

INNOVATING THE FUTURE



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Assessing and Leading Whole Systems: why I believe it's smart to be whole system values-driven. By Sherene Zolno

A well-designed whole-system change process guides an organization as it considers and makes changes in multiple aspects of its system concurrently (or nearly so) in order to achieve a critical mass of change. It's not a 'fix' or even a one time, everyone-in-the-room meeting, as some consultants have come to think of whole system change.

Rather, it is the integrated, system-wide, usually long-term, large-scale intervention that is designed to address the challenge of transforming a complex organization, and ensuring that the change is sustained.

The Values of Whole System Change

Whole system consultants bring a special worldview to their work as change agents. A covert goal we seek to achieve in the whole system transformation process is to increase the joy and spirit of people at work, to unleash their creative flow. This stems from our experience of what happens when a diverse mix of people becomes a single-minded, one-hearted

group. We've seen the magical accomplishments of such a group, that with just their shared view of the future, embrace a commitment to one another to the work of achieving that future—and we want to help bring about more of it!

A number of people working in the field of organization development – including

Marvin Weisbord (Future Space), Harrison Owen (Open Space Technology), and David Cooperrider/Diana Whitney (Appreciative Inquiry Summit) – have been touting the positive effects of gathering together all the members of a system to learn, talk and decide together.



Behind this idea of getting all system members in the same room lies an important value – that of getting everyone to connect with one another around common yearnings – helping them to bond together as a whole.

It is at this point that members can act in a unified way, even when separated by gender, ethnicities, distance or point of view. Family systems theory refers to this

as being “joined” yet “differentiated” – having the ability to stay in relationship to the whole, while speaking ones own truth.

We’ve learned that from the speaking of multiple “owned” truths, even when that is hard, organizational wisdom can, and does emerge.

It is truly democracy in action.

When we are at our best, the work we do as whole system change agents comes from a strongly held view that democracy is about what is possible for people to create when working from the ‘whole’. We believe that leaders in our organizations do a much better job when they have a complete picture of what is real, with none of those sticky, unappealing parts (like the “Emperor’s new clothes”) withheld.

For this value to come into fruition in a system, four adjustments need to take place:

First, the rights that people perceive they have must be confirmed. Second, with an appropriate system of rights in place, people need to understand the duties that they are required to perform. Third, there needs to be an appropriate moral order in place that supports rights and duties.

Fourth, senior managers need to ensure that their own actions are congruent with what is expected from their subordinates. When we put these four components in place, we restore democracy in a system.

And we model democracy for the system by being authentic in who we are and transparent in what we do.

Keeping the faith.

As guides to whole system change, we bring our faith in people and their capacity to become an ongoing force for positive change in the world, side-by-side with us. This requires of us that we deeply care about the success of the clients we choose to work amongst.

This care demands that we recognize each client’s responsibility for his or her own individual and organizational change. I make a point of remembering that members of the system are the ones with the ‘right’ answers, not me. In fact, my knowledge is only of value when connected to that of those inside the system – I have one point of view and others can embrace or leave it.

Whole System IQ™ is a calling.

Being involved in whole system change, and seeking to increase our understanding of how it works when it is working at its best, isn’t just a profession, it’s a calling.

The work is hard and long and emotionally moving. I don’t think you can take it on without being fully present – “wholehearted” even, in our commitment. It needs to matter that we are involved in the work of transforming the system as we participate in the process of that system undergoing deep and abiding change.

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Sherene Zolno, the developer of Whole System IQ™, has written numerous articles about the application of whole system assessment and intervention in her fieldwork as an Action Researcher, Organizational Consultant, Educator and Executive Coach. Look for her article, “Getting Smart About Whole System Change” (publication in 2008 Pfeiffer Annuals) for more thoughts on changing complex systems.

