

Conversational Inquiry as an Approach to Organization Development

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Organizational Continuity and Change

We are in the midst of a sea change in our understanding of how organizational continuity and change arise. We have concentrated on trying to design and implement future states, explaining, in hindsight, what actually comes about as the successful realization of our prior intentions. However as the complex interdependencies of our world become increasingly apparent, the illusory nature of our traditional understanding of control—of being able to trace simple chains of cause and effect, of re-engineering the form of our organizational activities—is proving illusory. So we are now shifting towards understanding how outcomes emerge from the local self-organizing interaction of multiple intentions in webs of power relations, where there is no single source of change.

This is leading us to explain continuity and change as arising through intensive processes of joint inquiry amongst diverse participants. The focus is shifting from the design of outcomes to the design of, and participation in, inquiry processes. This is not inquiry understood as investigation into a static set of facts to find simple causal connections. Rather, this is inquiry as an active on-going process of re-creating our situation. Inquiry means making fresh sense between us of how we get to be here and how we can move on, thus remaking the potentialities of the situations we are continuously constructing together. We are coming to recognize that complex change arises through the movement of inquiry itself rather than as a result of it.

This re-orientation gives us a new perspective on some key activities. For example:

- Leadership—How do we become good at recognizing, initiating and sustaining inquiry processes?
 - Professional education—How do we design development activity that is based on convening and engaging pertinent communities of inquiry?
 - Diversity—How do we become more inclusive and inviting of diverse input and sense-making in inquiry processes?
 - Organization development—How do we enable shifts in complex patterns of interaction through inquiry based dialogue?
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The starting point is often a small group of people, glimpsing possibilities, raising troubling questions, sharing experiences and ideas around questions that are beginning to form. These intense early conversations themselves emerge from other

Why the interest
in inquiry
processes?

Inquiry as a new
take on a number
of activities

What we are
learning about
inquiry: some
guiding ideas

What we are learning about inquiry: some guiding ideas,
continued

more desultory conversations and encounters, but people often identify the “start” as the occasion when a growing sense of purpose actually motivates people to meet to pursue what may be an emerging inquiry.

The key seems to be to value low key but intensive beginnings, and not move too fast to create representative groups or large project teams.

The paradoxical productivity of the ill-defined but urgent inquiry

In the early stages, the ill-defined nature of an inquiry is its power. The relative openness but relevance of the questions being posed, perhaps the introduction of new language and terms whose meaning is not yet clear, encourages a broader engagement and necessitates a constant revisiting of what this is all about, as different perspectives are drawn into the process.

The key seems to be to dare to stay longer in the forming process and not to rush too quickly to capture clear formulations, which are all too likely to be cast in familiar and limiting ways. Don't be afraid of multiple ways of talking about the inquiry; avoid collapsing to the latest buzz-project/initiative that becomes a slogan to be bandied about.

Sponsorship as an iterative process of broadening legitimacy

People do not need permission to cluster in this way. Indeed we cannot, fortunately, stop this from happening. However, as the first conversations develop, people do start looking to engage early “sponsorship”. They look to interest someone with the visibility, connections, and access to other conversational forums who will help to provide early legitimacy for “keeping the conversation going,” enabling limited investment of resources of time, travel costs, and above all allowing people to start inviting others to join the inquiry. These early sponsors are willing to be involved with the emerging discussions and spread the interest. As the process continues, and other interested parties are drawn in, the inquiry may be re-articulated and sponsorship becomes clearer and increasingly formalized.

The key seems to be to seek evolving legitimacy as the inquiry takes shape and not to get locked in to existing power structures.

Inviting others and allowing the initial conversation to spawn other related groupings

The best way of swelling an inquiry process is by pulling on webs of relationship and connection, inviting others to invite relevant others. Personal engagement that stirs curiosity excites diverse motivations and different takes on what is being explored works much better than email, round robins, or positional papers. Hold only loose ideas about the right or best people. Participation and project evolve together in unforeseen ways. People become involved, less because they are attached to specific outcomes, but more because they are keen to participate in the creation of new possibilities that shift their identities and relationships within the company and its evolution.

The key is to take the trouble to explain over and over again what this inquiry is about—why it matters, what is being questioned, what desire is fueling it—to create resonance with others. Don't be fooled by the fake “efficiency” of one generalized invitation. The process of inviting people to inquiry forums plays a crucial part in learning what the inquiry project is becoming. Always suspect the boundaries you have set and bring in less obvious contributors.

People are learning to how to host open-ended inquiry forums as a new leadership capability:

- Being comfortable yourself, and helping others become comfortable, with open space and the lack of a full or fixed agenda. Leading becomes being able to articulate issues and themes as they emerge and transform.
- Being comfortable without a fixed hierarchy but not an idealized equality—power relations are not pre-determined and can move as patterns of turn taking, turn making, persuasiveness, and spontaneity shift. Leading becomes encouraging lively conversation, living with pauses, not being anxious about conflict of views or strong feelings, being attentive to patterns of response that hold orthodoxies in place, or silent dissidence.
- The “speaking in the round” architecture is important but need not be taken literally to mean a single circle: there are many variations—care style tables, cascaded circles, “fishbowls,” spirals, and so on. We are learning to design and use conversational architecture to suit different modes of talking amongst very different sized groupings.
- A conversational space that is not too homogeneous and arid (e.g., the typical meeting room of identical chairs around a board table facing an overhead projector in a small room with flat grey/white walls). Informal, comfortable, light, colorful spaces with access to fresh air stimulates the full range of people’s intelligence and responsiveness.
- Rhythm is also important—regularly breaking, milling, taking time alone, and returning to take up the conversation from a fresh point of departure.
- The security of ready made “turns”; prepared presentations and rehearsed speeches are not suitable if the purpose of the conversation is to make new connections and associations between ideas and events, and to explore fresh meaning that opens unexpected possibilities of future direction.
- The “edginess” and messiness of spontaneous, rather than rehearsed, speech allows people to discover as they speak what they scarcely realized they thought. We register many subtle responses to what we are saying even as we speak and thus come to know what we are talking about in ways that surprise ourselves.
- People are “moved” from existing ideas, their existing sense of self and situation, by concrete utterance in the presence of others because of the bodily reverberation and increased affect of face-to-face engagement.

**Speaking together
“in the round”:
the value of
free-flowing,
exploratory,
conversation**

Active inquiry differs from investigation or consultation by not just seeking to bring back information “to the center” for sense-making and action. This is not about surveys or focus groups. The point is to create ripples of local sense-making that drive new activity. Guard against trying only to capture and harvest what comes of each inquiry “round.” The key questions are: What is the next conversation that needs to happen? With whom? Where? Who will take on inviting, convening, and hosting the next “round?” How do we overlap and keep interconnection between evolving conversational groupings? What ideas and material may stimulate and progress the inquiry?

**From one conver-
sation to the next**

The key seems to be to focus less on creating actions plans and more on generating the energy to take action as an urgent necessity. The idea is to keep moving forward rather than to “capture” everything that has happened.

Since this is all about joint inquiry as an emerging process, it does not lend itself to setting all the goals and targets for outcomes at the outset and measuring against

**Accounting for
this work: recog-
nizing results!**

Accounting for
this work: recognizing results,
continued

them. Instead, the effort and capability becomes continuously inquiring into what effect the inquiry is having as it evolves. This means being able to recognize what is stirring and changing, and shaping the evolving story in writing, models, pictures, presentations, and ordinary conversation in order to gain the attention and recognition of others as the work moves on.

The key is to keep revisiting and retelling what the inquiry is coming to mean, what it is helping to achieve, without claiming simplistic cause and effect relationships. The art is to retain humility as one among many participants in complex change while articulating and drawing attention to the part each inquiry strand is making to our co-creation of the future.

About
the author

Patricia Shaw is a visiting professor of management and associate director of the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire, which she helped found in 1995.

With her colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire she has developed new approaches to organizational leadership, learning, and change. She concentrates on helping people convene and participate in more emergent organizing processes in which lively “sense-making” may flourish, paying particular attention to the part they play in constructing the cultural and political contexts of their organizations and institutions. She is the author of the book, *Changing the Conversation in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change*.

As an organizational consultant for more than twenty years, she has moved away from large-scale change programs toward more conversational approaches to learning, whereby spontaneity, improvisation, and lively sense-making may flourish amidst everyday politics and conflict.

Dr. Shaw first graduated in physics from Imperial College, London in 1974 and qualified as a teacher. After a few years she moved into an internal consulting role with British Gas when it was still a large public sector utility. She specialized in designing models of business situations to aid strategic decision-making, and became head of manpower planning for the Southeastern region. She then joined Roffey Park Management Institute as a management tutor and then set up her own consulting company. She received a Ph.D. in organization development from the University of Hertfordshire in 1998.