COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY:
A POSTMODERN APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTATION[1]

Harlene Anderson, Ph.D.
www.harlene.org harleneanderson@eartlink.net
J. Paul Burney, Ph.D.
pburney@lcc.net

Our collaborative approach to consultation is collegial and egalitarian. It is the framework for a partnership in which consultant and client combine expertise to explore their dilemmas and challenges and develop new possibilities for resolving them. Whether we work with individuals or a group, members of a family or an organization, our collaborative approach remains the same (Anderson, 1990; Anderson & Goolishian, 1987; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Anderson & Swim, 1995; Goolishian & Anderson, 1987). In organizational consultation, the method is a way of integrating people and business strategies in building pathways to change and success. In this paper we describe and illustrate this postmodern approach to thinking about and working with human systems and the problems they present.

In its simplest form, postmodernism refers to an ideological critique that departs radically from modernist traditions in its questioning of the mono-voice modernist discourse as the overarching foundation of literary, political, and social thinking. Although there is no one postmodernism, in general it challenges the modernist notions of knowledge as objective and fixed, the knower and knowledge as independent of each other, language as representing truth and reality, and human nature as universal (Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984; Ricoeur, 1983; Rorty, 1979). Consequently, the postmodern perspective challenges the technical and instrumental nature of consultation and the notion of the consultant as the expert on organizational culture. It favors, rather, ideas of the construction of knowledge as social, knowledge as fluid, the knower and knowledge as interdependent, and thus knowledge as relational and the multiplicity of "truths." Said differently, knowledge, and language as a vehicle for creating knowledge, are the products of social discourse.

We view human systems as language and meaning-generating systems in which people create understanding and knowledge with each other through communicative action (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Goolishian & Anderson, 1988). Communicative action involves dialogue within a system for which the communication has relevance. An organization is one kind of language and meaning-generating system that has a relevance specific to itself. For organizations that seek consultation, our relevant role is to join them as they seek a solution to a problem.

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[1] In memory of Donna McVeigh.

Collaborative Inquiry:
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From a postmodern perspective, then, organizational consultation is a linguistic event that involves and takes place in a particular kind of conversational process, a dialogue. Dialogue, the essence of the process, entails shared inquiry--a mutual search and co-exploration between client and consultant and among the client system members--into their narratives about the organization and its members (Anderson, 1995). The shared inquiry is fluid, and it encourages new ideas and viewpoints to be advanced in the conversation. Client and consultant, and client system members, become conversational partners in the telling, inquiring, interpreting, and shaping of the narratives.

Dialogical conversation involves both internal and external dialogues as people talk with themselves and with each other. The internal dialogue consists of a person's internal unformed and forming thoughts and ideas. In this process possibilities come from within and are generated in and through the inherent and creative aspects of language, dialogue, and narrative. Transformation occurs within such a collaborative process as the participants generate and explore multiple descriptions, stories, and perspectives. That is, through dialogue, through the evolution of shifting, clarifying, and expanding meanings and understandings, and as a natural consequence of it, new narratives and new possibilities emerge. We think of this newness as self-agency: the ability to act, or to feel that we are capable of acting, to handle our dilemmas in a competent and autonomous manner.

As consultants, our aim, expertise, and responsibility is to create a dialogical space and to facilitate a dialogical process. How does the consultant achieve this aim? We assume what we refer to as a philosophical stance--a way of being in relationship with, thinking about, acting with, and responding to people (Anderson, 1995). It is a way of being that serves as the backdrop for the conversation. The stance is characterized by an attitude of openness to, respect for, curiosity about, and connection with the other. It entails flexibility and willingness to follow the client's ranking of what is most important to him or her. Although as consultants we may initially have a structure or outline for the consultation--a stepping stone toward the process--we do not operate from a set agenda of our own or with preconceived ideas concerning the direction the conversation should take or what its outcome would be. Any idea about the format or direction of the consultation is tentative, and we are poised to change it at any time. The task is to create and continue the dialogue and discover with the client what is significant.

The most critical aspect of this stance is "not-knowing." Not-knowing refers to the assumption that we do not know what is best for the other person or how they ought to be conducting their business. We do not suggest that we are tabulae rasa but what we do

know, or what we think we know, is only one perspective that is always open to challenge. Nor do we imply that if someone were to ask us a question we would not respond. The difference is in the manner in which and the intent with which we would respond. The consultant's not-knowing invites members of the client group to be the teachers, the experts on the circumstances of the consultation, and it naturally acts to involve them in a shared inquiry with us and with each other. Shared inquiry only happens, however, when the consultant's curiosity maintains coherence with clients and is not too far removed from their experience (Anderson, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Not-knowing questions, for instance, should not cause the client to be distracted from his or her train of thought.

As consultants we are more curious and interested in each person's ideas about his or her organization and the manner in which it operates than in proposing our own ideas. This is not to say that we will not offer reflections on ideas and thoughts when asked by the client for feedback or opinions. Our ideas and thoughts, however, are set forth in a manner that allows the client to consider them and to correct us if they are not consistent with the client's point of view. We offer our contributions tentatively, with genuine interest and a desire to hear more of the client's narrative concerning the organization's dilemmas and challenges, including the client's expectations of the consultation.

This conversational style and attitude enables us to operate from a position of curiosity about the client's dilemmas and a desire to acquire understanding. We listen actively to the narrative being presented to ensure we have not misunderstood, and we continuously check out what we think we have heard. By asking conversational questions in a manner that encourages the client to say more about the subject being discussed, and by verifying rather than assuming that what we think we have heard is what the client wanted us to hear, we explore the client's part in the conversation. Conversational questions are questions that are informed both by what has been said and what has not yet been said. The intent is not to receive an answer, steer in a direction, or create a narrative that we deem more useful or correct than the one we are hearing. The intent is to learn, explore, and clarify the client's narrative in a manner that enhances the dialogue. At the same time we know that the context of the consultation, the manner in which it is conducted, the client's intent, and the experiences and prejudices we bring to the consultation are all variables that influence our curiosity and the style, choice, and type of our questions.

When a consultant assumes this stance, consultation is changed from an archeological, hierarchical, and interventionist relationship between an expert and

nonexpert to a collaborative, egalitarian, and mutual endeavor by people with different types of expertise. Client members who view themselves as important parts of the dynamic process of change become actively and enthusiastically engaged. Consultants become facilitators of the dialogue regarding the concerns of the client instead of experts expected to provide solutions. As we become conversational partners with our client, the dialogue brings forth new ways of thinking and acting regarding dilemmas, problem-solving, communications, relationships, and ourselves as individuals.

In this kind of process the consultant is also at risk of changing. In our experience, the approach is a philosophical one: the consultant's beliefs and biases are not only part of the consultant's professional work, they become a way of being in our professional and personal lives. Our approach frees us to work in a variety of organizational settings, with individuals and groups, without regard to gender, culture, or type of dilemma. Interestingly, we have found that, in a sense, our stance models new and alternative ways for client system members to be with each other, even though modeling is not our intention.

In this paper we present a narrative of our consultation with Friendly Travel, a corporate client, as illustration of the collaborative process. We hope to show how the consultation set a collaborative tone, and how it provided the opportunity for multiple, crisscrossing dialogues by which the client system's members collaboratively defined their dilemmas and created possibilities for addressing them. We hope also to show the evolution of newness through collaboration and shared inquiry and how it was peculiar to the conversational process.

Organizational Setting and History of the Consultation

We were invited to provide a seven and one-half hour consultation to a small organization in the travel-tourism industry, to address issues of communication and interpersonal staff relationships, and to help create a more cohesive, effective team. The client organization is a full-service resource provider to individuals, businesses, and organizations in a small recreational, agricultural community in Texas that has as its market a larger, countywide suburban residential and technological business community. The company has one owner and 17 employees, all of them women. The agency has one main office and two satellites.

A member of the consulting team is an acquaintance of the owner who, in previous conversations, discussed some of the internal and external dilemmas she was experiencing

in her organization. The internal changes the client wanted to make concerned staff interpersonal relationships and enhanced service to her customers. She expressed ideas about building the foundations for a better team and developing "connectedness" within her organization. In her words,

"The dominant culture of the airline industry has had a major impact on us. The negativity directed at us, as travel agents, from the airlines, and the continuous change in the industry, has caused us to be reactive instead of proactive. We need to find a way to circumvent it." Not only did this represent a major dilemma for her company, but its current structure and employee relationships, she believed, did not allow the agency to address such issues successfully.

The owner expressed interest in a day-long consultation that might be somewhat different from one conducted by a consultant retained by the organization in the past. She said she hoped that plans could be formulated that would be helpful to her and her employees individually and to the organization as a whole. She warned, however, that the employees "would be reluctant because of the negative experience with the previous consultant, and resistant about attending on their day off."

The owner has a high profile in her community; she volunteers a large portion of her time to civic organizations such as the County Fair Association, Performing Arts Society, Chamber of Commerce, American Cancer Society, and she serves on the board of directors of the local community college. Part of her motivation is that she is known as a talented, energetic, and well-respected business person in the community, someone who can get things done. Another consideration is that community involvement is personally rewarding and makes good business sense. The organization is uniquely positioned in a continually changing industry that requires rapid response and leaves little time for proactive measures.

The Consultation's Structure

Our consultation began with the owner's interview and discussion of her objectives. The consultants then discussed the structure of the consultation day and confirmed it with the owner. It was to consist of introductions, opening comments, an experiential activity, partner interviews, small and large group discussions, and reflective conversations. Ninety days later a follow-up interview by one of the consultants with the owner led to plans for another day of consultation.

Conversation with the Owner: Shared Inquiry Begins

A consulting team member met with the owner before the group consultation to determine how the consultants might help her and what she hoped to accomplish. By introducing the client to the collaborative process, their initial meeting began the consultation. The consultant set the stage for collaboration by inviting the owner as the expert, to participate in a conversation about her organization and its dilemmas (Anderson, 1993). The consultant's inquiries concerned the focus of her business, her main objectives and special challenges, as well as what she considered to be her organization's strengths and weaknesses.

In the initial conversation we learned that her primary goal was to "build a better team that gets along and works together more efficiently." She characterized her organization's current dilemma as "disorganization." She felt her organization's greatest weakness was "our lack of teamwork." This affected the organization internally through employee relationships and organizational structure, as well as externally, by making it less responsive to the requirements of clients and the travel-tourism industry. A more efficient team would help the owner accomplish three main objectives: to increase overall business, streamline internal operations, and expand meeting and convention business. The organization's strengths were, she said, "Our knowledge and personal attention to our customers' concerns and our longevity in the business." The employees were knowledgeable, and they devoted a great deal of personal attention to each customer's needs. Their services had, in fact, become so individually tailored that they thought of the organization's customers as "my clients." The owner's attempts at changing this attitude had been unsuccessful because of the staff's concerns that change in their customer service would affect the quality of their product. Thus, an asset, concentration on individuality, had become a liability.

The Consultation Day

Introductions

An important consideration for the consultants is the manner in which to begin the consultation day, so that the staff will understand that the day's interchange depends on their input. An expert, hierarchical approach would conflict with the Collaborative Language Systems[2] philosophy of generating ideas publicly and collaboratively. From the beginning we considered the way in which we would introduce ourselves to the group and present what we knew, at that time, about their organization and its problems.

The consultants introduced themselves briefly, discussed their experience, and expressed their enthusiasm for the opportunity of working with the group. We shared what we had learned from the conversation with the owner about the internal problems of teamwork and communication and the external problems with the travel-tourism industry, as we understood them. We also expressed our wish that the group would use the consultation day in a manner that would be most helpful and productive for them. We presented the nonexpert concept: as consultants we were not experts who knew the solutions to their dilemmas but were present as collaborative partners in a process of mutual discovery--"a process we do with you rather than to you" (Anderson, 1990; Anderson, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Ideally, the process would generate new thoughts and useful ideas for their organization.

Then we asked the owner to share her version of the history that preceded the consultation day, her agenda, and her hope. She briefly summarized the first "official" consultation conversation and discussed the organization's previous consulting experience, which had not been helpful or productive. The previous consultant had lectured them about what was wrong and what needed to be done, rather than addressing their specific concerns. The owner also acknowledged resentment about scheduling the consultation on a nonworking day, since many staff members were vocal about "being here on my day off because the owner signs my paycheck." She expressed her expectations to the staff that

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[2] Collaborative Language Systems is an early term used to identify our philosophy and approach. We currently prefer to use the term postmodern collaborative approach.

this consultation would be different. She presented her ideas, as told to the consultant, about their shared organizational dilemmas.

 We invited the staff members to introduce themselves and to discuss why they were here and what they hoped to gain from the experience.

Several elements were important in setting the stage for the collaborative process. First, the consultants' introduction was nonhierarchical in manner, and it included their understanding of the organization's dilemmas and expectations for the consultation, based on the conversation with the owner. The consultants' role was one of inquiry, not expertise. As facilitators we hoped to initiate a process of discovery, exploring innovative ideas that might prove beneficial to the organization, rather than providing solutions to the organization's problems. Second, the owner, in her brief introduction, discussed the reasons for the consultation, her belief that it would be different from a previous, unsuccessful one, and that the consultants' collaborative style would benefit the organization. Third, the owner presented her perceptions of the organization's concerns to the group, emphasizing that they may or may not match those of the other group members. Fourth, the invitation to staff members to introduce themselves, to state why they were present and what they hoped to gain from the consultation, helped to initiate the collaborative process.

We are interested in the individual group member's hypotheses about her or his organization, rather than in hypotheses of our own. Our aim in using the Collaborative Language Systems philosophy is to create a dialogical space and stimulate conversation focused on hypotheses set forth by the client (Anderson, 1995). The collaborative manner in which participants are encouraged to express their ideas and opinions may differ from the organization's usual operational style and lead to a more productive outcome.

Experiential Activity: "Group Juggle"

We chose an experiential activity we hoped would be inviting and aid the client in developing a different style of team communication. Designed to be enjoyable while allowing the group to loosen up mentally and physically and move about, the activity increased the possibilities for interaction within the group. Experiential activity and physical movement can be effective stimuli in engaging participants and providing an opportunity to be open, active, and creative. Activity is also a basis for discussing important aspects of communication, such as focus, concentration, and the ability to listen effectively. Experiential activities effectively set the collaborative tone: all members of

the group participate on an equal basis, instead of the clients participating as a group and consultants observing as outsiders (Fluegelman, 1981).

The group was asked to stand in a circle as one of the consultants placed 10 balls in the center of the floor. Asked to throw the balls to one another, they began by throwing balls indiscriminately while dropping most of them. They described their first reactions to the activity as "total chaos." The consultant then addressed one of the participants and, gently, threw the ball to her. After she had caught the ball, she was asked to name another group member and throw the ball in the same manner. The sequence continued until everyone in the circle had caught and tossed many balls.

The consultant asked, "How many balls do you think you can toss around the circle without dropping any?" A discussion ensued about setting a realistic number, and the group attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to juggle three balls. As the discussion continued, the group suggested changes that could be made to improve their performance. In their next attempt, the group successfully juggled three balls around the circle and gave themselves a round of applause.

Asked about this change in performance, the participants said that communicating what they needed from each other and group concentration had made the attempt successful. The consultant challenged the group to use their new knowledge and repeat the game with a new goal concerning the number of balls. They agreed on 10 balls. When the activity ended, there were 13 objects in the middle of the circle, including a rubber chicken, a bat, and an alligator. This time the group achieved their goal very effectively. The activity was fast-paced, and the introduction of the last three objects caused a lot of spontaneous laughter and confusion.

Each participant then had the opportunity to reflect on her impressions of the experience. The introduction of new elements in the activity and the effect on group effort led to a discussion concerning the organization's styles of communication, which they felt may take place in unanticipated ways. One member commented that no one had been able individually to juggle three balls, but together they had juggled 13 objects. Ongoing, effective communication had allowed the group to accomplish more than any one individual could do, and it had allowed the introduction of new and unexpected elements. Experiential exercises, as "physical metaphors," illustrated concepts of effective communications and teamwork for the group.

Collaborative Inquiry:
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The Partner Interview

The group members were asked to form teams of two and to interview their partners. They were asked for their initial responses to four questions: Why are you here? What do you hope to leave with? What do you see as your organization's primary dilemma? and What do you see as your organization's primary strength? Two other questions were optional: What do you think people need to know about you? and What misunderstandings do you think people have about you?

Each team member introduced her partner to the group and reported the partner's responses. Each respondent was encouraged to listen and reflect on the manner in which her partner presented her answers and to hear how the partner interpreted and expressed her answers. Throughout the day the consultants recorded each team's responses on a 24" x 36" pad displayed for the other group members. Recording discussions for the group to see highlighted the fact that the consultants listened carefully to the group members' comments. The group members had the opportunity to see as well as hear the responses, which were referred to during subsequent discussions and provided the group with permanent notes about the consultation.

An important part of the Collaborative Language Systems philosophy is that, throughout the consultation, information is publicly shared. The partner interviews allow team members to develop and share ideas about the organization and their expectations concerning the consultation. Many group members had concerns about "being criticized," or "fixed," and that "only the owner's ideas would be presented."

This type of activity has several other advantages. The participants are eased into working together in a new fashion by starting, in pairs, with a small activity rather than a large group-oriented one. However, they become comfortable in presenting ideas to the group by introducing their partners and his or her ideas, rather than first discussing their own.

Small Group Inquiry

We began the Small Group Inquiry by dividing the clients into three groups and asking each group to spend 30 minutes discussing six questions: What is the organization's number-one dilemma? How does it work against the effectiveness of the organization? What factors contribute to this dilemma? How have you tried to resolve this

dilemma? What needs to be done to resolve this dilemma? and How would the organization be more effective if this dilemma were resolved?

The consultants asked the participants to think of the questions as a springboard from which to generate and develop ideas, as well as an opportunity to brainstorm about possibilities. The owner was asked to move among the groups as a silent observer for two reasons: to give the participants the opportunity to talk without her involvement, and to allow her to listen to the discussions first-hand, because it is difficult to recreate the richness of a conversation.

Small group members enthusiastically shared their answers to the questions with the whole group. Group I stated that their primary dilemmas were "communication and a lack of leadership." Group II said their problems were "a lack of communication throughout the organization, the unavailability of management, and a lack of personal responsibility." Group III listed their dilemmas as the attitudes of their clients, co-workers, themselves, their employer, their families, and the consequence to the organization's effectiveness. Group III also stated that effectiveness was diminished by leaving problems unaddressed and unresolved, which "leads to conflicts, frustration, and confusion resulting in errors, anger, and negative attitudes."

The groups described a number of factors that, they believed, contributed to the dilemmas: "a lack of respect for each other," "inconsistency in leadership," "failure to follow through on tasks," "fear of reprisal," "negativity," and "rudeness." They also expressed concerns that management did not spend enough time on-site with them and that personnel training was inadequate. Staff meetings were the usual mode of resolving dilemmas, but there was no follow-through on proposed solutions, which, ultimately, led to an avoidance of the issues. They concluded that what was needed was "consistent leadership," "training," "realistic policies," "rules," "structure," and "more positive interaction." They stated that positive change and reinforcement needed to start at the management level and filter down. If they were able to resolve their dilemmas, they said, the organization would become more productive and efficient, which would lead to better understanding and a more pleasant, helpful work environment. Developing confidence and unity in the office would result in improved customer service, they said.

The short, impressionistic answers given to the questions by the small groups introduced multiple perspectives on topics of importance to the organization. The Small Group Inquiry provides the opportunity for multiple voices as well as the individual's voice to be heard, and it encourages participants to engage in their own conversations concerning the organization. This process initiates conversations for the larger group

process, and it dramatizes the importance of group members' presentation of their ideas and solutions while the owner and the consultants listen (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992).

Large Group Reflection

Ideas about the dilemmas, initially generated by the Small Group Inquiry, were expanded during the Large Group Reflection. The discussion created the opportunity for generative conversations. The participants were invited to think about the various ideas and suggestions offered by the small groups, and to find common threads and similarities, as well as distinctions among the groups. A great deal of comment concerned communication--primarily the lack of open communication within the organization. The small groups also stated that there were "too many chiefs"; they felt "understaffed and stressed"; there was "pettiness and jealousy," along with "negative attitudes and a few combative personalities."

While engaged in the Collaborative Language System process, our experience has been that individuals described as "resistant" or "combative" in their personal relationships often change, very quickly, to a response characterized by openness, and that they communicate without fear of reprisal. The open and nonhierarchical manner in which the consultants began the workshop and their continuing collaborative stance was a critical factor in creating a safe environment in which non-collaborative behavior could begin to change, in a pattern that routinely occurs at this level of open communication. This was not necessarily our intent, but we have observed it to occur invariably.

As the group's agenda evolved, perceptions of problems and interpersonal relations began to change, with participants reporting "feeling respected," "being heard," and "taken seriously."

The Large Group Reflections generated many ideas concerning dilemmas: lack of effective communication, lack of responsibility, lack of adequate continuous training, "turf" issues, and management issues. Group members identified the lack of effective communication within their organization, with their clients, and with the industry as their primary concern.

The group members expressed a need for consistent information open to everyone. Poor communication, in their words, "creates a hesitancy to ask or answer questions." In one employee's words, "I have a fear of asking questions because of reprisal." The group members characterized this dilemma as the cause of "pressure and stress contributing to decisions being made in crisis."

Difficulties in coordinating the agency's activities from three separate locations was identified as another factor in the overall lack of communication. Several office locations received company mail, memoranda, and tickets on a timely basis while others did not. They described the agency's interoffice communications system "as if everything fell into a black hole"; information was not received in a systematic or timely manner. The lack of effective communication resulted in "no follow-through on tasks," "a lack of respect for each other," and "expectations being unfulfilled."

Organizational Dilemmas

Several group members talked about the influence on the staff of the owner's involvement in charitable and civic organizations. Some ideas expressed in group discussions were that "she (the owner) works better under pressure, but some of us do not," and that "when she is pressured, it affects all of us." The added pressure of upcoming community events was also expressed as "a dread of the Cattle Barons' Ball or the Chamber of Commerce events."

A hectic atmosphere prevailed in the offices, and "just do it" was the staff's attitude and approach to tasks. They characterized the organization as one that had grown in response to the community's demands for service, not necessarily as the result of an opportunity to develop a long-term strategic plan.

The staff struggled with aspects of team cooperation while dealing with the practical dilemmas of systems hardware, communication, and the internal operations of the organization. The staff characterized the "feeding-frenzy" environment as contributing to a "contagious" attitude of individuals treating others with little regard or respect for boundaries. The staff had trouble with issues of relationship integrity, while communication was indirect, instead of direct, open, and inclusive. Adding to the "contagious" attitude were pressures from the travel-tourism industry and the organization's clients.

The staff members' conversation identified concerns and insecurities about "turf," fear of losing their clients to the "organization," and they raised such questions as, "Whose clients are they?" "Does the client belong to us (the employees) or are they Friendly Travel's clients?"

Another area identified as problematic was a lack of responsibility in implementing procedures concerning client relations. Who had the authority to implement procedures

was unclear to the staff. They also discussed a lack of compassion and acceptance among staff members regarding different personalities and work styles.

Among management issues the group identified inadequate policies, procedures, and job descriptions, all of which, they believed, resulted in multiple and overlapping responsibilities, and thus confusion. The staff characterized the management team as being unavailable and the chain of command and responsibility as being blurred. They raised questions about the management team's inability to take time to listen patiently to their concerns and suggestions.

To allow her more time to pursue other interests, the owner had appointed a manager for each office to supervise daily operations. The entire group agreed that an individual staff member's relationship with the owner was of great importance. Concern about the underlying sense of competition was expressed by the comment, "Everyone wants to be the owner's pal."

They described inadequate training as hindering new employees from being easily incorporated into the organization's work force. The absence of continuous training for the staff made it difficult to stay current on changing policies within the organization and with the dynamics of the travel-tourism industry. Although there was unanimous agreement on this issue, it had gone unresolved for more than two years.

The large group reflections and "cross-talking" about ideas initiated the process of conceptualizing possible solutions to the group's dilemmas. In a collaborative consultation, solutions develop and evolve continually. The solutions the group determined to be most effective for their organization were the end-result of the process, and they are presented later in the article.

Consultants' Discussion

The collaborative process, introduced during the early stages of the consultation, tends to create a conversational attitude, so that informal discussions continue during breaks, at lunch, and over coffee throughout the day. Group members reflect on various ideas that surface during informal conversations, and they often bring their insight to the larger group discussions.

During the lunch break, with the group members listening, the consultants reflected on the morning's activities and brainstormed about the afternoon (Andersen, 1991; Andersen, 1995; Anderson & Goolishian, 1991). By talking openly, we allow clients access to our thoughts, shared ideas, and discussions, reinforcing the collaborative aspect

of the team's reflections. There were no secrets about our impressions of the organization and the staff's concerns.

The afternoon began with the "As If" group activity, whose content had evolved from the lunch-break conversation.

The "As If" Group Activity

The "As If" group activity and discussion stimulates an awareness of thought processes and invites the participants to voice their ideas (Anderson, 1990; Anderson & Goolishian, 1990; Anderson & Rambo, 1988; St. George, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1994). The "As If" group's multiplicity of perspectives mirrors that of an individual who, at any given time, may think about many, often contradictory, ideas. The individual, while engaged in the act of listening, is concurrently engaged in an inner dialogue.

The group activity provides participants an opportunity to (1) develop awareness of how each participant in the organization experiences and thinks about various dilemmas; (2) experience the diversity of individual perceptions and points of view; (3) discuss ideas in a public forum instead of an exclusive or private setting; (4) experience shifts or changes in perspectives; and (5) experience the style and types of questions or comments that invite conversation, while becoming aware of the types of statements that cut it off (Anderson, 1990; Anderson & Goolishian, 1990; Anderson & Rambo, 1988; St. George, unpublished dissertation, 1994).

Determining which dilemmas would be presented, the group decided that the owner would present a dilemma to the "As If" groups from her view of the situation. The participants, organized into three groups again, were asked to listen "as if" they were members of one of the following groups: the travel-tourism industry, the organization's clients, or the organization's staff. They were asked to listen while placing "on hold" any emerging ideas, questions, or comments.

The "As If" groups were asked to talk about the presented dilemma, pose questions, and offer suggestions or advice they thought might speed its resolution. The owner moved among the groups and listened. Each group then shared a synopsis of the group members' discussion of the dilemma from the various "As If" perspectives of industry, clients, or staff. The owner and the other two groups listened without questions or comments. After each group concluded its report, the other participants reflected on what they had heard. Thus, the "As If" groups were a catalyst for the large group process; they generated a

wealth of information and led to a spirited discussion of solutions, including establishment of short-term goals and the proposal of a new business structure for the organization, all developed solely from the participants' ideas.

Proposed "Solutions"

The "As If" exercise solidified a shift in focus from problems to possibilities. In the general discussion that followed, the participants generated various ideas about their goals and possible strategies for initiating change in their organization. They developed specific ideas about job descriptions, training manuals, policies and procedures, communication, and changes in the organizational structure. They characterized their solutions as new beginnings for their organization. Several participants were "astounded by the openness and freedom of expressing our ideas," and said that "she (the owner) listened to us." They expressed a desire to create an ongoing dialogue with their co-workers and "the boss."

They determined that an organizational structure was needed that specified individual responsibilities and levels of decision-making authority. They proposed a new structure in which the owner would have the final say, while other responsibilities would be delegated to three managers who would report directly to her. The managers would be responsible for accounting, personnel, and training. The new structure would also create two divisions in the agency, one for leisure travel and related activities, the other for corporate and convention business.

Plans were discussed to develop job descriptions and training manuals, as well as organizational policies and procedures, telephone technique improvement, and more effective communication with each other and their clients. The group members expressed the unified opinion that the organization needed a technologically updated communication system, and that personal interactions needed more attention. All believed that the proposed improvements and shared recommendations would increase the organization's productivity and profitability. As one person expressed it, "Friendly Travel would become 'Friendlier Travel.'"

Reflective Conversation with the Owner

Afterward one of the consultants engaged the owner in a reflective conversation about her thoughts, the information generated by the group, and her experience of the

consultation as a whole. The reflective conversation was not intended to be an evaluation of the consultation day, but it is an aspect of the collaborative process of sharing thoughts in a public, inclusive fashion (Andersen, 1991; Andersen, 1995).

In this case, the interview was spontaneous rather than planned. While one of the consultants talked to the owner, the group members were asked to listen without comment. Often this process creates new awareness for the interviewee, the group members, and the consultants. The owner responded during the interview that, "I was amazed by the great ideas, the group's enthusiasm, and how helpful and freeing the experience has been."

The consultation day was concluded as each participant voiced her ideas about the owner's reflections and the day in general. The owner and consultants offered closing comments as well. Several participants mentioned their initial resistance to the consultation: "I did not want to come today but am glad I did because it was totally different from my expectations," and "Even though I had to come on my day off, it was worth the effort." The participants described the day as passing quickly and felt that the experiential exercise had created the opportunity to view dilemmas in the office in a different way. Several comments concerned the experiential activity and that "It has been a while since we've laughed and had fun together." The participants had enjoyed the enthusiasm and "moving around rather than sitting and being lectured." They expressed amazement at the wealth of information produced in a short time and mentioned the open and nonjudgmental way the consultants had related to the group.

Several participants discussed new impressions of their coworkers. The consultation had allowed them to relate to one another in a new way, outside the office, and this, they felt, would carry over when they returned to work. They also discussed the ways the group members had communicated with one another. The owner expressed her appreciation to the consultants "for their time and efforts in making the day a unique and helpful experience" and thanked the group "for doing a great job."

The consultants commented on the amount of information the group had discovered in collaborative conversations and "our continuing fascination with the process." They remarked on the group's spirit of enthusiasm and on the positive attitudes that had developed over the course of the day, despite some of the participants' reluctance. The consultants concluded the consultation by thanking the owner and the staff for sharing their collaborative experience.

Collaborative Inquiry:
A Postmodern Approach to Organizational Consultation

Ninety-Day Follow-Up with the Owner

About ninety days after the consultation, the owner of Friendly Travel and one of the consultants met for a follow-up conversation. This kind of meeting is an important continuation of the Collaborative Language Systems process and an opportunity for both client and consultants to review and reflect on the consultation.

The owner commented that the style of the questions and the manner in which they were asked by the consultants had helped the group to achieve a high level of openness. In fact, she said, "The group has never opened up like this before," and "they really loved the role-playing."

Since the day of the workshop she has noticed a difference in the role staff members play in the organization. She described the employees as being less secretive and she said that problems are now discussed with no stigma attached to the person who brings the problem to the other's attention. Her sense was that "We are working 'smarter,' showing more consideration for one another, and seem to be on an emotional upswing." She also indicated that the staff seemed to appreciate her being more open and approachable, spending more time with them, and "showing less partiality or favoritism."

With one exception, the employees have been more open in talking with her. The owner outlined how she has changed her role in the organization since the consultation. She has become more active in the business and has reorganized her management staff while delegating more authority.

She has implemented a training program and begun to address the technical communication problem. Two employees, both with broad expertise in specific areas of the agency's business, have been chosen as designated "trouble shooters." The owner retains the final decision-making responsibility for all of the company's activities.

Staff Initiatives

The monthly staff and management meetings are more open and productive, the owner reported. The staff requested that meetings be scheduled after office hours rather than using time devoted to their clients. She said she believes this represents a real change in her organization. The staff also proposed eliminating guest speakers from the meetings, to devote more time to discussing organizational matters. The staff has expressed a new reliance on the "support, input, and feedback" from their fellow staff members in

problem-solving and new perspectives on "old problems." Before the consultation, she said, "if someone was snowed under at the end of the day, at five o'clock, the others would just leave instead of asking whether that person needed help." Now the staff members are more considerate of one another.

The owner was impressed that "all of the staff seem genuinely interested in keeping the wolf away from the door," and the agency is generating more business for which staff members receive an "override" commission. She said that she has revealed to her staff, for the first time, the total dollar amounts represented by the override commissions, so that the managers will understand more about the organization's financial situation. The owner now provides, monthly, each staff member's ranking in the company's total sales, income, and commissions. She expressed an interest in scheduling another collaborative day in six months "as a checking in on my staff's true feelings."

Summary

Based on the Collaborative Language Systems approach to working with organizations, the consultants chose to operate from a non-expert, non-hierarchical position, applying their expertise to the art of creating a dialogical space. They facilitated conversations concerning the client's thoughts and ideas about various dilemmas her organization was experiencing. Such conversations often lead to solutions created by the participants and they usually produce meaningful and durable results. The experiential activity encouraged both physical and mental movement, which, in conjunction with collaborative conversations, became a catalyst for new awareness and insight.

Setting a collaborative tone, an important part of the Collaborative Language System's style, begins with the initial interview of the organization's representative. The collaborative tone was reinforced by the manner in which the consultants introduced ideas, as they understood them, concerning the organization's dilemmas and it facilitated continuing conversations as the consultation progressed. Ideas and thoughts were pursued from the organization's perspective.

The experiential activities, the Small Group Inquiry, and the Large Group Discussions were arranged so that the participants were gradually introduced to a non-threatening way of generating and sharing ideas. Such an atmosphere created an open and safe space in which dialogue could occur, and it encouraged the participants to express their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions without fear of ridicule or reprisal. An important part of the process was recording the group's ideas and suggestions, so that the information

was continually available to everyone. The "As If" activity was especially important in that it provided the opportunity to listen, think, and express views from different perspectives.

The collaborative process often creates conversation that continues after the initial consultation. Such conversations occur among employees informally throughout the day, over coffee or lunch, and they continue formally during staff and management meetings. Once introduced to a new way of communicating, organizations often discover that conversation becomes a springboard for advancing innovative ideas and creating solutions. As organizational members become more responsible for implementation and rely less on external consultants as catalysts, the organization becomes empowered to act as its own agent of change.

Collaborative Inquiry:
A Postmodern Approach to Organizational Consultation

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Collaborative Inquiry:
A Postmodern Approach to Organizational Consultation

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