

consulting today

The Values of Whole-System Change

By Kathie Dannemiller

Like most years, this year has been one of triumph and change. Sometimes the triumph is in the survival, but this year's unique triumph came with the publication of two new books written as "one-brain and one heart" by all fifteen partners of our company.

Writing the books gave us at Dannemiller Tyson Associates the opportunity to reflect on our action research journey, combining everything we think we know at this point.

Our work and processes are based on a whole-system view of the world, a view that began for me at the National Training Labs in the 1960s, with Ron Lippitt.

Ron Lippitt was my strongest mentor and teacher. He could go out into a community—Duluth, Chicago, Denver, etc.—and pull together a microcosm of the whole society, a group capable of being a portal (doorway) to the larger community.

Lippitt taught me the power of bringing a small group together who could design conversations for the whole group. Once that microcosm came together, with combined knowledge (one brain) and connected yearnings (one heart) they were able to unleash magic in the large organization. I took that knowledge with me as we began working with Ford Motor Company in the early 1980s.

Like us, other exponents of whole system processes for change—including Marv Weisbord (Future Search), Harrison Owen (Open Space technology), and Dick Axelrod (the Conference Model)—came out of the change processes of the 1960s. So our work is based on similar values.

The values that shape our work and our lives include:

Wisdom is in the people of the organization.

That wisdom is developed through helping participants get to one-brain (all seeing the same data) and one-heart (all connected around common yearnings). When this has come to pass, people will be bonded together as a



"People working with one brain and one heart unleash the magic of the organization..."

"whole," and will be capable of acting separately yet in a unified way. In the 1960s we used to refer to that process as "Think globally, act locally."

There are various kinds of true microcosm groups — design teams, max-mix tables, representative large groups, and more. Our wisdom as consultants is to enable people to work together in new ways to combine and release their own system-wide wisdom.

Each person's truth is truth. Creating a common database of truths is the work of the consultant.

From the complexity of all of those diverse "truths," organizational wisdom will emerge and make sense.

As members of a microcosm move back into the larger organization, they can act as a catalyst to evoke change in the "blood stream" of the whole organization.

This is similar to the process that makes stem cells harvested from my own body capable of transforming my immune system when they are re-planted in my blood stream. The new genome discoveries have finally explained the power of the microcosm to me!

It's about living out of our hearts. We share the wealth with others in faith that those who receive will do the same, thus creating an ongoing, positive force for change in the world.

We must love the clients we choose to work among, and care about their success.

We must also care enough to give the client the responsibility for their own individual and/or organizational change processes. We do our clients no favor when we think we're the ones with the "right" answers.

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Values, continued

Continued from previous page

It's easy to keep from acting as if we know everything because we don't! The outsider's knowledge has value mainly in conjunction with the knowledge of insiders—the real experts on their own world. The biggest clue that I am inappropriately “taking over” is when I get irritated at my client for not doing the “right” things.

We must say to a client, “let's uncover this together.” We are experts on process and adult education; that's all. The client system are the experts on the organization.

We should fight for the process, but be willing to be flexible and creative. If the organization says a particular process (e.g., a presentation or open forum) will be wrong there, we must be willing to say “Okay. How else could we paint the picture of what the organization needs to see?”

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Living from our hearts also tells that if it's not fun, we should give our clients a break and leave.

This work is about a sincere, deep abiding, unwavering view of democracy and empowerment within a system-wide view of reality. The wisdom is in the “whole.” The answers are always the right ones when we help to release and combine the diverse beliefs and voices.

We want “good leaders” in our democratic worlds, and we commit to help them be as good as they can be, by getting them to see the whole picture of reality, inside and outside the organization.

And when I truly believe in those democratic processes, they will show up in all of my work as a consultant. I will be authentic in everything I do, with the client systems as a whole, with other consultants with whom I work, with my partners in my own business, with my students and with my own children and grandchildren. This belief system is not a “part-time” thing.

Three key questions guide our work:

- * What's the purpose of this event? What truly needs to be different in the world because we held this meeting?
 - * Who needs to be in this room (represented in this room) if we are to achieve that purpose?
 - * What conversations need to take place and develop if we are to achieve the purpose?
- ...and thus: Trust that purpose, the right people, the robust processes, and it will work!

Life is an Action Research Project. Everything we do or say becomes data for action learning and insight. The key questions:

- * What did we say we would do differently?
- * What did we actually do differently?
- * What did we learn from that?
- * Where do we need to go from here?

Every checkpoint moves the organization (and the individual) farther ahead on the journey.

It seems that organization development isn't just a profession we are involved with: this is a calling. We are called to make sure it matters that we showed up and are here.

Nothing in our life or language is a throw-away line. Everything I say to my children, my friends, my clients, my partners has an important meaning. I am continually asking myself: what is the purpose of this event? What is the purpose of what I'm about to say or do? Let's make sure it matters. ☞

Kathleen D. Dannemiller is the founding partner in Dannemiller Tyson Associates, and co-inventor of *Real Time Strategic Change* and *Real-Time Work Design* (now called *Whole-Scale*). She is one of the co-authors of the recently released “Whole-Scale Change: Unleashing the Magic in Organizations” and “Whole-Scale Change: The Toolkit,” (Berrett-Koehler 415.288.0260). Kathleen may be reached at kdannemiller@mediaone.net.

