

Organizational Consultation XV

Appreciative Consulting Within the Domain of Intentions

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Social philosophers, historians and organizational consultants are in agreement that it is valuable to conceive of all organizations as systems, just as all biological organisms are considered to be systems. Human organizations resemble biological systems in many different ways. The most important characteristic that biological and human organizational systems hold in common is their intentional foundations. All systems, human or biological, have one or more fundamental reasons for their existence. A random assembly of people (such as those walking down a street) is not considered a system, nor is it considered by anyone to be an organization. At the point, however, when these people stop at a street corner and wait for the change of a light, they are briefly considered a system and an organization. They have a common purpose: waiting for a change in the color of the stoplight. People waiting for the light to change accept and obey a common set of rules regarding the right to cross the street when the light turns green. They accept and obey these rules because they all share the same intention: to crossing the street quickly and safely.

The intentions of an organization are especially important in our contemporary world because organizational boundaries are being shattered or at least obfuscated. This is a serious problem, given that the second major characteristic of all systems is the presence of boundaries. If there are no clear and consistent boundaries to hold an organization together, then members of the organization must look toward clear intentions as the glue that holds the organization together. Intentions have become the lifeblood of contemporary organization. They provide both vitality and direction. A Chinese colleague of ours describes the intentions of his organization as “our alarm clock in the morning; our caffeine in the evening . . . [intentions] touch our heart.” This concern for organizational intentions is likely to become even more central. As we look forward to the next few decades of the 21st Century in which change is not only likely to accelerate but also become even more unpredictable, we can expect successful organizations to hold fundamental intentions that provide continuity and clarity—anchors during these turbulent periods.

An appreciative perspective regarding organizational intentions suggests that the founding structure and dynamics of an organization should remain intact throughout the life of the organization and provide the essential ingredients for any statement of intention. These founding styles or patterns are central to the creation of an appreciative organization. These styles and patterns remain the prevalent means by which an organization brings in new resources and information from the outside world. They also inform the way in which the organization works with these resources and information in order to produce something of value that is subsequently exported to the external world. These intention-based processes define and reside in all organization—and are to be found in all living systems, whether or not they are of human design.

Contemporary organizations of the emerging postmodern era are the inverse of modern organizations with regard to both intentions and boundaries. Modern organizations typically have clear boundaries, but unclear intentions, whereas postmodern organizations usually have unclear or changing boundaries and, therefore, must have clear and consistent intentions if they are to remain vital. While many established modern organizations will survive in the postmodern era because of their substantial resources and reputation, the postmodern organization must be clear about its intentions if it is to survive. An organization that defines a specific product or service as something needed by at least a small segment of society is likely to be successful in our chaotic, postmodern era. Conversely, many modern organizations that lived for many years with unclear or shifting intentions are likely to fail in the volatile world of the 21st Century.

The Intentional Organization

A clear organizational statement of intentions comes in many forms. Some organizations identify a set of guiding principles. The leaders of other organizations focus on mission or on the dreams of the organization's founders. Yet other leaders issue a statement of vision or formulate a statement of values. We propose that all of these ways to identify and articulate the intentions of the organization are valid and invaluable to the organization and its members. We tend to focus in our own consultative work on four aspects of organizational intention: mission, vision, values and purposes. In essence, it seems that the leaders of successful 21st Century organizations must know who they are, what business they are in and where they are headed in the future. These intentional organizations can be much more flexible with regard to boundaries. They can readily establish their own market niches and shift with the changing nature of the market, while preserving a specific identity and purpose.

Postmodern organizations with clear intentions are likely to be much more open than modern day organizations to changes in clientele and to moving across previously restrictive boundaries—whether these boundaries are product lines or international borders. Furthermore, in establishing a clear set of intentions, and in dropping their boundaries, postmodern organizations are likely to be more fully responsive to changing technologies, shifting customer needs, and new sources of revenue. They are more likely than are modern day organizations to draw their customers or clients in, across the organization’s boundary, for discussions about and actual design of new products or services.

A *bottom-line* mentality is typically not appropriate in an appreciative organization—nor does it make much sense in most 21st Century organization. Organizations no longer exist simply to make money for their owners or stockholders. Perhaps they never were solely wealth creating enterprises. This may be one of the most influential and ultimately destructive myths of 20th Century organizations: “Money is everything.” “Show me the cash.” “What’s our bottom line!”

The creation of wealth is an inadequate mission for any organization, especially one with diffuse or highly flexible boundaries. A bottom-line mentality tends to hide or distort the founding or driving purpose of the institution. The bottom line leaves an organization without direction in a rapidly changing world. An organization creates a distinctive statement of intention not by pointing to profitability, but rather by pointing to the direction in which it wishes to go in order to become profitable. Financial viability is essential, especially in a for-profit organization, but it is not a defining purpose. Profit may be essential to the ongoing life of an organization, but it is not the reason for the organization’s existence.

Deficit-Based and Appreciative Perspectives on Intention

Most of the management literature on the setting of organizational goals and objectives is based on a deficit model of organizational life. A deficit strategy is engaged whenever a leader or manager places primary emphasis on establishing new intentions. It is also engaged when someone seeks to inculcate a set of intentions that are not inherently displayed or intimately interwoven with the fundamental culture of the organization. Much of the literature on effective management encourages a manager to “make his mark” on the organization; to firmly establish his own priorities; to convince those who report to him and even those he reports to that his vision for the organization is “the right way to go.” We are taught to be persuasive communicators and internal marketers who influence the identified needs of not only our external customers but also our “internal customers.”

A deficit strategy with regard to organizational intentions is inherently destructive and demoralizing. It begins with the assumption that the current intentions of the organization are somehow inappropriate or invalid, and that the existing culture somehow lacks inherent wisdom. Many management gurus and organizational consultants assume that something new is better than something old and that fresh knowledge and new perspective somehow are better than the traditional wisdom which is deeply embedded in the organization. This deficit model may have worked during the modern era of mechanistic organizations; however, it is inappropriate in a complex and changing 21st Century world of dynamic organizations that are replete with knowledge workers and flexible boundaries.

An appreciative consultant honors the existing patterns and values of the organization, while also encouraging her clients to remain open to newly emerging realities, shifting employee concerns and volatile customer needs. This appreciative strategy needs to be founded on a thoughtful analysis of the organization's intentions. This analysis must be both historical and contemporary, identifying old as well as new ways in which the mission, vision, values and purposes of the organization are being expressed and engaged. This analysis must also look forward in time. It must anticipate needs and aspirations that are not yet fully realized in the organization. To be truly appreciative in nature, the analysis must focus on the clarification and expansion of organizational intentions, rather than being founded in a deficit-oriented attempt to only inculcate new intentions.

The Nature of Organizational Intentions

One can influence the intentions held by individuals and organizations in one of three ways: inculcation, clarification, and expansion. Inculcation occurs when we impose our intentions on other people through persuasion, intimidation, or physical force. By contrast, clarification is a process whereby the intentions already held by an individual or organization become more fully and consistently articulated. The third mode of influence, expansion, occurs when an individual or members of an organization are encouraged to think about their intentions in domains of their individual or collective life that had previously not been explored. While inculcation is based in a deficit-based perspective on individual and organizational intentions, both the processes of intentional clarification and intentional expansion are decidedly appreciative in nature.

Inculcation

Intentions can be changed. One can inculcate intentions and shift the intentions that are held by members of an organization. Significant change in intentions is hard to induce, but it can happen with sufficient time, resources, power and control. We have only to witness the unethical, but effective, brainwashing techniques of concentration camps, cults and terrorist organizations. This form of inculcation requires absolute control of the inductee's environment and a mixture of deprivation and reward. Others who seek to inculcate intentions suggest that some people can be changed through the long-term application of force. If someone is forced to state that they believe something enough times, and in many different settings, then eventually they may grow to believe that it is true. This technique is often described as *cognitive dissonance reduction*. Fortunately, very contemporary leaders (outside of despotic governments) ever become so desperate or discouraged that they resort to either of these inculcation strategies.

Clarification

Unlike inculcation strategies, which focus on change in intentions, clarification strategies focus on the formation of intentions and on ways in which intentions come into being. Clarification rarely focuses, as does inculcation, on the nature of the specific intention being held. Since the growth and development of intentions is certainly not a process that stops with late adolescence, the methodology of intentions clarification can be of great benefit to the members of any organization.

Leaders, in particular, benefit from the clarification of their personal intentions, as well as the intentions of their organization. As leaders become clearer about their own intentions and become familiar with the process of intentions-clarification, they often begin to introduce this ingredient into their own management, planning and supervision. Typically, intentions must be individually clarified—suggesting that consulting and coaching often should be interwoven when addressing the challenge of values clarification.

Expansion

We can influence the intentions held by organizational clients through a mode other than either inculcation or clarification. We can help clients expand their intentional horizons. This mode of influencing intentions is employed less frequently used than is either inculcation or clarification—but only because it usually involves an

intensity and uniqueness of experience that few people can afford either financially or psychologically. Many of the highly adventurous experiences that are now being offered—for example, rafting a wild river, climbing cliffs, herding cattle or skydiving—involve intentions expansion. Participants in these adventures identify new intentions that often involve self-reliance, confrontation with fear, or the need to absolutely trust another person. Typically, these intentional areas previously have been outside the realm of experience for these participants.

Intention expansion might be among the most important and long-lasting forms of organizational change, though we are only now beginning to recognize its value. Corporate executives, ministers, teachers and social workers are taken on rafting trips, during which they listen to and participate in readings from literature, from tribal lore or from their own journals. They explore new dimensions of their identity, and, as a result, forge new intentions, as well as clarify existing ones. The new intentions are highly beneficial in preparing a young man or woman for new career challenges and for the frustrations and ambiguities of organizational leadership.

Engaged Intentions

Our personal intentions are the highest priorities in our lives: parenthood, financial security, adventure, affection, spiritual formation. Our organizational intentions are similarly of highest importance—our ultimate concerns from an organizational perspective. Over time, these intentions provide the underlying structure and meaning of our individual life, and our collective organizational life. We often use terms like *obligations*, *values* and even *mission* in a cavalier manner. We aren't really serious about the commitments inherent in a statement of personal or organizational intentions. We use these statements for public relations purposes. We use them to win over a customer, negotiate a new deal or fashion a major merger. An appreciative organization, by contrast, takes its commitments seriously. It honors the process of thoughtful engagement in the identification of fundamental commitments regarding mission, vision, values and purposes.

Building on the work of many behavioral scientists and educators who have focused on the nature of personal and organizational intentions, we specifically propose that an appreciative organization consistently engages intentions that are characterized by seven features:

1. **Chosen freely.** If something is to guide the life of an organization, then it must be a result of free choice. If there is coercion, the result is not likely to endure. Intentions must be freely selected if they are to be embraced by an individual or organization.

2. **Chosen from among alternatives.** Intentions are concerned with choices made by an individual or organization; obviously, there can be no choice if there are no alternatives from which to choose. We say that we have identified an intention only when a choice is possible.

3. **Chosen after consideration of the consequences of each alternative.** Impulsive or thoughtless choices do not lead to enduring personal or organizational intentions. Only when the consequences of each alternative are clearly understood can one make intelligent choices.

4. **Prized and cherished.** When we appreciate something, it has a positive tone. We prize it, cherish it, esteem it, respect it, and hold it dear. We are joyful about and proud of our intentions.

5. **Affirmed.** When we have chosen something freely, after consideration of the alternatives, and when we are proud of our choice, glad to be associated with it, we are likely to affirm that choice when asked about it. We are willing to publicly affirm our intentions. We may even be willing to champion them.

6. **Acted upon.** Where we have a clearly formulated intention, it shows up in aspects of our living, both individually and collectively. For an intention to be present, life in an organization must be affected. Nothing can be an intention that does not, in practice, give direction to actual organizational behavior. Intentions are always something more than rhetoric.

7. **Repeated.** Where something reaches the stage of a formal intention, it is very likely to reappear on a number of occasions in the life of the person or organization holding it. It shows up in several different situations, at several different times. Intentions tend to have a persistency. They tend to make a pattern and repeatedly tend to attract attention, energy and commitment.

In summary, choosing, prizing and acting characterize an intention that is fully engaged. An intention that is fully engaged has been freely chosen from among alternatives after thoughtful consideration; an intention is prized and affirmed; an intention is repeatedly acted on.