

Introduction to the Special Issue on Large Group Interventions

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Twelve years ago, as practitioners were just beginning to work with and create new methods for gathering whole systems in one place to plan and make decisions, we edited a special issue of this journal to present the range of practice that was emerging (Bunker & Alban, 1992). Before 1992, individual practitioners were engaged in a variety of innovative practices, but there was no sense that a whole area of practice was developing. After the special issue, many new developments occurred that created and established large group methods as a new way to create organizational change at the systems level (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Bunker, Alban, & Lewicki, 2004).

Now, 12 years later, we have entered a new stage. We agreed to edit this special issue in the hope that both we and our readers would learn more about the state of this practice as it moves from being new and innovative to being established and a part of the methods of many practitioners. We issued a Call for Papers, not knowing whether the response would allow us to create a worthwhile special issue. We are more than gratified by the response. Fifty people volunteered to write articles, and almost 30 delivered them. They all were of great interest and of high quality. We had a difficult time selecting the 10 we include here from the many interesting ones submitted. The more the manuscripts poured in, the more excited we became about what is happening

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in the field. The articles we selected represent the range of best current practice and research in large group methods. They demonstrate how these methods are being used in business, health care, education, government, and in community settings at both the local and national level in countries around the world. We hope that reading this issue will be as exciting for you as it has been for us.

Our purpose in this introduction is to provide a brief guide to the articles we have chosen to include and their contribution to the practice of large group methods in 2005.

METHOD INNOVATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The first three articles present innovations in large group methodology that have occurred in the last few years. The fourth article describes how methods are being combined, which is occurring widely and deserves thoughtful reflection. The fifth article, by the originators of Future Search, describes a major innovation in their own method in response to client need. A major shift in practice is occurring as practitioners are experimenting with both combining and modifying the original methods. In addition, articles about the use of the World Café and Appreciative Inquiry appear later in this issue. Both of these methods have developed since our overview of the methods was written (Bunker & Alban, 1997).

Large Group Scenario Planning: Scenario Planning With the Whole System in the Room

Gilbert Steil Jr. and Michele Gibbons-Carr, independent practitioners, report the use of their adaptation of traditional scenario planning to working with the whole system. In large group scenario planning, a critical mass of an organization or a community can use scenarios of the future environment to move beyond the natural tendency to think of the future as an extrapolation of the past or as the projection of present trends. The authors bring the methodology to life by presenting a description of how this method was used with the Boston University Goldman School of Dental Medicine.

Transorganization Development for Network Building

Nicholas Clarke, on the faculty of the School of Management at the University of Southampton in Great Britain, reports the use of transorganization development (TOD), a four-stage model for improving collaboration among organizations that need to work together. He has studied the second stage of TOD, which is a modified Search Conference, by using social network analysis (SNA). This article provides thoughtful insights into the effectiveness of this intervention with a group of government and voluntary mental health service providers and funders. By integrating SNA with planned organizational change, he found that the most important outcomes of the intervention were its predominantly political effects.

***Taking Democracy to Scale:
Large Scale Interventions—For Citizens***

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer and Steven Brigham are engaged in an exciting enterprise to bring participative democracy back on to the American scene. Their organization, *AmericaSpeaks*, uses large-scale 21st-century town meetings to engage citizens in discussions of important national and regional issues. They have created the technology to gather data from meetings of 1,000 to 5,000 and a process for delivering the outcomes to decision makers. Their article describes their method and how it has been used in interestingly diverse situations.

***Combining Open Space and Future Search
to Address Special Situations***

Richard M. Lent, Marie T. McCormick, and Donna S. Pearce address the issue: How in a large organization or community do you give more people voice in decisions that affect their future? They describe how combining Future Search and Open Space in politically charged environments allows for a large number of people to have an opportunity to discuss the issues that matter to them and to learn what is on other people's minds. The authors present two cases of religious communities, a Unitarian Church and a consortium of seven synagogues, in which the sequencing of the large group events has important effects. A third case discusses the risks of using Future Search by itself in highly charged political environments. Conclusions are drawn about when to consider combining methods.

Faster, Shorter, Cheaper May Be Simple: It's Never Easy

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, creators of Future Search, describe their wonderful adventure with IKEA, the global furniture retailer, using "Future Search" (with many modifications) to create a new system for product design, manufacture, and distribution in one 18-hour meeting. Their honest description of how the relationship with the client developed and affected what they could and could not do will allow readers to get inside the contracting and consulting practice that accompanies all large group contracts. The authors ask and answer the question, Was this bold planning venture idiosyncratic to IKEA or repeatable everywhere?

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF LARGE GROUP INTERVENTIONS

In the 1992 special edition of this journal, there was, as far as we knew, little diffusion of large group methods across the globe. Since then, there has been a growing acceptance, worldwide, of these methods.

We selected three articles, out of the many that we received, that reflect the use of these methods in different cultures raising some very interesting questions:

- How does one adapt, and be sensitive, to local cultural norms and values?
- Are some methods better suited to some global cultures than others?
- What are the possible pitfalls of making changes in the design to better accommodate different clients and cultures?

***The World Café in Singapore:
Creating a Learning Culture Through Dialogue***

Several years ago, when the editors were in Singapore, we presented a workshop on large group interventions. During the course of the workshop, we became increasingly aware that these highly participative methods such as Future Search, Real-Time Strategic Change, and the Conference Model were probably not congruent with the hierarchical nature of Singapore organizations. The article by Samantha Tan and Juanita Brown about the World Café demonstrates a new method that is more congruent with Singapore culture. It duplicates a coffee house environment and encourages people to explore a selected theme or topic through a series of conversations. The name now given to this method in Singapore is *Kopitiam*. Kopitiams are the traditional Singaporean local coffee houses. Widely used in the West, this method seems particularly appropriate to the Singapore situation. It is interesting to find a participative method that also works in more authoritarian cultures.

***Appreciative Inquiry in Building a Transcultural Strategic Alliance:
The Case of a Biotech Alliance Between a U.S. Multinational
and an Indian Family Business***

The research on the success rate of joint ventures is dismal. Monty G. Miller, Stephen P. Fitzgerald, Kenneth L. Murrell, Joanne Preston, and Rajendra Ambekar tackle an even more difficult task, a strategic alliance between a large multinational U.S. corporation and an Indian family business. How do you develop understanding, trust, and collaboration in a cross-cultural alliance with very different organizational cultures?

Two different types of interventions were used to build relationships across the alliance. One of the interventions was a traditional management education approach; the second intervention used a modified version of Appreciative Inquiry. The article makes explicit the important differences between the two cultures and the rationale for the modifications of Appreciative Inquiry.

***The Dangers of Success: Diffusion and Transition
of Large Group Interventions in German-Speaking Countries***

Susanne Maria Weber from Germany has done an excellent job in researching first the diffusion of large group interventions (LGIs) in German-speaking countries and then what happens to these interventions over time. In the first part of her article, she traces how in a fairly short period of time, with very little translated into German, Open Space and Future Search, the first of these methods, spread through German-speaking countries. She uses the framework of Everett Rogers (1962/1995) on the diffusion of

innovation, describing how innovations spread, and the role that early adopters play. Her second research project was to track LGIs during a period of several years. This time she focused on how many of the large group meetings were what she calls “mix match” and how many followed the original structure of Future Search, the Conference Model, or Open Space. Although it is exciting to see in her statistics the ready adoption of these methods, she raises some serious questions about the risks of rapid diffusion. Her research shows the tendency of adopters to modify the methods and to shorten the time frames, even to a half day! While she points out the advantages of adapting these methods to better serve client needs, she also warns about the dangers implicit in shortening the time frames.

EVOKING HEAD AND HEART

Two articles examine approaches that engage the whole person. They evoke a level of experience that is more than mere intellectual understanding or assent. Although we know that deeper commitments involve more than knowledge that change is needed, we do not know a great deal about how to engage the whole person. These articles are provocative and cutting edge about this largely unexplored issue. One of the articles looks at large group interventions as a performing art, the other uses graphic facilitation to capture story, voice, and meaning through visual representations. Theater and graphic arts are not new to large group methods. For example, Future Search and the Conference Model use evocative skits and role plays to help envision the future or address an issue. Many consultants are currently using graphic facilitation in their meetings. These two articles demonstrate the power of evocative methods to break down barriers and motivate change.

Large Group Interventions: Change as Theater

This stimulating article by Philip H. Mirvis, an independent consultant, looks at Large Group Interventions through the lens of a theatrical production. Using a 5-year case of the corporate transformation of a Dutch company, he describes how a performance-oriented approach was used to “direct” rather than “manage” change. Each phase of the change, from current reality to the desired future state, was orchestrated as an experience that would tap both mind and heart. A series of questions for practitioners aims to stimulate thinking about their own use of dramaturgy. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the implications of change as theater for theory and practice.

Graphic Facilitation and Large-Scale Interventions: Supporting Dialogue Between Cultures at a Global, Multicultural, Interfaith Event

Carlotta Tyler, Lynne Valek, and Regina Rowland, graphic facilitators, describe the use of the graphic arts in a multicultural, multifaith event during the 2004 Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona, Spain. They show how effective some of the methods

were in giving voice to the voiceless, capturing stories of oppression and hope in pictorial representations, and how engaged people became when they saw their words and stories reflected in pictures that acknowledged their culture. The article has important implications for cross-cultural meetings around the world. The authors propose several different ways that graphics can be used in large group meetings.

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