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AI Practitioner

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Relationally Responsive Moments That Enable Positive Change

Social construction can be considered a highly relational way of being in the world and with others. How can we then look at practices like Appreciative Inquiry through this lens? What would we notice? This article looks at relational leading and responsive moments between people that helped enable relating and shared meaning making which created positive change within a community of research scientists.

What can happen when we focus on change as an inquisitive relational process that helps us continually move towards "what is to become?" (Gergen, 2014).

Many change efforts offer methods and tools to get to a predetermined end-state. But if we focus on creating together, rather than trying to discover a meaning that already exists outside of ourselves, we can gain a different level of understanding of relational questions that may enable us to go on in new and enriched ways. This view of research is relationally engaged and different from other understandings of the research process (McNamee, 2000). It focuses on an emergent "interplay of relations, shaped movements and connections, occurring in our responsive interactions" (Cunliffe, 2002 pg. 130). It supports Wittgenstein's notion of dialogue and conversations as the space where our articulating creates relationships with our surroundings, and as we exchange in dialogue and meaning making we also re-create ourselves, others and our possibilities for action (Wittgenstein, 1953). This article will offer a view on the practice of relational leading in an organizational change effort using Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

Starting conversations

Local reality or social order contributes to, and emerges from, ongoing processes of dialogue or "multiloguing" (Dachler & Hosking, 1995 pg.4).

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An organizational development colleague and I were approached by a group of scientific project leaders at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research, a drug discovery research engine for Novartis, because they wanted to revisit the way they were leading teams. To begin this conversation, each person was asked to share their perception of what it meant to be a team leader. Through our multiloguing we realized that scientific leadership and useful impacts of leading meant something different to everyone, even though we were part of the same community. As we started to inquire into the topic our curiosity and research together began.

Seeing others: Inviting intentions and perspectives

We opened a dialogue on why they wanted to revisit team leadership. We wanted to get a sense of who would care about this question as well as answer "why now", and so as we talked we created a network relationship map of the scientific project team and worked to "perceive the network relations" (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006 pg. 419) that were connected to this topic. This was done not with an intention to manage those on the list, but to engage them so that we could reflect together on our current ways of relating.

We held a conversation with this network community and the group decided they were seeking change because the way they were practicing science was changing. Their community was responsible for finding compounds that would help treat disease. This used to be a linear and set process that was becoming more dynamic and iterative. The changing context was prompting them to revisit the way they were leading, where the project team leader was no longer the expert of all the science, experiments and data interpretation. It was now a shared responsibility.

Co-creating in our research: Diverge to converge

"The power of conversationally constructed realities lies in people speaking and listening as (responsible) creators, rather than as reporters" (Ford, 1999 pg.493).

We used wide-reaching surveys and feedback to determine what our leadership inquiry and change should focus on, and sense-checked our interpretations with those who volunteered to do so. When we reviewed various change approaches there was a unified reaction against options like training programs, and strong resonance to our words when we talked about creating a shared exploration. The conversations gave us ideas for how to frame an AI summit. We converged on a metaphor of leadership as exceptionally interconnected, and helpful networks and how leadership could be applied to practices of knowledge-generation and sharing, decision making and project coordination.

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To determine who would attend the summit we wrote down approaches with pros and cons, ultimately deciding to include the project team leaders, project managers and senior sponsors. We were not able to invite team members due to logistics and timing constraints, and chose not to include a subset so as not to privilege anyone in that group. To increase comfort with our choice, we promised ourselves to make efforts to include them in the process soon after the AI session.

Designing as a collaborative process

Hosking wrote that "when a person is understood as a knowing individual s/he is being viewed as a subject, distinguishable from the objects of nature" (Dachler & Hosking, 1995 pg. 3).

In a relational view, we can look at knowing less from an individual lens to more of a meaning-making process between individuals. To blend the traditional roles of participants and facilitators, we spent several hours with a participant design team reviewing the 4D AI cycle and how we might create a compelling exploration. The design team helped to fine tune interview questions and shaped language to be relatable for the community. The team also expressed a wish to learn from what has been working well and to expand their thinking around new ways of leading. This prompted us to propose research papers and TedTalk-style videos which could support their exploration during the AI session. We also asked the community to give us their ideas and used a voting process to select final choices. In these dialogues, the research process continued.

The AI summit

During Day One of the summit, we broke into three subgroups to watch the videos or read the selected articles on new ways of leading. Subgroups shared back to the whole group what they thought were inspiring key messages, and the group had time to ask clarifying questions and share what they liked about what they were hearing. Lastly, we all expressed our hopes for the future and its impact by using pictures and words. Many in the group said using continual inquiry and sharing back what we thought we heard and liked was important to building our shared understanding.

When we returned to themes we had captured the day before, confusion around a few of them surfaced.

An event at the beginning of the second day reminded me of Dachler and Hosking's words, where they said meanings are open and have no ultimate origin or ultimate truth (1995). When we returned to themes we had captured the day before, confusion around a few of them surfaced. We unpacked what we thought we had meant the day before, and made new sense again of the stories to ensure we could create as much shared understanding as possible. This, for me, was an example of how intentions and meaning unfold moment to moment, and we should be careful in assuming one conversation is the end of meaning creation.

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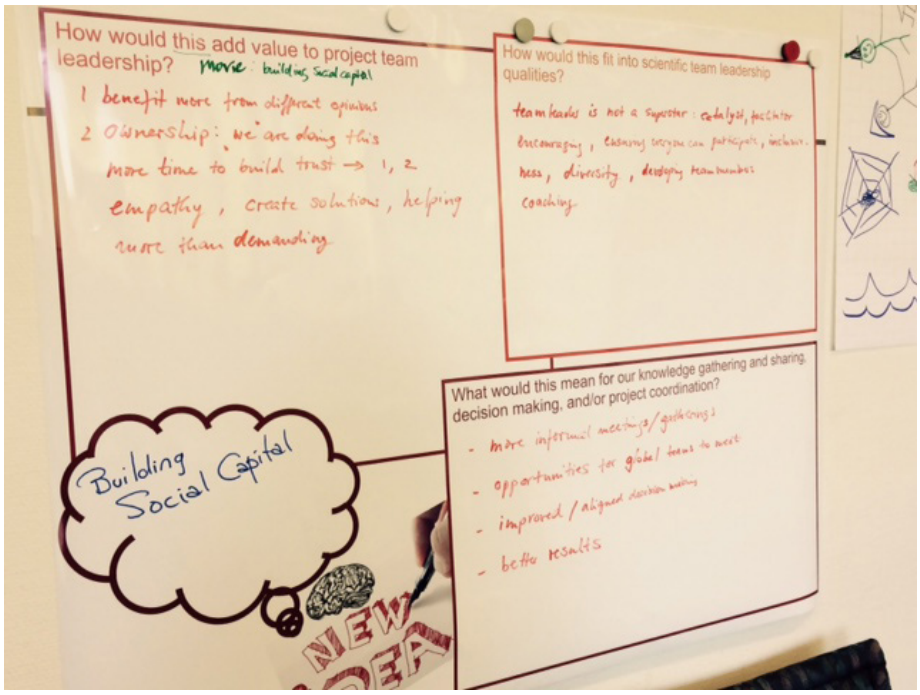

After the AI summit

On the last day of the summit, the group formed co-leads around their project ideas. A few weeks later progress slowed, and we were asked by them to help regain momentum. What happened next will address how we as practitioners can support the evolution of change in complex organizational life through relational process. When it comes to emergence in the social constructionist view, we are invited to consider a change that is unpredictable, since what is created stems from the shared inquiry of individuals and a meaning that surfaces from the group in the moment rather than something planned. Patricia Shaw describes her role as a consultant in a conversational approach to sense making and states she acts as someone who helps to leave "open the space of sense making" longer than it would have been without her there. She refers to this as attending to the process of relating (Shaw, 2002 pg.33) and shares that, by opening this space during a change process, we can better allow for different voices along the way. She also points out that this is not always a harmonious evolution.

If we open the space of sense-making we can better allow for different voices along the way. This is not always a harmonious evolution.

When the co-leads met after the AI session to fine tune the summit project scopes, they were confused about the purpose of one of them and expressed concern that one or two dominant voices had shaped it. They also felt they had received a message from their sponsors to focus on other priorities and interpreted that to mean they should put these projects on hold. Hearing their frustrations, we asked if they would support us in helping explore the project in question and to speak to their sponsors. They agreed.

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Change can happen by changing who is in conversations with whom.
Bushe and Marshak

We hosted a conversation with the project team leader community and sponsors around the three project scopes. There was still energy for two and the confusion over the third surfaced quickly. After the group tried without success to make meaning through sharing statements about what it meant, the frustration mounted. We then asked the room to tell personal stories which exemplified the project purpose for them. After several minutes, the group realized they were already doing what the project set out to do and agreed to share more stories in the future. The individuals who had pushed for the project were happy and felt heard by the community and sponsors. Their frustration seemed to melt in that conversation and the room's tension lifted, enabling us to move forward.

Next we spoke to the leaders, where we learned they had been exploring one project themselves. The team had heard this and was disheartened by the exclusion. We also shared the fact that their teams felt these projects were not priorities; the leaders recalled the words they had said to give this impression. The sponsors wanted to change the perception and unite efforts, so we agreed to meet together with the co-leads to define the scope together for the year. These were bridging conversations, where we were able to connect in order to converge again.

Closing reflections

It can serve us to realize that "intentions are forming all the time, not as fully completed plans but as movements in the way things seem to be shaping up" (Shaw, 2002 pg. 35). As relational leaders, we can focus on relational process and moments of tension and/or divergence as opportunities to shape change efforts. Frank Barrett talks about improvisations in jazz as something that borders on chaos and incoherence since it is "widely open to transformation, redirection, and unprecedented turns". He relates it to a "continual process of negotiation" or continual dialogue (Barrett, 2012 pg. 32).

Thinking about emergent change as something that occurs in each moment in our day-to-day conversations opens the door for it to be viewed as an everyday practice or research. We can attend to divergence and tensions by attempting to slow down the space between feeling and judging/acting, and chose to fill it with inquiry, reflexivity and relational research.

As relational leaders, we can focus on relational process and moments of tension as opportunities to shape change.

Disruptions pull the attention of the group to the present moment in a pronounced way, where members become acutely aware of and attentive to each other in order to be able to respond to each other and re-establish a "mutual orientation" (Barrett, 2012 pg. 33). Barret goes on the say that this is a highly relational emergence that results in a performance where members are "able to perform beyond their capacity" (Barrett, 2012 pg. 34) and play together in new ways they could not have anticipated.

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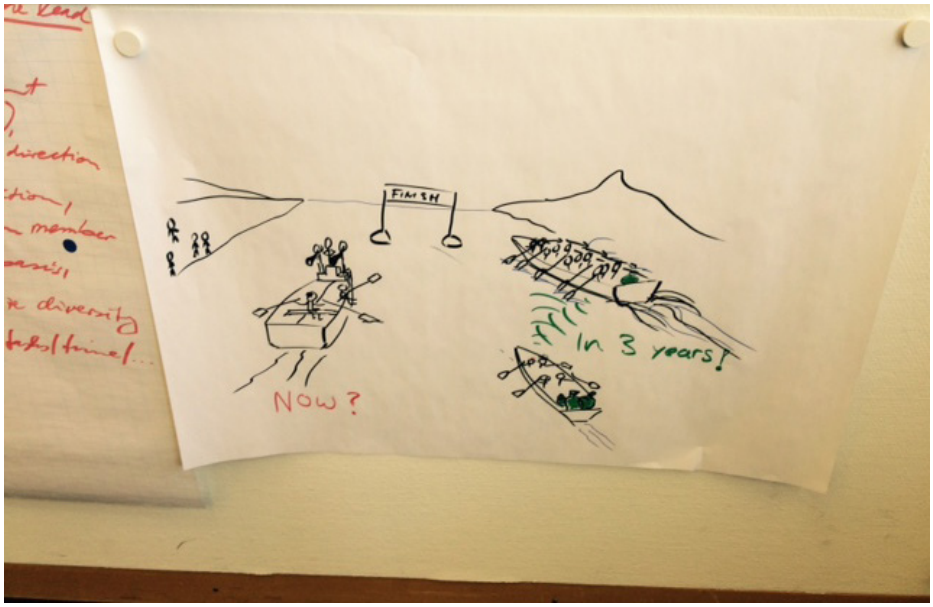
Attending to these moments and framing them as opportunities to build new understanding and connection to one another is important.

Bushe and Marshak state that change can happen by changing who is in conversations with whom and by increasing the diversity in content through the inclusion of marginalized voices. Therefore, they also state that how conversations take place is important for shared meaning making and creation. They offer practices like asking what is being created from the content and process of the current conversation. They encourage us to think of the principles of participatory inquiry and enable stakeholders to voice their unique perspectives, concerns and aspirations, without privileging anyone before seeking new convergences and coherences.

As the group now reconnects, they are re-negotiating what their intention is as a larger community. This can be a learning point for how different efforts can enter the same dialogue again and potentially coordinate in new ways. As relational

Image of the future



leaders and facilitators, helping people see and engage in instances of conflict and/or tension becomes critically important in these moments (Lichtenstein, 2014). Shaw describes these as times where our bodies as well as our minds are engaged. For example, we tap into the feelings where we may notice a "change in our body responses" like a quickened heart rate (Shaw, 2002 pg. 32). As relational leaders, attending to these moments and framing them as opportunities to build new understanding and connection to one another is important. Benyamin Lichtenstein sums this up in a succinct way where he describes "emergence as the creation of order" which gives rise to something "new and unexpected" not just in what we do, but how we relate to each other and go on together along the way (Lichtenstein, 2014 pg. 1).

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