective. Paul Hawken and Janine Benyus are its ecologists. Ray Anderson and Thomas Friedman contribute to the business side. Kevin Kelly is one of its leading technocrats. Through their work, we now understand that “adaptive strain” (in engineering and physics, this refers to the tension within structures and/or functions that result from destabilizing events) is inherent in the interactions between human systems and their environments and that this tension is resolved through a natural process of “adaptive change.” Unlike in nature, however, the magnitude of adaptive strain in HOS depends upon (1) the presence or the absence of a clear vision for the future, and (2) the conscious recognition that change is necessary for survival.

From strain to change

Nature is a living system that uses adaptive strain to sense, test, and adapt to a constantly changing environment in order to maintain and co-evolve a healthy, self-sustaining ecosystem. A commonly cited example is the Blue Tit, a bird that adapted to the introduction of foil tops on milk bottles that were previously uncapped. The adaptive strain that the birds experienced arose from the loss of access to a nutrient-rich food, milk. The adaptive change was that they figured out how to get past the foil, producing a wave of species-specific learning that quickly spread across the English countryside and caused the “bird–milk bottle system” to evolve. The “adaptive clue” that initiated and maintained change was the observation of birds that knew how to open the new caps (the “modelers”) by the birds that did not (the “imitators”). As more birds learned this skill, the adaptive strain gave way to



a new status quo, and the system returned to a state of relative equilibrium.

Two aspects of the adaptive change process are critical when considering HOS. First, the “transactional” aspect of adaptive change – the tangible processes and outcomes of change – are what we are most familiar with. For each Blue Tit, the transactional aspect of change involved watching another bird successfully open a milk-bottle cap and then learning the process itself. For organisations of commerce, the transactional aspect of change might be to understand and respond to events in the marketplace in order to remain competitive. For schools, the transactional aspect of change might involve monitoring local demographics to determine staffing needs. And so on.

Second, the “transformational” aspect of adaptive change refers to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual effects that change has on individuals. Although these are often disruptive, they also contain the seeds of successful adaptation. In my own experience, transformation is what makes adaptive change successful because, in the words of consultant-author William Bridges, “To feel as though everything is ‘up in the air’ . . . is enduring if it means something – if it is part of a movement toward a desired end.” Combining both the transactional and transformational aspects of

adaptive change creates a model that we can apply to any HOS.

Adaptive change: the evolution of ecospheres

Before the onset of any adaptive change, all living systems exist in a dynamic steady state that we call equilibrium or status quo. This state is maintained by an invisible network of connections and interdependencies between the system and its environment, producing small unnoticed course corrections and creating resiliency. When internal and/or external destabilizing events occur, these same connections produce adaptive strain. Initially, destabilization temporarily disconnects the system from its environment, opening a gap between the existing status quo and some unknown future state. This often precipitates the fear and resistance that result from feelings of disorientation, uncertainty, ambiguity, and the sense of loss we commonly associate with periods of change. This set of responses is called “the fall.”

The “cauldron of change” marks the bottom of the fall, where creativity and innovation become available to the system, wrestling order from chaos and providing a wealth of options for resolving the adaptive strain. Remaining in a state of chaos or disconnection long enough for innovation to emerge is critical to successful passage through this stage. Forcing resolution too early or imposing control when uncertainty and ambiguity still exist can abort the change process and return the system to its previous status quo. This is also the point at which effective leadership is most critical. For example, during the 2008 U.S. presidential

THE MAGNITUDE OF ADAPTIVE STRAIN IN HOS DEPENDS UPON (1) THE PRESENCE OR THE ABSENCE OF A CLEAR VISION FOR THE FUTURE, AND (2) THE CONSCIOUS RECOGNITION THAT CHANGE IS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL.

election, because of Barack Obama's calm presence, both wary and first-time voters stayed in the cauldron instead of retreating to the old status quo of apathy, despair, or cynicism.

During this stage, uncertainty and diversity are amplified, sustaining the jagged psychological highs and lows that began during the fall. These are resolved when transformational ideas – such as market insights that generate a new business strategy or the discovery of new occupational needs that motivate the redesign of a school's curriculum – create a platform from which the system can learn its way “back to the future.” As connections and networks are re-established, interdependencies throughout the ecosphere become richer and more complex. In this way, the future status quo emerges from within adaptive change (see Figure 2).

Adaptive change also generates organisational learning in such areas as greater collaboration, full engagement, and trust. Over time, the characteristics of ensuing cycles of adaptive change (the shape of the cauldron) are altered in three important ways:

- *The magnitude of destabilizing events are reduced as the system becomes more sensitive to its environment.*
- *The steepness and depth of the fall decreases as participants become more adept and innovative.*
- *The road back becomes easier as the system learns how to integrate transformational ideas into existing structures and/or functions.*

When this happens, adaptive change becomes a “core competency” of the institution, and it begins to move in sync with its ecosphere, behaving like an organism instead of a machine.

Examples of adaptive change

Although we think of change as operating primarily on a large scale, nature teaches us that every interaction creates a microcosm of change. Change your mind, change your opinion, make a decision, set a goal, plan a strategy: all of these processes follow a pattern of adaptive change and are precipitated by adaptive strain. The first example below captures both an individual and collective change process; the second illustrates when such a process isn't successfully completed.



Successful adaptive change

Mary was brought in from outside to lead a team of highly diverse marketers to launch a product in a company where “leader as expert” is the dominant business model. The project was initially successful, but the dynamic between Mary (the expert) and her high-performing team began to create stress and compromise productivity. The company wanted to keep Mary and so provided her with six months of executive coaching. Her goal was to increase her team's trust, collaboration, and performance by changing her leadership style.

Mary's yearly review flagging this problem provided the destabilizing event of her change journey. Her fall into the cauldron of change began when she realized that her leadership style was contributing to a dysfunctional team dynamic. This also defined the challenges of adaptive strain within her “personal system” – for example, challenges to her confidence and self-esteem. Her cauldron of change contained established behaviours that needed to be eliminated, new behaviours that were necessary for a different leadership style, increased risk tolerance as others took on more decision-making responsibility, and greater comfort with uncertainty, which comes with loosening control. Completing her fall in two months, she spent three months in the cauldron of change, gaining self-awareness and self-reflection through coaching. She spent another two months integrating her new leadership style on the road back. Shortly after her successful change journey, she was promoted to lead a global marketing team.

Similarly, Mary's team, co-creators of the existing status quo, began to experience adaptive strain when her evolving leadership style began to influence team dynamics. This was especially evident when a significant external event impacted their company's brand after the launch. Two months into her change process, Mary, rather than taking control herself, instructed the team to manage the impacts. This moved the team into its own cauldron of change, which contained budget cuts, project revisions and cancellations, and outside pressure from senior management and market specialists. As the team met these challenges, Mary saw that her new leadership style was positively affecting them – an example of how the process of adaptive change has a ripple effect throughout an ecosystem. Aware that

Mary would likely be promoted, the team began their road back by consciously strengthening their levels of internal trust and collaboration, thereby co-creating a new status quo that did not depend on Mary's leadership.

Aborted adaptive change

Adaptive change is not always successful. For example, a mid-sized U.S. school system obtained the consulting services of a well-known non-profit organisation in order to eliminate bullying from within the district. After a year of meetings and workshops, teachers and administrators, stuck in a cycle of resistance-denial-defence, had not completed the fall. Each time there was a chance to disconnect from the existing status quo – necessary to enter the cauldron of change – they retreated to the safety of past beliefs and behaviours, including helplessness and disengagement. In an attempt to tip the system and push it into the cauldron of change, the consultants tried to convince the superintendent of the school district to champion the effort. His refusal to do so resulted in the discontinuation of the project.

Upon reflection, the consultants felt that the absence of district-level leadership was the primary cause of the change cycle's failure. Without a clear vision of a bully-free future, teachers and administrators could not imagine that the bullying behaviours could change. The consultants could see that the district's system was stuck in a state of cyclical aborted change, unable to creatively engage the adaptive strain within the system and thus unable to complete the adaptive change necessary to achieve a new, bully-free status quo.

Challenges and tools

The challenges of facilitating adaptive change in human organisations and systems are largely due to the remains of a mechanistic change paradigm, which include the following:

- ▶ a desire for the system to remain in the status quo
- ▶ an inability to trust the collective to successfully navigate the needed change
- ▶ a dislike and distrust of ambiguity, uncertainty, and loss of control even when prediction and certainty

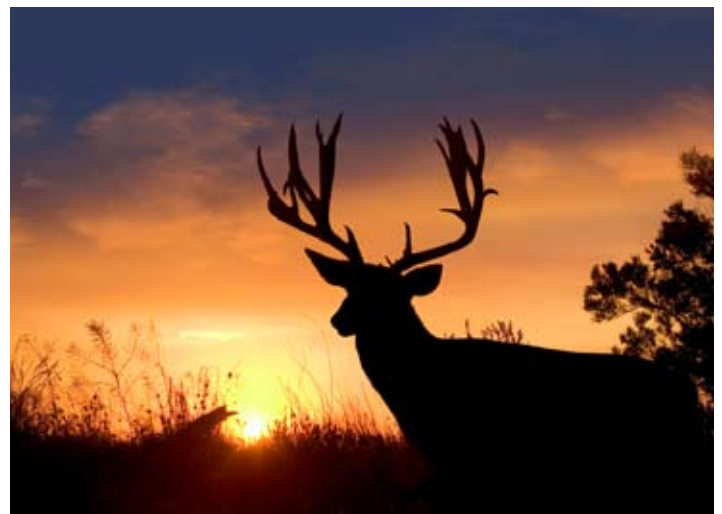
fail time and time again

- ▶ a discomfort with nonlinear emergent processes, which fluidly cocreate with the environment
- ▶ a tendency to fall back on linear cause-and-effect thinking

Similarly, the following three key leverage points support a successful journey through adaptive change:

- ▶ the use of collective conversations to produce clear, compelling, and shared visions for the future
- ▶ the ability to tap the collective intelligence of the system and use its diversity, imagination, and creativity to resolve the adaptive strain
- ▶ a leadership that builds relationships of trust, commitment, and collaboration

To ensure the long-term survival of all living beings and our planet, HOS must quickly learn and apply attributes of the co-evolutionary change process that operates within nature: interconnectedness, limitation, and the law of consequences. The adaptive change model presented in this article addresses those needs. It also draws from the familiar path of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" – and nothing less than heroism is required of humanity at this point in history. To effectively change the way we affect the natural and human world, we must adopt a paradigm of change that can be applied universally – by individuals, public and private organisations, and leaders of economic, social, and political systems. The beauty of the adaptive change model is its simplicity. Nature has tested



its effectiveness for centuries. Its strength is that it allows the psychological turmoil of human change yet still provides a logical path for HOS to navigate the obstacles and to achieve a new equilibrium. ♦

“The Adaptive Organisation” by Carol Mase, MA, DVM, MSc, appeared in *Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness* (No. 22, Spring 2009, pp. 26-31), the quarterly publication of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), and is reprinted with permission of IONS (Websites: www.noetic.org and www.shiftinaction.com), all rights reserved. Copyright 2009.



A Hidden Lever of Leadership – Supporting Meeting Interactivity

Lenny Lind and Karl Danskin

Through their San Francisco-based company, CoVision, **LENNY LIND AND KARL DANSKIN** have over the last eighteen years developed large-group meeting methodologies for face-to-face, multi-site, and virtual meetings. The hallmark of their work is the use of technology to facilitate small-group discussions becoming part of a whole-group conversation.



WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP BEING DEMONSTRATED AT A MEETING, they visualize a single strong person—probably the most senior leader—speaking to the group in a galvanizing fashion. Charismatic, focussed, compelling.

In reality, however, this is rarely what is needed, and even when it is, it is rarely executed. Often the hope is that a meeting will be an opportunity for *many* people to step up, share insights, and have a role in the decisions made. But when meetings get large, the opportunities for people to participate in this way often (and

unnecessarily) diminish.

Ideally, in many situations leaders and meeting organizers would prefer to see people walking away saying things like: “it was real leadership development,” “I feel much more connected to my peers,” or “we had lots of opportunity to influence the future direction.” Clearly, to achieve this kind of meeting, organizers need to cultivate other dimensions of leadership (beyond the charismatic presentation), and frame the goal more broadly than “get my vision across and get people’s buy-in.”

Meeting competitive challenges ... together

Before a leadership team meeting, a senior leader framed his goal as: “Catalyze a value system and a set of behaviours that would propel our organisation into growth and the needed execution that goes with that.” Clearly this was not just about transmitting information; instead, the goal is to influence the organisational culture and for everyone to embody the needed leadership traits.

The company was a well-established American insurance company with a long and successful history. However, markets were changing, new agile competitors were leveraging new tools and models, the company was in silos, and the new business plan was very ambitious. The company needed to react with all parts working in concert, supporting each other and adapting to new external realities – so that they could provide solutions that were much more relevant to customers.

The leader’s agenda coming into the meeting was to break the patterns that had developed over many years, employing the dictum: “If we do nothing differently, we will continue to get the same results.” He

CLEARLY, TO ACHIEVE THIS KIND OF MEETING, ORGANIZERS NEED TO CULTIVATE OTHER DIMENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP (BEYOND THE CHARISMATIC PRESENTATION), AND FRAME THE GOAL MORE BROADLY THAN “GET MY VISION ACROSS AND GET PEOPLE’S BUY-IN.”

wanted to focus on the role of a leader in the organisation. Meaning: he wanted the top 100 to “think and act as owner-leaders of the company – beyond teams, functions and departments.”

The meeting was only a day-and-a-half long, held once a year. The challenge now was how to have this be a broadly shared conversation, where everyone’s viewpoint was heard, challenges were encouraged, and the group could hammer out working agreements, coming away with a feeling of being one large team. Clearly a series of presentations with Q&A and breakout sessions wouldn’t cut it.

In concert with his design team, the senior leader chose a method that used technology to quickly gather what the participants had to say. The method also enhanced his ability to “listen” by providing an accelerated means to review key themes arising in the small-group discussions.

Participants were seated at round tables of six with a stage area in the front. The agenda was unusual; the senior leaders’ presentations were kept short. This allowed time for the group to break into triads (groups of three; two at each table) and discuss the topic with each other. The technology (two networked laptops on each table) allowed them to type in their group’s thoughts as they discussed. This gave the experience of “saying” what they were thinking.

Also in the room was a small, carefully-chosen team from the organisation. They read all of the thoughts and ideas that were being input at the tables. These folks were constantly reading and talking to each other, comparing notes on what they were seeing. In real time, as the participants were still in discussion, this group distilled all of the input into key themes. The team shared their findings with the senior leader and presenters as the themes emerged.

All input was anonymous. The group reading it could see every comment, but didn’t know which table group had sent it – giving everyone the safety to be



Values encouraged and built through technology-enabled interactivity:

- Honesty
- Respect
- Inclusion
- Trust
- Valuing each person's contribution
- Collaboration
- Ownership
- Creativity

more honest. This was especially important at the beginning. None of the topics were light – the organisation was in a period of transition, and the targets were high. The leader wanted to know what was real.

He chose this method because it could increase the level of honesty in the room and would build the level of trust that was needed if leaders were going to see beyond their own areas of responsibility. The method was more inclusive than many of the usual meeting methods because every person had a voice in the conversation and each person's contribution was included and valued. Rather than being passive listeners, the whole group was engaged in collaborative, creative work throughout the meeting. And the result was a shared sense of ownership for everything that was done in the meeting, for agreements that were made, and for the success of each part of the company.

After several minutes, the discussion period was halted, and the key themes that had been distilled were projected up front on the big screen so that everyone could see what the group as a whole had been discussing. The leader had already had some time to think about the key themes as they were developed, and he was able to give a detailed response, constructive to each point that the group had raised. He then invited the participants – those who were willing – to reply to respond with their views. The give and take was surprisingly robust, and it bred a sense of openness and of being part of a larger team.

At one point in the agenda, the group was asked,

“On a scale of 1-10, what is your confidence level that we will execute on our plan?” Everyone cast a vote through the computers. Then they were asked, “What would it take to raise your score one point?”, and they talked in their groups and sent in their thoughts.

The leader took the quantitative result to the first question in stride. But the turning point came when the themes for “What would it take to raise your score one point?” were projected on the big screen.

The whole group's thinking was there for everyone to see. And the leader saw immediately that there was a misunderstanding about where the company was in the process of reshaping itself, and about the role that these top 100 were being asked to play in the process. Their role, to his way of thinking, was pivotal.

He stopped the meeting and gave his best articulation of their journey, their current reality, and what role everyone needed to play if they were going to succeed. When he paused, he was answered by an emotional voice in the room that spoke for what many were thinking – “offered that role, I am at once challenged and energized to pick it up and try it on.”

Slowly other people started to add their feelings about what the role meant to them and how it felt to take it on. After half an hour, the room was completely electrified. The sense of excitement and commitment was palpable. What could have gone unnoticed, or even unknown, instead became a catalyst for clarity and a bonding point for this whole group. All it took was a half hour, but it put the whole meeting onto a new footing. Afterward, the group took a break and then resumed with the agenda.

Though not always as dramatic, the meeting as a whole was like that – interactive, fast moving, enlivening and inherently meaningful for the participants. And the leader used the meeting to help build leadership in the organisation that is integrated, focused and flexible. In this case, the senior leadership team took full advantage of technology-enabled interactivity and modelled the leadership behaviours needed for a transformative change.

RATHER THAN BEING PASSIVE LISTENERS, THE WHOLE GROUP WAS ENGAGED IN COLLABORATIVE, CREATIVE WORK THROUGHOUT THE MEETING.

Desired Behaviour	Enabling Process
<i>Honesty of participants</i>	Assure anonymity in the feedback process
<i>Honesty of leader</i>	Create a safe process for formulating candid responses
<i>Inclusion</i>	Provide many opportunities for conversation in small groups, where everyone's voice is equal
<i>Valuing everyone's contribution</i>	Identify the themes from all of these small group conversations and have the leader respond to them
<i>Trust</i>	Repeat these feedback loops – where participants are able to be honest in giving their input, and the leader is able to be honest in responding to them
<i>Collaboration</i>	Use small group discussions to work toward solutions
<i>Creativity</i>	Focus on solutions, drive the generation of new ideas and proposals
<i>Ownership</i>	Generate new ideas and solutions as a group, and prioritize them as a group

Tailor meeting design to objectives

Often, meetings are designed to “get across” certain information to the participants. But as we’ve seen in hundreds of large meetings, the most profound information that participants receive is about who the leader is, what kind of culture is tolerated and promoted, and how engaged they feel. The real opportunity is to design a meeting that allows the leader to model the desired kinds of leadership needed more broadly.

A leader can ask: Does the meeting design allow me to listen? Does it allow me to be candid and share and respond openly with the participants? Does it provide the opportunity for me to learn? To make adjustments? To realize and admit mistakes? And does it provide those opportunities for the participants as well?

If the answers are mostly ‘yes’, then full speed ahead. If they are mostly ‘no’, then it is time to explore options with the help of internal and external design experts. There are methods for safely and effectively engaging large groups, and they are not difficult.

Finally, there is no such thing as a “neutral design” in which the information being presented is the sole

focus. How information is presented and processed makes a significant statement about who the leader is, how the organisation functions, and what is expected for the future. By attending to the process as carefully as the content, leaders can benefit their organisations and themselves. It is a hidden lever of leadership. ■