Ongoing Discussion "Thought Piece"

Productive Engagement DNA, Lessons from Future Search

Prepared and Presented by Shem Cohen

scohen@changeevents.com

July 2014

Ongoing Discussion Host: Bill Bellows
william.bellows@rocket.com

for

Aerojet Rocketdyne's
InThinking Network

Productive engagement is the process through which people pull their realities and perceptions together, learn from each other and tap the collective knowledge, skills, experience, resources, networks and political power of everyone at the table to make something important happen.

Productive engagement leads to action - highly committed, best-informed and well-concerted action which, when applied systemically by "widening the circle" (Weisbord), generates a wave of positive change within and across teams, organizations, communities and human networks. Productive engagement is premised on 'systems thinking in action', providing groups opportunities to bring diverse perspectives together to create truly systemic solutions to their most pressing issues, and well-concerted, cross-boundary action to realize their collective aspirations.

What makes productive engagement so powerful is attention to two parallel dimensions of interaction- awareness and experience. The awareness dimension relates to cognition, rationality, learning and strategic thinking. The experience dimension relates to positive and meaningful human interaction which removes or avoids obstacles to productive work and inspires alliance building, partnership and highly-committed action. Productive engagement can be seen as these dimensions intertwining through time like strands of DNA, leading to, most often, the creation of exceptional results. When the methods, principles, and values of this kind of engagement are applied to any human endeavor across the continuum of interactions (team planning, cross-boundary group planning, leader-group engagement, merger integrations, team building, coaching, conflict resolution or dialogue), people discover the interests, goals and values they hold most important and in common, and "discover their greatest capability for action" (Weisbord/Janoff). The intent of this article is to offer a framework for understanding productive engagement, what makes it so and how to apply the principles, values and methods to any human interaction.

Most professional circles engage each other well enough to meet demands, but more often only well enough to conduct business as usual. When confronted with overwhelmingly complex challenges, big surprises or big change, we enter rip tides of uncertainty and risk and tend, most often, to respond with fight or flight behaviors or lock into our most familiar patterns. Like selecting a hammer to drive a screw, these responses often fall short of optimal action to meet the needs at hand. During periods of high uncertainty and perceived risk, internal political dynamics can make getting important things done difficult at best, or, at worst, create a landscape of turf boundaries which may not engender actions in the best interests of the organization as a whole. As a client once said to co-members of the board and senior leaders of their global organization, "acting from individual intelligence builds collective ignorance… we need to each get out of the trees and see the forest before we decide on action". He also commented, "None of us are playing with a full deck – it will take all of us putting our cards on the table to address these challenges and create the successful, sustainable future we are here to create".

Organizational and human systems are complex entities. While the practice of productive engagement is by no means a silver bullet, this framework is, in this consultant's

experience, the very best chance leaders and groups have to successfully manage complexity and change, and create a more-desirable future.

Productive engagement is a relatively simple algorithm - "simple but not necessarily easy" (Weisbord). When this algorithm is applied to any situation where people have to come together to accomplish something important, conditions are created for them to be engaged in mind, heart and spirit and build the connections and relationships needed to achieve successful results. The methodology was coalesced from several generations of behavioral science research and practice by Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff in their creation of Future Search, a large group conference model created to help diverse stakeholders of a system "discover common ground and their greatest capability for action". As a testament to the power of this methodology, within a decade of the first Future Search conference in the early 1990's, the model had spread around the world helping hundreds of communities, organizations and human networks discover common ground and create a more desired future (read more about Future Search here: www.futuresearch.net). As an organization development consultant working with primarily intact teams/organizations, and after facilitating several Future Search conferences, I began to design and facilitate my work with clients from Future Search principles and values. When I did so the results my clients were able to create were profoundly more successful than any other OD methodology I had employed or seen others employ. It was through this experimentation I realized that Marv and Sandra had not only created an elegant, powerful large-group planning methodology, but had identified a core DNA strand of productive engagement applicable to any dimension of people-related work.

To best understand this framework and the power it offers, it's helpful to appreciate two realities of human engagement: 1) A 'Social Field' is created whenever two or more people interact; and 2) the reality that everything moves.

A 'social field' is the undercurrent dimension (or 'energy') of any group and is generated from a combination of individual values, goals, sense of safety, perceived needs, passions, self-concept, mental models and ways we relate to the outer world – essentially, everything about us we each bring to the table. There are many models to help us understand what influences our social fields. When considering this multitude of lenses it's important to understand that, "the map is not the territory". As Dr. Weisbord says, "everything is everything". Attempting intervention or design of a group process based on these models can be a daunting task, especially the more models one tries to apply. But the complexity of influencing this field doesn't need to complicate or inhibit wise action on the part of leaders or facilitators. One needn't have earned a Ph.D. in behavioral sciences to facilitate productive group work as there are archetypes of human engagement that, if attended to wisely, helps to generate a social field of openness, rationality and productivity. The leader or facilitator's role from this approach has far less to do with applying the right behavioral model to guide a group process and far more to do with creating the right conditions for a group to guide and evolve themselves to higher levels of collaboration and partnership.

The best metaphor I've found to understand a 'social field' in real time is music, specifically concepts of the overtone series, harmony, and sympathetic vibration. When we

hear a note, we identify that note as an "A" or a "G" or a "Bb" – but in reality, this note is actually made up of many more frequencies. We name this note based on what we perceive as a fundamental tone, but there is so much more there. The same is true with people and with groups. It's easy for us to perceive someone or define a group through limited assumptions and judgments (or preferred behavioral model) rather than actual reality. When working with groups, operating from the principle that there is always more going on than anyone will be capable of perceiving brings humility and an overall sense of acceptance of people, ideas and the complexity of situations they are confronting at a given time. In so doing, we are able to create a safe(r) place for people to share ideas and values, and, under the surface, to positively impact the field of that group at that time. In any interaction, it is always helpful to know that everyone is fighting a battle we know nothing about.

Harmony is based on the physics of tension and resolution. Certain notes stack well to make beautiful, pleasing sounds; other combinations create 'discord'. Both qualities of chords are needed to create a good piece of music. In addition, music creates motion through cycles of building tension and then resolving to a new place. (Try singing the song, "Row Row Row Your Boat Gently Down The Stream…" – only don't sing the last note in the verse and see if you can feel the motion, the tension created and the resolution when finally singing that last note). Too much discord is, to most, highly unpleasant. Not enough tension and the music lay still as a tranquil, glass-surfaced pond. While this might serve well for meditation, it doesn't serve well for creating movement. (Studies show that 'new age' music that has no tension actually decreases productivity in the workplace). Understanding social fields as energy in dynamic motion propelled forward through participant's learning, questions, challenges, disagreements and agreements, expressed values, concerns, passions and dreams helps to put singular events into context. This lens also helps us to appreciate the white water a group in a challenging situation will inevitably need to navigate if they are to evolve to a higher level of functioning. Avoid the tension, as unpleasant as 'being in it' might be, avoids opportunity for crucial understanding and alignment to take place (resolutions). Get lost in the tension and things will dissipate greatly as people check out (literally). Managing an effective group process - whether it be planning, shaping agreements or intervening between people or across groups, requires appropriate levels of tension and subsequent resolution(s).

If we place two, tuned guitars facing each other a foot or so apart and sound one string of one instrument, the same string on the other instrument will vibrate and sound the same note – all without touch. This is a demonstration of sympathetic vibration. When people discover the values, interests and dreams they hold in common the same phenomena happens – inspiration and energy is generated between people which can then be easily channeled into collaboration and action. On the flip side, groups have a tendency to become polarized by issues they will never agree on and, in so doing, prevent progress on any number of fronts where everyone's commonly-held aspirations can be realized. In this situation groups will tend to burn 80%+ of their time arguing over the 20% (or less) of matters on which they will never agree (Weisbord/Janoff). As Marv and Sandra describe this obstacle to productive work, "just because a community can't agree on the abortion issue, this shouldn't prevent people from building the neighborhood day care center everyone actually

wants". The tragedy is that, most often, this is the case. The implication for engendering productive engagement here isn't to avoid disagreement – on the contrary, it's critically important for all views to be heard and honored. The difference, contrary to common practice, is to work from the principle that no one has to change their values or their minds in order to collectively make something powerful happen. With an orientation towards hearing and honoring differences and a focus on discovering what everyone wants to see happen/make happen (common ground), aligned action is not only likely, but highly probable. The discovery of common ground is akin to tuning a symphony and allowing sympathetic vibration to play its part in moving people to action.

The reality that 'everything moves' is important to keep in mind when leading group process. Like a stream meandering through the landscape, the group-planning journey is filled with stretches of calm, stretches of rocks and white water, eddies and sometimes, dangerous whirlpools. The goal of the leader or facilitator is to guide this journey so things move towards productive outcomes. This includes helping planners to build clarity where needed, remove and/or avoid obstacles en route and continuously partner with the group to make their own best decisions. Just because a group seems stuck, caught in a difficult impasse or locked in divisive stances, understanding that everything moves helps one manage the journey, stretch by stretch until calmer, readily moving waters can be reached. Every group decision, every point of clarity achieved and collective agreement attained – in both content and process dimensions, builds greater and greater capability on the part of the group.

It's important to note that, to be an effective guide, the facilitator is not the leader – the group must be brought to a place where they own responsibility for managing a productive process. This high level of ownership and self-responsibility on the part of the group significantly reduces resistance, projections and authority issues, keeping everyone's focus on co-navigating the waters to reach their desired destination.

Future Search DNA for Productive Engagement

The following principles, values and methods of Future Search, while originally design for helping large, diverse groups discover common ground and their greatest capability for action, are, in fact, applicable to any conversation. This includes leadership and team planning, new project launches, merger integration planning, cross-boundary planning, team interventions, coaching, conflict resolution and even discussing important matters with a friend, neighbor, significant other or one's own teenager.   As you experiment with employing this algorithm, notice how a productive social field evolves, how, what was feared to be too difficult to express or address becomes far easier through establishing the right context and through improved listening and partnership… and how better solutions manifest through broader consideration of data, feelings and values.

1) A Meaningful Business Case: The topic or planning goal is important to participants.

2) <u>Whole System (representative groups/players) in the Room</u>: with regard to whole-system or cross-boundary planning/change: In context of planning goals, involve people/stakeholder groups with information, knowledge, skills, access to resources, authority, ability to act and a stake in the outcomes; In context of more intimate conversations: in light of objectives, begin with considering a wide array of perceptions from many angles before settling on a working set of assumptions/beliefs.

3) <u>The Flow of Conversation: Past – Present – Future:</u> (Past: the history of the organization, team, topic and people in context of the planning goal/themes at hand; <u>Present</u>: the current state, in all its glorious complexity, including environmental trends and influences on the future; <u>Future</u>: Collectively create images of an ideal future, discover what ideal future everyone would like to see become reality).

4) <u>Establish a Global Context Before Deciding on Local Action</u>: In a Future Search conference, this is accomplished through the use of timelines going back 10-20 years (the business/industry, global events, participants/individuals) and a mind map of the trends influencing the future, created by the whole group. In more intimate settings (intact teams, 1:1 conversations or mediation), these tools can still be employed, and also any data generation, assessment or exploration which contributes to building a big-picture context of the system, issues, people or goal at hand. When people feel part of the same world, that they share the same reality, they are then most often able to move beyond deeply held assumptions and beliefs about others and create conditions for true dialogue to ensue. Also, considering the complexity of matters in today's fast pace, hyper-connected world, systemic solutions can only be created by first establishing this global, big picture view before deciding to act on any of the parts.

5) <u>Self-Management</u> - People are responsible for managing their own (small group/individual) process: In a Future Search conference the facilitator (the preferred title is 'conference manager') is responsible for giving the small groups their task and for setting the parameters of time. It is participant's responsibility to manage their own process and to have their deliverable ready by the time report outs to the whole are due. Should a conflict within a small group predicate a request to intervene, the conference manager's job is to merely remind the group of the task and the time, ask them what they need to do to get back on task and leave it to them to decide what to do – and to act on their own decision. For some facilitators this seems a profound change from the ways they are used to working. (It might also trigger some insecurity about what they feel they are being paid to do). But, should the conference manager intervene (and most have the skills to do so effectively), it would pull responsibility (leadership) back into their own role (not a positive outcome for a myriad of reasons) and rob the group of discovering their capabilities for managing important work together.

In more intimate settings, the expectation of responsible self-management will almost always step up people's levels of ownership and sense of responsibility for their own words, work and actions. This can be established with formal ground rules at the start,

or, in more informal situations, a few simple words or even a 'look'. The general rule is, "expect high performance, and one will get high performance".

6) <u>Participation in Stakeholder and in Mixed Groups</u>: When people participate in 'stakeholder' groups they are able to achieve several important things: 1) they are able to coalesce and present a perspective from that part of the system which is important for others to hear. They are also able to listen to other parts of the system as a unique group versus discreet individuals. This contributes to true system learning, systems thinking on the part of everyone and the building of crucial cross-boundary connectivity; 2) when people are part of a stakeholder group, it is far easier to present difficult information that, for political or emotional reasons would more often be suppressed if participating as an individual.

When people participate in mixed groups, an experience is offered where the whole system is reflected in every group. When these groups present their perspectives to each other it sets the stage to discover what important ideas, values and priorities are shared by all (common ground).

7) <u>Differentiation and Integration:</u> A group cannot integrate until a certain level of differentiation has taken place. (This is why, in whatever team development model one explores, a "Storming" stage is always present somewhat early on in the life of a group. "Storming" is merely a stage defined by differentiation). Differentiation needn't be difficult or a trying experience (though it sometimes is). We all bring different interests, values and needs to the table and until these can be safely expressed (and heard), we will generally not be ready to hear other, different perspectives with minimal judgment or step forward to fully become a member of the group. Integration happens when we discover the interests, needs, values and priorities we all hold in common, and then develop strategies to realize our collective goals.

Differentiation and Integration is at the core of every effective team building and large group planning process and is the fuel that drives concerted action. For this consultant, DNA of Productive Engagement stands for **D**ifferentiation – i**N**tegration – **A**ction.

8) <u>Focus on Discovering Common Ground and a Desired Future (versus problems and conflicts)</u>: There is always a lot going on in any human system. Generally, when we engage in problem solving or place our focus on conflicts, we can easily end up digging ourselves into a hole that's often very difficult to climb back out of. When groups focus on problems and conflicts their energy level goes down and conversations can get mired in the weeds. When we focus on discovering what we all hold in common, and focus on imagining a more-desired future our energy levels increase and conditions are created for meaningful, productive work to take place.

9) <u>Make Public Commitments to Act</u>: Little supports committed action like public commitments to act. When we announce to our colleagues, bosses, reports and cross-

boundary partners that we commit to doing something in a public way we generally form a strong bond to that commitment. Public commitments to act support sustainable action.

For more information, please feel invited to view this slide share, "Successful Execution on Strategy and Change" here: http://www.slideshare.net/shemcohen/successful-execution-strategy-changeshem-cohenchange-events-incjan-2014

For more on Future Search principles and values, please feel invited to read this article, "The Spirit of Our Work" here: http://www.changeevents.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/FutureSearchArticle_Spirit-of-Our-Work_Shem_Cohen.pdf

BIOGRAPHY
Shem Cohen works with leadership teams and organizations to facilitate common ground - shared purpose, vision, strategy, values and to develop greater alignment, partnership and synergy within and across groups.

Clients create high-quality solutions for their most pressing concerns, winning strategy people buy-into and act upon – often with *"unprecedented commitment"*; stronger, better-connected teams, alliances and communities of practice; and execute successfully on strategy and change.

Shem creates this value through deep expertise in human and organizational systems, strategy development and change management – as well as a lifetime of interest and passion working with people at all levels of organizations and walks of life. His work is included in three globally-published books on best-practice planning and collaboration including the recent award-winning 'Productive Workplaces, 25th Anniversary Edition', awarded top shelf business book on culture by *Strategy and Business Review* and 'one of the top influential books in the field of the past 40 years' by the *Organization Development Network.* He has served as guest faculty for New York University Stern School of Business Executive Education and keynote for the Project Management Institute.

Mr. Cohen holds a Master's Degree in Organization Development from American University and his clients include many prestigious organizations including Fortune 500-100 Companies, The United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations and British Government, The Federal Reserve Bank, global consumer goods companies, banks, healthcare organizations, law firms, not-for-profits and many small-to-mid size, independently owned businesses.

CONTACT
Shem can be reached by e-mail at scohen@changeevents.com for additional information about this Ongoing Discussion.

WEBSITE
www.changeevents.com

LINKEDIN
https://www.linkedin.com/in/shemcohen