

## **Reflection in whole system change**

Originally written by Santhosh Babu and published in the book "Organisation Development: Accelerating Learning & Transformation, Edited by S Ramnarayan (Indian School of Business) & T V Rao (Chairman, T V Rao Learning Systems)

This paper is about my experiences with organization transformation process with emphasis on Whole System Change. What is meant by whole system change? It is a process that engages people from all aspects of a system – organization or community to enable emergence of what is most important, individually and collectively and increase the likelihood for achieving it by growing people's capacity to care for themselves, others and the whole system. The definition implies that the intervention -

- Touches all aspects of a system.
- Focuses on emergence of what is most important individually and collectively.
- Emphasizes developing people's capacity to care for oneself, others and whole system.

THE ELEMENTS OF WHOLE SYSTEM CHANGE PROCESS ARE:

- 1). Transforming Leadership team and creating alignment
- 2). One to one Coaching with Leaders
- 3). Large Group Intervention
- 4). Follow up of the Initiatives and supporting



FIGURE X.1: ELEMENTS OF WHOLE SYSTEM CHANGE PROCESS

**Leadership Intervention.** Leadership in this context is the ability to create a new possibility that would not have happened as a natural extension of the past. member, Edison did not create the electric lamp by improving the candle, he created a new possibility. The Leadership approach is based on the premise that future is not a logical extension of the past.

Do we need a Leadership Intervention? Unless the leadership team is committed and willing to drive a transformation initiative, creating and sustaining change becomes difficult. Thus, transformation initiative begins with the Leadership Team.

**Our approach with Leadership Intervention:** Once we engage with the client, we start our deep structure interviews with key stakeholders and members from all parts of the organization. This process helps us tap people’s aspirations, concerns, thought process and beliefs about the current situation. Then, we move to our next phase which is a three day intense workshop with the leadership team. The workshop focuses on achieving the following objectives:

- Identifying the core strengths, the positive DNA or the life giving force of the Organization
- Creating a powerful “Positive Future”

- Creating First steps to move towards the Aspiration

We believe that the leaders need to walk the talk and manifest a powerful future into the present and act “as if” the change has occurred. During the course of session, the leaders also gain insight that this is not just an organization transformation journey but also their leadership and personal transformation journey. The journey is similar to how Joseph Campbell describes the journey of “the Hero Myth”.

Campbell said that the story always began with an Every man just living his humdrum life. Suddenly and unexpectedly, either by chance or by choice, he is either pulled out of his ordinary life or chooses to leave his ordinary life to launch into a great adventure, whose ending he cannot know at the beginning. The adventure, according to Campbell, then goes through several specified stages.

Striving for his goal, the hero is challenged to his limit, reaching a peak culminating experience, that Campbell calls a “supreme ordeal”. The result is that the hero “gains his reward” and is forever changed by the experience, and the transformation is complete. We relate this to our breakthrough model of leadership where a leader might not know the challenges he needs to face to reach his goals.

It is important to mention here that the leadership offsite focuses on the following points.

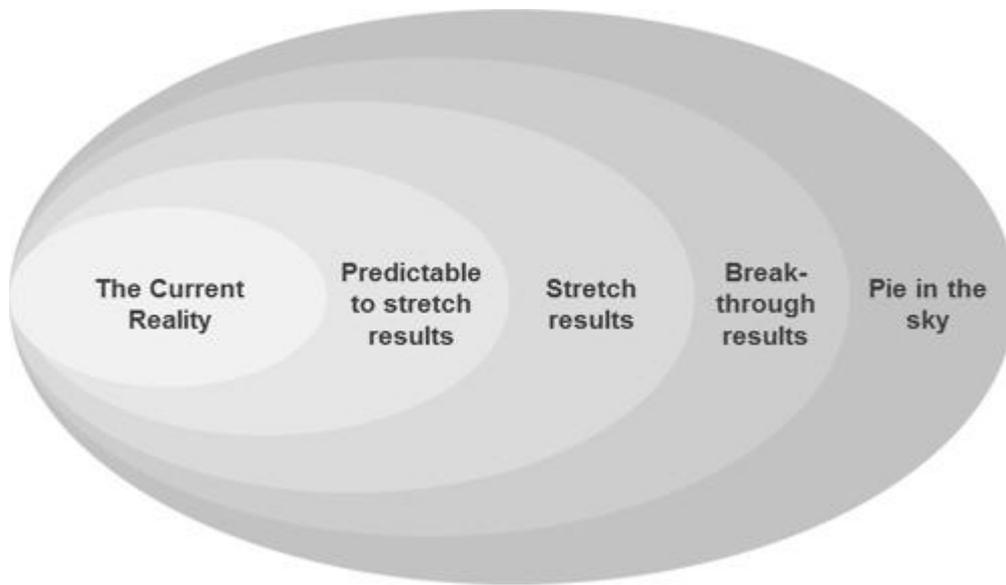
Leadership is about making a difference versus merely being successful.

Leadership arises in taking a stand that a difference can be made, not studying characteristics and traits.

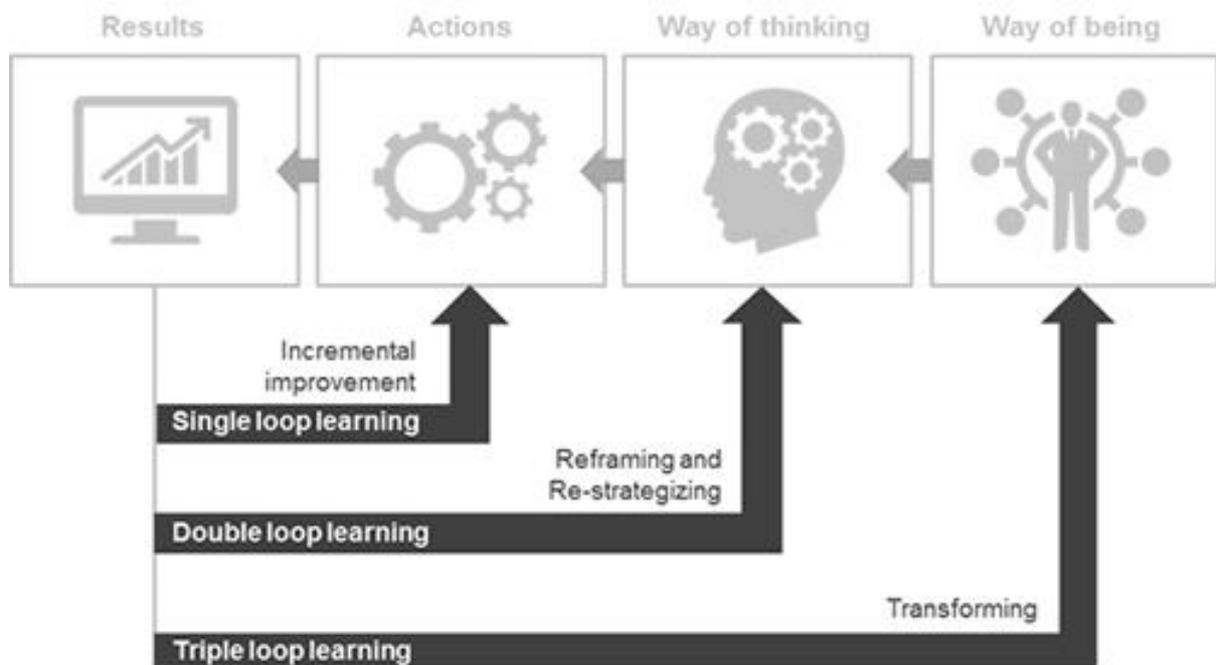
Leadership is about creating what never existed before, versus managing what already exists

All you have as a leader is “who you are being” in any given moment.

We also look at what would be a breakthrough for the organization and for individual leaders. A breakthrough is something that you will not get as a natural extension of the past or by merely stretching yourself. Therefore there is a current reality, a stretch possibility and a breakthrough. Beyond breakthrough, there could be something that we call a pie in the sky i.e., impossibility. Organization Transformation requires complete commitment, and ownership at the leadership level.



**Coaching:** In the context of Whole System Transformation, our coaching focuses on triple loop learning among the leaders rather than merely trying to create behavioral changes. Let me explain three types of learning.



## FIGURE X.2: THREE TYPES OF LEARNING

### **Single-Loop Learning (Incremental Learning)**

Single-loop learning refers to learning new skills and capabilities through incremental improvement, doing something better without examining or challenging underlying beliefs and assumptions.

### **Double-Loop Learning (Reframing)**

Double-loop learning occurs by fundamentally reshaping the underlying patterns of our thinking and behavior as a result we're capable of doing different things. This goes beyond single-loop or incremental learning.

### **Triple-Loop Learning (Transformational Learning)**

Triple-loop learning involves transforming who we are by creating a shift in our context or point of view about ourselves. It involves "learning how to learn" by reflecting on how we learn in the first place. This is about learning how our "being" influences our beliefs and thus our actions

What is Large Group Interventions? What are its key characteristics?

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Jannoff exposed me to Large Group Interventions. The origins of Large Group Intervention (LGI) can be traced back to 1960 when the British government had merged Armstrong-Siddeley, a piston engine company, with Bristol Aero Engines, a pioneer of jet engines, to create Bristol Siddeley. The new company was competing with Rolls-Royce to be market leader in jets. Bristol Siddeley's problem was the lack of common plans and strategies and they wanted to create a unified strategy, mission, leadership and values. Eric Trist and Fred Emery were brought in as consultants and on their work with Wilfred Bion, they developed the first Search Conference as a way of "unlocking the internal forces of the group". The group spent five and a half days together, involved 11 stakeholders and the event became known as the Barford Conference, and inspired the development of Future Search.

The term Large Group Interventions (LGIs) covers a wide range of methods, from the very structured (Future Search, Conference Model, Search Conference) to those that are almost open (Open Space) and everything in between (such as Real Time Strategic Change, World Café, Participative Design). All the Large Group Intervention Methodologies believe in the System Thinking principles.

- An organization is a complex puzzle.
- No single person or group understands the entire puzzle but everyone holds a piece of the puzzle that is important to the overall picture.
- When viewed collectively, the pieces provide a more holistic understanding of the system and its potential for change.
- To understand the entire puzzle, all piece holders (larger groups) must meet and work together.
- If everyone is working on the system together to implement the change, it will happen more quickly and effectively.

My training as an ecologist helped me to look at organizations as complex living systems and I knew that unless I got the whole system in one room, organization transformation would be difficult.

While there are many methodologies under the umbrella of LGI, the commonality is that they are essentially collaborative inquiries into what is important in the organization life cycle. All LGI methodologies advocate inclusiveness and widespread participation in the change process. These methodologies have been used in areas like organization development, organization redesign, restructuring, strategic planning, visioning, values and principles clarification, process improvement, customer/supplier relations, mergers and acquisitions and leadership development.

These approaches have several defining characteristics. They are best used when:

- Time is of the essence
- The issue is complex
- The purpose of the intervention is clear
- There is committed and involved leadership
- Benefits can be reaped from stakeholder involvement and ownership
- A design team that is representative of the whole is engaged to develop the content and process pieces of the intervention as well as its follow-up, support, and communications plan

Although large group methods possess a common set of fundamental beliefs and values, they vary in terms of structure, facilitator's role, purpose of session, optimal number of participants, length of intervention, number of sessions, etc.

#### WHY DO WE USE AN LGI FORMAT?

Traditional, top-down change models have two major drawbacks: they create resistance, and they require a great deal of time to implement. LGIs avoid these two pitfalls. Unlike the traditional approaches, LGIs engage the whole system at a single point in time. Because they are based on collaboration, shared information, and system integration, LGI models encourage the simultaneous participation of many individuals across the organization, and thus help to reduce resistance, inspire motivation, and build strategy ownership across the entire system. The most important aspect of LGIs is that, diverse stakeholders coming together create whole system change faster.

#### EASY TO EXPLORE THE COMPLEXITY AND TOTALITY

Organizations and communities are complex living systems where every component of the system is inter-linked and connected. By bringing all parts into one room, we explore the complexity of the system. This also helps each part of the system to understand and empathize with another part. Whole systems perspective involves understanding how all factors (people, processes, sub-systems, and technology) within the system relate to each other and to the whole.

#### PREPARATION FOR THE LGI

A small group of 4-5 people gets formed in the leadership workshop and they are involved in the design of the event. This is done as a two and half day event where we begin at noon on the first day and end at noon on the third day. Most of the leaders want to have control of what is happening and control of the outcome and hence it becomes imperative that we orient them and explain the principles of the LGI, especially concepts such as:

- Truth is subjective. Even if my 'truth' differs from your 'truth', it does not mean that one of us is lying. We can learn from each other's vision and perspective through dialogue. Differences can be enriching and enlightening.
- Learning from each other, developing a common knowledge system, is fruitful in itself and has an energizing effect.
- Facilitator's role is to manage the space and time and there is minimal intervention thus maximizing participation and self-management.

Below are some of the cases where we have used this model of leadership intervention and LGI to create organizational change and transformation.

#### CASE 1: AIRTEL MAHARASTRA AND GOA CIRCLE 2004

Christopher Tobit was appointed as the COO of Maharashtra and Goa circle of Airtel in 2004 and Airtel was the third largest operator in terms of revenue at that time. A strong believer of OD and people empowerment, Christopher started a Whole System Transformation initiative that touched every employee of that circle. We started with the leadership offsite followed by a one and half day offsite involving different hierarchy and functions. We did a total of eight workshops to cover the entire organization.

Christopher was present in all the workshops and demonstrated how committed he was to creating a new possibility. In one year Airtel moved up and become the number 2 operator in the region.

According to Christopher who is now the CEO of the Airtel joint venture in Bangladesh, “The biggest challenge to achieve revenue market leadership in M&G, was getting the organization to believe in its individual and collective ability to do so. The team lacked self-belief and was finding it difficult to face the enormity of the challenge. In the first year we focused on network and distribution, and on people and strategy. Processes were re-written and re-engineered. In terms of revenue market share we started recording big gains towards the end of Year 1, as we expanded the network and the sales team developed confidence after early successes. New town launches were templated and we became execution machinery. Every success brought new levels of confidence.

My biggest learning is that any team of average members can produce extraordinary results. What is required is leadership, vision, strategy, execution ability and most importantly – self-belief.”

#### CASE 2: AIRTEL NESAS

Airtel NESAS, (North East States and Assam) in spite of being the youngest circle has evolved as one of the best performing circle with strong market leadership. NESAS's biggest challenge was talent availability.

During the course of leadership intervention which was planned as a two and half day offsite in Kaziranga, in 2009, the leaders committed to a new possibility that was more than what they had just agreed in their Annual Operating Plan. Here we created a distinction between aspiration and goal and the aspirations of all the

Executive Committee (EC) members were more than the goal that they had agreed for that year. The workshop was only for the EC members.

After the offsite, the fourteen member team went through one to one coaching over the phone for the next three months. The coaching sessions helped them to tap their potential, increase awareness and create focus.

This was followed by two large group events each having around 80 people. The participants were all from mixed hierarchy and function. Each table had eight people and we tried to make each table a microcosm of the whole system. The focus was to find out what is most important individually and collectively and how we develop capabilities to improve and nurture the system.

Typically our LGI starts after the lunch on the first day. The first half day was spent doing three things:

- Sharing the concepts and assumptions such as:
  - 1). What we focus tends to get expanded, so it is important to know where to focus.
  - 2). Without listening to other parts, we cannot understand the system fully
  - 3). Listening to each other and co-creating is the task here.
- Exploring the strength of the individuals and the system, what aspects give life and what is the core positivity. This is done with minimal interference from the facilitator creating
- principles of self-management in small groups.
- Synthesizing key themes emerged and were presented to the larger group with agreement
- on a collective understanding of the key strengths and potential.

The next day we talked about the breakthrough leadership concepts focusing on the importance of having a vision that is not an extension of the past, the ability to enroll others to this vision and walking the talk and role modeling.

After this concept sharing session, participants got into mixed groups and explored what would be a power dream, vision for Airtel NESA. This dreaming was done for the next five years. Once we had a five year dream, we asked participants what they need to be doing this year to reach their dream. Most of

the time participants express their dreams in the form of skits, poems, posters, etc., and this helps to tap their creative wisdom.

After the one year goal, we divided participants in their respective functions to create aspirations for their specific functions and initiatives that could lead them to the aspirations. By the evening each function presented their aspirations and initiatives they would be undertaking to reach their breakthrough aspiration.

On the third day, we started with sharing the integral model of an organization and discussed the subjective and objective changes (outlined in figure x.3) that we need to create in the subjective and objective parts of the organization at an individual and system level. The session ended at lunch time with some of the functional leaders and participants making declarations about what possibility they would create at Airtel NESAs.

		Subjective	Objective
Whole system	Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual beliefs</li> <li>• Perceptions</li> <li>• Feelings</li> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual measurable behavior</li> <li>• Competencies, skills, achievement motivation</li> </ul>
	Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Norms</li> <li>• Stories</li> <li>• Shared beliefs and assumptions</li> <li>• Organization values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy</li> <li>• Systems</li> <li>• Processes-people and technical</li> </ul>

FIGURE X.3: SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE CHANGES IN THE WHOLE SYSTEM

Looking back Airtel NESAs has created some major breakthroughs in the last two years.

- Highest incremental RMS

- One of the highest Customer Sat Score
- Best in class employee SAT score
- Only Circle to deliver revenue and profitability beyond Annual Operating Plan
- Consecutive 2 years of CSR champion award

### CASE 3: NILAMBUR PANCHAYAT IN KERALA

Even though dowry is illegal by law, it is an integral part of the religious and cultural customs in Nilambur Panchayat in Kerala. Dowry plays havoc with the economy of these households and families often need to sell their houses to give dowry. There are around 15 dowry marriages conducted in a week in small income families. The minimum dowry tends to be around Rs1 Lakh and 20 sovereigns of gold which is equivalent to Rs 3 lakh. The families raise this money by mortgaging their houses in the banks or going to private money lenders. At an average rate of 15 marriages in a week, Rs 45 lakh is the debt amount overflowing in the society. In a year it adds up to a whopping Rs 24 Crores.

This is the story of a single Village panchayat. Mr. Arcadian Shoukath, the Panchayat president narrated this story to me. He is also a progressive leader and a filmmaker. We first met the leaders in the Panchayat and explained our methodology and approach. After working with key leaders in November 2008, we did a large group intervention in January 2009. The gathering had all the diverse stakeholders of an ideal community. This was done over two and half days and the group had students, teachers, senior citizens, housewives, full time members of political parties and religious leaders. On top of a small hillock, under a temporarily built shack, one hundred people spent two and half days telling stories, sharing dreams and planning the future of the Panchayat. We used Appreciative Inquiry as a tool here.

The tool, appreciative inquiry, turns the problem-solving approach on its head. It focuses on a community's achievements rather than its problems, and seeks to go beyond participation to foster inspiration at the grass-roots level. Appreciative inquiry is a strategy for purposeful change that identifies the best of "what is" to pursue dreams and possibilities of "what could be". It is a co-operative search for the strengths; passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system—those factors that hold the potential for inspired, positive change.

So through the stages of Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver, the microcosm of this Panchayat plunged into this ambitious goal of making it a dowry-free place. Today they have a website <http://www.dowryfreemarriage.com>. The dowry marriages have decreased dramatically.

## CASE 4: BAUSCH AND LOMB

The members of the Bausch & Lomb senior Leadership team went through a leadership intervention as a kick off for their transformation process. Participants decided to create a new possibility that was not merely an extension of the past and beyond what they had planned in their Annual Operating Plan. The leadership team also decided to involve the whole system in the annual planning meeting and do hold the meeting as a LGI.

The entire sales organization and other key stakeholders, around 120 people gathered in Goa in early 2010 to involve everyone in the annual goal setting process. The group explored what gave life and energy to the system and the peak experiences that they had in the past within the system. They created a powerful dream for the organization and to achieve their dream, that they were willing to stretch and go beyond what was expected as an annual target for the year 2010. Instead of a top down target setting process, the leaders were able to involve the whole system intelligence and ownership in the target setting process.

## CASE 6: KOKOLA COPPER MINES

Post the acquisition of Kokola Copper Mines in Zambia, by Vedanta, the organization in the last few years experienced multiple changes in the ownership pattern along with the associated cultural attributes. The organization truly has had a long transformation journey. During the transition process, post acquisition, there were issues around people resistance to change largely due to lack of professional practices, ownership, commitment and suspicion. There were internal politics at play and the transformation journey was taking more time than expected. The new management wanted to pursue four key initiatives:

- Improve output
- Reduce costs
- Step up operation, and
- Pursue future growth

Keeping in view the need to change, align and grow, People Transformation was one of the major issues to be addressed in the transformation journey.

The leadership team created a powerful and a compelling future that they wanted to share with the entire organization. Large group interventions designed for 200 people included the operators and workers who never in their lives had sat around a table and discussed the future of the organization. These interventions helped

each participant to quickly understand the whole picture, appreciate each other and create compelling and meaningful goals. CP Baid says, “I have found the leadership and large group interventions directly linked to Business and highly effective in aligning everyone to a ‘Business Goal’. They really added value in creating escape velocity among employees for the change in Zambia.”