

Brief Encounters with The Taos Institute

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Organizational Consulting with Social Constructionist Twist



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“Preaching to the choir is a waste of time when you could sing together instead.”

From a daily horoscope reading!

I have practiced organization development with a social constructionist twist for close to four decades. Fortunately, I was generally too busy to articulate how the way I work varies from more traditional OD. Recently, as I prepare for an evening of story telling based upon my work, I’ve begun to put words to my ways of consulting. The purpose of this short, and in no way comprehensive, essay is to invite you to join with my musings.

Traditional organization development (OD) is defined (www.odnetwork.org) as an effort that is: planned, organization wide, managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health, using interventions based on behavioral science knowledge (Beckhard, 1969). OD consulting is said to progress through five phases: Entry and Contracting; Data Collection and Diagnosis; Feedback and the Decision to Act; Implementation; and Extension or Termination (Block, 1981). As I write these definitions one after another, I am struck by their mechanistic tone.

Consider instead, that the aim of organizational consulting with a social constructionist twist is to help large groups of people – multiple, diverse stakeholders with varying relational resources – enhance their collective organizational capacities to achieve worthy results. Consulting practices, in no special order, can include: Getting to With-ness; Beginning with the End in Mind; Getting to You're Hired; Clarifying what to Accomplish; Negotiating the Meaning of Best; Discovering and Amplifying What Works Well; Designing Programs and Processes; and Experimenting with Relational Structures.

As organizational consultants all that we say and do is a move, an invitation for others - potential clients, clients, and assorted stakeholders - to move, in what becomes a series of relational moves, a co-creative consulting process. As a consultant I am mindful of what I am being invited to, and how my communication invites others. A practice that I find especially meaningful in establishing with-ness and co-creativity is *“beginning with the end in mind.”* For example, if you understand from a phone call that a potential client wants to enhance collaboration among diverse groups within his or her organization, you might suggest a first meeting that includes a diverse group of people, rather than the typical first meeting with one or two executives only. In this way you are following the potential client’s move and at the same time demonstrating how to go forward differently, yet in line

with his or her wish. Organizational consulting that approximates a desired result from the start creates a practice field for learning and transformation.

What follows is a story of how my work with British Airways began with the end in mind and grew into a successful co-creative organizational consulting process. When I first met Dave Erich, then VP of British Airways NA, he wondered how Appreciative Inquiry (AI) might be used to help employees engage with the business. Having invested significantly in outward-bound type activities for employees, only to have them ask, what does this have to do with the business, he was then looking for a way to engage employees in the business. Rather than attempt to convince him, I suggested that he gather a group of employees from all levels and all functions of the organization to attend a two-day Appreciative Inquiry workshop and then let them answer two questions: one, how might AI be used to engage BA employees with the business? And two, do you think doing it will be a good business decision?

He also wondered how unionized employees and their leaders would view AI. I suggested that he invite them to the workshop and let them be involved in making the decision to go forward with AI or not. As a potential client, he wanted employee engagement with the business so I repeatedly suggested that he do just that – engage them!

Together with a small group of 3 people, I designed a two-day workshop for 40 people. Participants included unionized customer service representatives, a couple of disgruntled old timers, a couple of new hires, directors and VPs. In the last two hours of the two-day workshop the entire group made the decision to design and lead an organization wide Appreciative Inquiry process that would engage 2200 employees in 19 locations across North America, ultimately leading to dramatic increases in employee satisfaction survey scores, the chosen measure of success. Both research and British Airways experience showed that in customer service organizations when employee satisfaction increases so does customer satisfaction.

In this case, beginning with the end in mind led to significant organizational improvement and seeded additional consulting processes in other business units.

Now, having suggested a number of possible consulting practices with a social constructionist twist and having elaborated on one, *beginning with the end in mind*, I look forward to your reflections.

You are invited to join my evening of story telling at the 1st Global Conference on Positive Change, in Amsterdam, April 13th and 14th. www.positivechange.org