

PART 1: ESTABLISHING RELATIONAL CONTEXT

In the beginning, there's relationship. Social constructionism, one of the foundations of AI, posits that we co-create our worlds of meaning in relation with others. Therefore, it is not surprising that the authors in this section each highlight the central importance of establishing the relational context for large-scale change efforts. As Diana Whitney sees it, "getting started with a large scale effort is a consulting process. It is about making a relationship, exploring possibilities and together deciding to go forward." But how does that happen in practice? In this section, we begin to explore the myriad ways that relationships that generate and support large-scale inquiries are established and cultivated. The section concludes with a provocative, introspective reflection on the subtle, often hidden-from-view questions and dynamics involved in that process.

Secrets To Initiating and Contracting For Successful Large Inquiries: Establishing Relational Context (1)

Diana Whitney, Ph.D., President, Corporation for Positive Change, In conversation with Bernard J. Mohr and Stephen P. Fitzgerald, Monday March 6, 2006

Q: Diana, what in your experience is the secret to initiating and contracting for successful large-scale inquiries?

A: It is all about making relationships, exploring possibilities and together deciding to go forward. It begins when, somehow, you and your work comes to the attention of a potential client – a leader who has a unique hope or dream for her or his organization. This may happen through a referral, a cold call, a book or article you've written or a speech you've made. It begins with that first interest in you and the idea that you may be able to help them accomplish something they want to achieve.

My early work with Smith Kline is a great example. I had just left Hay Associates to start my own business and was worried that I wouldn't have work. A colleague introduced me to the director of OD for the clinical laboratories. When we met we found that we had common educational backgrounds. We were both communication scholars and knew a lot of the same people professionally. She hired me and we worked together on a large scale acquisition integration process. That work got the recognition of the CEO of Smith Kline and I was asked to support the merger with Beckman Instruments.

I flew out to California to meet the VP of HR. We had dinner, got to know each other and talked about possibilities. The next morning I went to his office expecting to sell myself by outlining what could be done. He smiled and said, "We don't have time for that, you're hired, let's get to work." He was clear that what he wanted was a variation of what we were doing in the clinical laboratories. The integrity of the relationships was modeled in the contract we established. I was paid 50/50 by each of the two merging organizations,

“reported” to an executive from each organization, and worked with a team of people from both organizations. It remains one of the best learning experiences of my career.

Q: How does this relate to your work with AI?

A: This was before I was introduced to David Cooperrider and AI, but what I did had a lot of similarities to AI. In three different large-scale change processes, I put together a team of people from all different parts of the organization. High potential people in HR inquired into best practices, came back, shared stories and analyzed data.

At Beckman, we made gigantic mind maps that they turned into blueprints of all of the data. It was a variation of what we would now call a “positive core map.” This helped with the culture transformation and is why when David and I met we had such an instant connection, because AI is grounded in communication theory and social constructionism.

More often than not now, people call me because they have read a book and they want Appreciative Inquiry. They want to talk about what’s going on in the organization, and see how AI relates to it. So the process becomes my learning about the organization, and seeing if I’m the best fit for what they need, and if it’s someone I want to be working with. If it is, I try to make the budget work, and if it’s not, the budget sometimes helps to make the decisions.

Q: Tell us more about your prior background with Hay Associates, and how that contributed to your more recent work with AI.

A: I had the good fortune of working 1.5 years with Hay Associates. That’s when I learned the business of consulting. For example, as an external consultant working with clients, it’s really important to respect their internal relationships and let them guide me. It’s their judgment and process as to when to introduce me to the senior executives or other departments.

At British Airways, our team included front line supervisors, HR folks, and presidents, and we met monthly for a long period of time. I learned a lot by being on that team and serving as its leader/facilitator. I often hold the vision for the team. Internal partnership is really important. I’m impressed when someone says “I think I can do this on my own.” I say I will support you in that, but I’d also like to be involved, and think it will be stronger if I am.

It’s different with external teams: I expect them to know their competencies, show up, and be able to do what they say they can do. I think we need to put together teams who can do what we’re promising to do based on the client’s needs. On external teams, sometimes others bring me in to the team, and sometimes I bring others in.

Q: Diana, what is the difference between a one-time event like an AI Summit and a bigger project? And at what point do you go for the bigger project?

A: A single summit does not a culture change make. I prefer to use what Amanda Trosten-Bloom and I, in *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, called “whole system inquiry” for culture change. When we engage large numbers of people in inquiry over time, the organization gets a buzz. People make new relationships and deepen existing ones. And

tremendous amounts of new knowledge get created and shared. I find that when people commit to AI as a long-term process, they begin to change their management style and systems along the way. All of this supports the sustainability of the newly emerging organization culture.

Still, there are several instances where 6 or 8 or even a dozen summits followed by an integration summit have been used for very successful culture change. Jim Ludema is especially skilled in designing these kinds of large-scale processes using multiple summits.

Q: As you think about some of the large projects you've been involved with, what are some of the similarities and differences with respect to introducing AI to the system, building internal sponsorship, etc.?

A: Let's use Hunter-Douglas and GTE-Verizon. In both cases, AI came to the attention of an executive. In Hunter-Douglas, Amanda, a long-standing consultant, brought it into a meeting and used it. At GTE-Verizon, David did a speech, and Tom White asked about it.

The second thing in both cases was learning about AI. At Hunter-Douglas, a team came to Taos to attend the week-long workshop. At GTE, we did a weeklong workshop for all of the people that they considered to be change agents, so education was a really big piece.

The third step involved design of the change process. At Hunter-Douglas that was determined to be whole system inquiry. At GTE they determined to begin by creating critical mass through training frontline employees. That began as the "Zealots" program and shifted to positive change training.

The next step involved ensuring appropriate resources. At Hunter-Douglas, Amanda went internal for a year, with me as her shadow consultant. At GTE, we built a team of internal OD people, and David and I partnered with them. So in both cases, we had an internal-external team. At Hunter-Douglas, it was Amanda's client, but I had the knowledge base. At GTE Verizon, it was David's client, but I also had large scale corporate experience.

Q: What is the value of inviting a team from the client system to some kind of a foundations workshop early on, whether that's done internally or externally?

A: It enables relationship building in a non-selling environment, and lets the client develop capability so that they are not quite as dependent on me and can partner more effectively with me. It gives them and me the opportunity to see if they really "get" Appreciative Inquiry. I think that's essential.

The choice to work in the affirmative is hugely different than other ways of consulting. Once you get AI as a way of being, there is no going back. It is a question of personal values and integrity.

It speaks also to the issue of commitment on the client's part. Clients can't commit to something that they don't understand. At a deep level, they're committing to changing their own way of being. They have to ask themselves, "Am I willing to embark on a journey of personal transformation to help this organization be more effective?"